

Limitations of Power

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After the Iraq Election

In the month since the elections in Iraq, there have been two separate developments that are relevant to analysis of possible trends over the coming months – the actual election result and the status of the insurgency. The election resulted in a legislature that will be dominated by Kurdish and Shi'a-orientated parties. As expected, electoral turn-out in the Kurdish north-east of Iraq was exceptionally high, and was also high in the main Shi'a areas in the central and southern provinces of the country. In some parts of the country experiencing a degree of insurgency, the turn out was impressive, with many people taking risks in order to vote. Even so, in the main Sunni areas turn out was still below 10% of the electorate.

A secondary issue was the relatively poor performance of Mr Allawi's party, given that he had been the political leader most favoured by the United States, and this is one aspect of an electoral process that contrasts greatly with original American expectations when the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated nearly two years ago. At that time, there was a confident expectation that a political transition could be overseen in Iraq that would ensure a largely secular government coming to power – what some might call a client regime but Washington would regard as a friendly state that would be committed to a close security relationship with the United States. This would include the very heavy involvement of US companies in the Iraqi oil industry, and an acceptance of the long-term basing of US troops in the country.

Given that Iraqi domestic security is dominantly dependant on the presence of large numbers of US troops, it follows that the US Embassy in Baghdad, the world's largest, will have extraordinary influence over whatever administration is established. Even so, this does not disguise the fact that such an administration is not going to be what was expected. Nowhere is this more significant than in relations with Iran. One of the common claims from US sources is that Iran, along with Syria and external paramilitaries, is playing a thoroughly unhelpful role in the evolution of an Iraqi governance that is friendly to the United States. The evidence for the Iranian connection is actually sparse, but what is significant is that the newly elected Iraqi administration is likely to have a particularly sympathetic attitude towards Iran for two reasons.

One is that many of the main political leaders that have won election to the legislature are people who were in exile during the latter stages of the Saddam Hussein regime, with the main place of exile being Iran, not the United States. In providing shelter and some support, Iran is seen intrinsically as helpful to the future development of Shi'a-orientated parties. The second reason is that such Iranian sympathies also apply to Kurdish political elements, if for more pragmatic reasons. For much of the period from 1991 to 2003, the Kurdish region of north east Iraq operated as a quasi-

independent state, aided by the Northern No-Fly Zone that limited the ability of the Saddam Hussein regime to encroach on the area. Although economic and social links with Turkey were important at this time, so were the links with Iran, where the Iranian authorities were willing to allow substantial cross-border connections.

The end result of both factors is that there are likely to be personal and political sympathies with Iran felt by the main Shi'a and Kurdish parties in Iraq. This is a long way from the hopes and expectations of the United States and is particularly problematic given the manner in which the Iranian nuclear programme has become such a dominant issue in US military planning.

The Insurgency

The election period itself was characterised by singularly forceful action by the US military to close down the risk of electoral disruption by the insurgents. From a US perspective the results were positive, and there was also a small lull in the insurgency in the few days after the election itself. While it is still only a month since the election, there are two issues that give some idea of the status and effectiveness of the insurgency. One is that while the number of daily attacks is not quite as high as the months before the election, they are still sufficient to give a high level of insecurity across much of Central Iraq, with extensions to other regions as well.

For the US troops, the toll continued to be serious, with 58 killed during the course of February, taking the death toll since the start of the war to almost 1,500. During the course of the month, 450 US soldiers and marines were wounded, 214 of them seriously. For the Iraqi police and security forces, the insurgency continued with little respite, including the bombing of the Tikrit Police Headquarters, killing at least ten and injuring many more, and a number of assassinations of security officials. On the last day of the month, the worst suicide bomb attack since the start of the war killed 125 people and injured over 100 more outside a police recruitment centre in the city of Hillah, south of Baghdad. A US response to the problems has been a prolonged if little-noticed assault on insurgents in the city of Ramadi.

Another development in many towns in Iraq has been the collapse of neighbourhood councils. The establishment of these, earlier in the occupation, was seen by the Bush administration as a significant step in local governance, but the level of intimidation by insurgents has been such that most no longer operate and many of the members are in hiding.

There has also been a change of tactics by insurgents involving concerted efforts to damage the electricity and oil supply systems. This form of sabotage is not new – there was a particular period during the middle of 2004 when there were persistent pipeline attacks that greatly damaged Iraq's oil export potential, making reconstruction as a whole more difficult. This time, though, the actions of the insurgents are much more specific in that they are systematically concentrated on Baghdad and are having a profound effect on supplies of electricity and petrol to the great majority of the six million people living in the greater Baghdad area. The skill with which the sabotage is conducted shows a thorough knowledge of the entire supply system, suggesting either that former officials knowledgeable about the system are involved, or even that inside knowledge of current developments in the system is

readily available to insurgents. Given the extent to which the security forces are infiltrated by insurgent elements, this should not cause too much surprise.

While the overall picture emerging is one of substantial post-election problems in curbing the insurgency, the very fact that the elections took place has been seen in the United States as a success for the Bush administration, even if the end result is hardly the one desired. The elections have been followed by two immediate developments in US foreign policy, President Bush's visit to Western Europe and his seeking of a transatlantic consensus over Iran, and a cautious meeting in Slovakia with President Putin of Russia, a political leader who had previously been welcomed by the Bush administration but is now treated with suspicion.

Russia and Iran

During meetings in Belgium and Germany, considerable efforts were made to persuade George W Bush about the European preference for a diplomatic solution to the potential confrontation with Iran. While there are some in the Bush administration, not least in the State Department, that would greatly prefer to avoid another military confrontation, there is a clear belief in the influential neoconservative circles, that Iran must be "dealt with" early in the second term. In such circumstances, the Europeans may have difficulty in persuading the Iranians to curb their nuclear ambitions, especially as the view among the Washington hawks is that not only must Iran not develop nuclear weapons, it must not develop a nuclear fuel cycle and should not even have a civil nuclear power programme, given the potential for dual use of many nuclear technologies.

What is complicating matters is the involvement of Russia, with this being the primary reason for the cool state of relations between Washington and Moscow. At the root of this is the agreement signed at the end of the month between Moscow and Tehran, for the provision of uranium fuel for the Bushehr nuclear power plant on the shores of the Persian Gulf. The agreement includes the return of spent fuel rods to Russia, the implication of this being that it will be a closed system in that the Iranians will not be enriching uranium produced from their own mines, and will not have spent fuel available for diverting into plutonium reprocessing. Theoretically this means that the Bushehr project will not require Iran to operate a nuclear fuel cycle. Even so, opponents in Washington do not accept that such a process can be verified, nor do they accept that Iran even needs to develop a nuclear power programme, given its plentiful reserves of oil and natural gas.

On this last point, the Iranian response is that the country has long had a policy of energy source diversification, including a substantial component of its electricity supplies produced by hydroelectric power. The claim is made that since Iran does have indigenous sources of uranium-bearing ores, some diversification into nuclear power makes strategic sense. This is questioned in Washington, not least because it implies that obtaining nuclear fuel from Russia is no more than an interim step. Even so, the problem for the United States is that Russia is clearly willing to further develop its relationship with Iran, even if this is against the interests of the United States and its persistent view of Iran as the leading member of the "axis of evil".

A Sign of Awkward Trends

This more generally fits into a pattern in which three major states are developing policies that simply do not fit in with US neoconservative intentions to be the dominant player on the world scene. These states are Russia, China and India, although it is also worth noting a trend in Latin America towards the election of centre-left governments that are cautious about maintaining close relations with the United States, the latest being Uruguay.

The pattern is one of countries taking steps within their capabilities that limit US ambitions. In the case of China and India, there is a particular concern with the long-term security of supplies of oil and natural gas. China still has some domestic sources of fossil fuels, including oil and gas, but has long since passed the point where it could satisfy demand from home supplies. With its very high growth rate, demand for imported oil may now be growing at a rate close to 10% a year, and any interruptions of supply could have a substantial and immediate impact on the Chinese economy. As a result, China has been making concerted efforts to identify long-term sources of supply. While some of these efforts are directed at the Caspian Basin, together with overtures being made to some oil-rich African states, the main focus is inevitably the Persian Gulf region, with its concentration of well over 60% of world oil reserves.

Late last year China agreed a long-term deal with Iran for the supply of oil and natural gas, the latter component being crucial because it makes it feasible for Iran to invest in the relatively expensive liquefied natural gas (LNG) tankers required for shipment. Iran has the second largest reserves of any country (after Russia) but needs to invest in expensive and specialist infrastructure if it is to benefit from these reserves. China appears to have no difficulty in working with the Iranian government. Nor does India, which has, in parallel with the Chinese, agreed a similar long-term oil and gas supply deal with Tehran.

Two things follow that are problematic for the United States. One is likely to be a reluctance on the part of the Chinese to vote in favour of any obviously anti-Iran resolution sponsored in the UN Security Council by the United States, with the threat of a veto always available if not stated in public. The second issue is that neither India nor China will be likely to acquiesce to any programme of targeted economic sanctions against Iran. In a very real sense, the United States is being constrained by the manner in which the international energy market is evolving.

The Russian involvement in the potential limiting of US influence is rather different, given its plentiful domestic supplies of oil and gas. Here, the issue is one of export potentials, partly for nuclear power but much more obviously for weapons systems. The Russian support for the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran may be causing displeasure in Washington, but this is a rare example of Russia exporting civil nuclear technology. What is much more significant is the nature of Russian arms exports.

At the end of the Cold War, the Russian military-industrial complex went into something approaching a free-fall, as a heavily protected domestic industry suddenly lost almost all its orders because of the near-collapse of the Russian economy. Some sectors of the industry hung on by putting much more effort into arms exports, but

much of the military equipment was relatively obsolete, there being little money available to undertake the kinds of research and development programmes that could maintain a degree of technological equivalence with the United States.

By the end of the 1990s, the Russian economy had improved to the extent that domestic arms orders began to flow, but they were certainly not enough to enable manufacturers to modernise production lines and update the end products. To do this and compete with Western states, it was necessary to have vibrant overseas arms markets, and the end result has been a determined effort to expand access to such markets. In most cases, the arms exports still do not compare with US or Israeli equipment, but there are notable exceptions.

One example is the SS-N-22 Sunburn supersonic anti-ship cruise missile, the fastest missile of its kind in the world. While essentially developed during the Cold War era, it has been upgraded and is available for sale across the world. Because of the speed, the current anti-missile systems on US Navy ships have little time to react, making the ships theoretically vulnerable to SS-N-22 missiles whether launched from land or sea. For Russia, providing such a system for export has three substantial advantages. One is that it brings in much-needed revenues, some of which can be invested in further areas of military technology, and a second is that it enables Russia to improve relations with a range of countries. The third and most valuable asset, though, is that it serves as a potential limitation on US power.

In relation both to energy supplies, especially oil and gas, but also to arms exports, it is apparent that we are moving into a multipolar world in a manner that has not been fully recognised in the United States and is beginning to cause some consternation, hence the less than cordial discussions with President Putin. Iran may be one example where a significant state, Russia, simply does not do what the United States requires, but there are likely to be others. This may not mean the end of the drive for a New American Century but it does indicate some of the limitations now being experienced. Neither Russia, India nor even China can begin to match the military power of the United States, nor would they pretend that they can do so. What they are able to do, though, is to develop policies that suit their own economic circumstances, whether these be arms sales or energy agreements, while also having a limiting effect on US power. For all three countries, and from rather different perspectives, these are satisfying outcomes.

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Professor Rogers' monthly briefings from May 2003 – April 2004 are published, along with analysis and discussion, in the Oxford Research Group International Security Report for 2004, *'Iraq and the War on Terror'*. Copies can be ordered from ORG at £7.99 plus postage. More information is available from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/books/iraqandwaronterror.htm>. The International Security Report for 2005 will be published later this year.
