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IRAQ – THREE YEARS ON

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Earlier briefings in this series sought to analyse the manner in which the United States' forces were responding to the insurgency in Iraq. In the October and November briefings last year, for example, two trends were singled out. One has been the tendency to embark on major operations against particular urban centres of the insurgency, seeking to clear these of opposition and then maintain security by a combination of US and Iraqi government forces. The assault on Fallujah in November 2004 was one of the first examples of this, but there have been many more, including Tal Afar late last year.

The other developing tactic has been to rely more heavily on helicopter gunships and strike aircraft to attack identified concentrations of insurgents. One of the aims here is to minimise the necessity for extensive ground patrols by US troops, but an inevitable consequence, given the frequently inadequate intelligence available on the insurgency, is an increased risk of civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, minimising US casualties is regarded as one of the key necessities for military operations, not least because of the steadily increasing impact of the deaths and serious injuries among troops on domestic opinion in the United States. By the end of February, US forces had lost almost 2,300 people killed and just under 17,000 injured in combat. Since the war started, around 10,000 troops have been medically evacuated back to the United States for treatment via the military hospital at Landstuhl in Germany. In addition, around 25,000 US personnel have been evacuated back to the United States either for non-combat injuries or through physical or mental illness.

These figures may be small compared with the losses in Korea or Vietnam, but those were when the United States had very large conscript armed forces, whereas these losses are being incurred in a smaller volunteer Army and Marine Corps, together with heavy reliance on reservists and National Guard units. The overall effect of these current trends is that the great majority of troops that have been deployed in Iraq have had personal experience of friends killed or seriously injured, and they have been facing a determined and effective urban insurgency that has proved extremely difficult to counter. Moreover, consistent attempts to train Iraqi forces to take over have been met with numerous problems of unreliability. It is this context that does much to explain the behaviour of US troops in many circumstances, with that behaviour often exacerbating the insurgency.

The Significance of Samarra

One of the most damaging incidents during February was the destruction of the shrine in Samarra, an event that resulted in many hundreds of people being killed in violence across much of central Iraq. The attack on the mosque was almost certainly designed to provoke conflict between Shi'a and Sunni communities, making it even less likely that the government that was in process of formation in Baghdad would successfully integrate the different confessional groups.

Whether the Samarra attack does have that impact in the longer term remains to be seen, but the city itself was important for other reasons. After the take-over of Fallujah by US forces in November 2004, Samarra became a centre of insurgency actions, and the US forces responded in the early part of 2005 by putting in large forces of their own troops together with Iraqi security units. The city was surrounded by rapidly constructed earthworks which, in combination with a limited number of checkpoints, meant that movement in and out of the city could be carefully controlled.

In this way, Samarra was seen as an example of how to curb the insurgency, yet within a few months it was apparent that the policy was not working. Because of the restrictions, about half of the population of

Samarra moved away and the economy came close to collapse. Even under the tightly controlled security measures, the insurgency continued in the city with US forces taking casualties as they engaged in conflicts with insurgent groups.

As a result of the “embedding” of an experienced journalist with a US unit, one particular incident came to light which is indicative of the problems facing the US military authorities. After one exchange of fire, two insurgents were killed, after which a sergeant ordered their bodies to be tied to the bonnets of Humvees and taken through the streets, like deer killed in a hunt. The reporter described the sullen expressions on the face of local Iraqis as they witnessed this.

To the US troops involved in this operation, the insurgents were terrorists, part of a large and amorphous enemy that killed or maimed other American soldiers and was proving almost impossible to counter. Young soldiers were seeing their friends and comrades killed or horribly injured in a campaign in which they may have initially believed they were bringing democracy to Iraq, as well as facing up to an enemy which, in some indefinable way, was part of the greater enemy that had committed the 9/11 atrocities. The behaviour of tying the dead Iraqis to their vehicles may have been deeply provocative to local Iraqis, but for the soldiers concerned it was their way of retaliating against the community from which these terrorists arose, demonstrating the extent of US military power and showing the determination of the United States to maintain control.

To the Iraqis watching this in Samarra the outlook was almost diametrically opposed. What they saw was the gruesome defiling of the bodies of freedom fighters who had given their lives while resisting the occupation of their city by the foreign invaders that were being aided by collaborating Iraqis from a corrupt and unrepresentative government. The effect of this one incident is not clear, but it is part of a pattern of actions by US forces increasingly frustrated by their lack of success.

Another example is the ready recourse to massive firepower. If an American patrol comes under fire from a single sniper hidden in a building, the patrol may immediately respond with many hundreds of rounds of machine gun or cannon fire, quite possibly followed by an air strike called in to respond to the attack. From a US perspective this is a response that is fully in tune with the circumstances, a legitimate response that demonstrates both the power of the US forces in responding to terrorism and, in particular, the near-absolute requirements to minimise their own casualties. Moreover, the continual linking of the conflict in Iraq to the wider “global war on terror” by the Bush administration, gives ordinary US troops the right to respond with such force. They are, from their perspective, not so much occupying a foreign country but protecting their own, having suffered a grievous and unprovoked attack on 11 September 2001.

From the perspective of the local Iraqi community, the end result may be the destruction of houses, factories, schools or public buildings and the likely killing of innocent people in addition to insurgents who are regarded as freedom fighters. The extent of the destruction in towns such as Tal Afar and Samarra is considerable. In Fallujah, a large proportion of all the buildings in a city of close to 300,000 people were either destroyed or badly damaged. While the US authorities played down the level of Iraqi casualties, these are now believed to have number close to 5,000. Of the several thousand men detained by US and Iraqi forces during the assault on Fallujah, the great majority were quickly released. This gave the lie to the idea that the only people left in the city were insurgents, with the implication that many of the 5,000 killed were civilians, not insurgents.

The Cost of the War

In Iraq itself, the estimates for civilian casualties exceed 30,000 killed and many tens of thousands seriously injured. In some parts of Iraq, conventional law and order has largely broken down – in Baghdad alone, for example, there are currently around fifty kidnappings every day. Furthermore, the

insurgency continues to include the sustained use of economic targeting, especially against oil facilities. The effect of this has been to cripple Iraq's economic development. Oil production in early 2006 was still markedly lower than at the end of the Saddam Hussein regime, even though that was operating under sanctions. This has had knock-on effects across the economy with access to drinking water down by a quarter since the start of the war, and electricity supplies in Baghdad down to under four hours a day, a quarter of the level before the war.

The sustained use of economic targeting by insurgents has been achieved in spite of intensive efforts to train Iraqi security forces and the continuing presence of well over 150,000 coalition troops in the country. Estimates from the Bush administration towards the end of February spoke of 227,000 Iraqi troops and security forces available for duty, so that the combined forces available to the US and Iraqi authorities were close to 400,000. While there remains tension and some violence in southern and south-eastern Iraq, this is not at the level of an all-out insurgency, and the Kurdish north-east is largely calm.

In effect, the insurgency is limited to four provinces centred on Baghdad and the towns and cities to the north and east of the capital. Within this population, the Sunni communities from which the insurgency largely draws its support number at most six million people, of whom no more than two million are adult males. While the Iraqi and US security forces are stretched across the country, at least half are deployed in this particular region in which the insurgency is concentrated. There are therefore about 200,000 troops and security personnel seeking to control an insurgency whose active paramilitaries are drawn from two million people, an extraordinary ratio of one soldier or security officer for every ten adult males in the entire population. Bearing in mind that perhaps half of the security personnel are US soldiers equipped with a wide range of weapons and surveillance equipment, the deep-seated and embedded nature of the insurgency begins to become apparent.

The US Defence Budget

The impact of this war, and the continuing violence in Afghanistan is reflected not just in the human costs but also in the losses in equipment including tanks and helicopters, with this, in turn, reflected in burgeoning defence budgets. Since the start of operations in Iraq almost three years ago, the US forces have lost 20 M1 Abrams main battle tanks, 50 Bradley fighting vehicles, 20 of the new Stryker armoured fighting vehicles and 20 M113 armoured personnel carriers. Almost all of these have been lost to roadside bombs, the so-called improvised explosive devices, with the recently deployed shaped-charge explosives being readily capable of attacking heavily armoured vehicles. The losses of more lightly-armoured vehicles are much higher, with some 750 Humvees, reconnaissance vehicles and transport trucks destroyed so far.

The extent of the losses, especially among tanks and armoured vehicles may seem surprising, given that the Iraq War is assumed to be a counter-insurgency operation against lightly armed paramilitaries. They are explained, in part by the fact that many of the insurgents had previous training in the armed forces of the Saddam Hussein regime, and partly by the availability of numerous munitions stored throughout central Iraq towards the end of the regime or secreted away during the chaos that immediately followed its termination.

More significantly, though, US military planners now recognise that the commitment of the insurgents and their overall morale are both much higher than had been previously understood. In the few assessments of US officers on the ground being published in some of the specialist defence journals in recent months, one aspect comes through repeatedly – the manner in which new people immediately come into the insurgency to replace those killed or detained. Given that around 25,000 suspected insurgents were killed or detained during each of the calendar years 2004 and 2005, and that many of

the detentions were for months or years, with a current population of insurgent detainees of around 15,000, it is clear that this is an insurgency that is deeply embedded in a largely supportive community.

A feature of the past three years since the war started has been the increase in the basic US defence budget coupled with the supplemental requests to cover the added costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Following a decrease in the defence budget in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the budgets are now approaching the exceptionally high levels of the most intense period of the Cold War in the mid-1980s.

The first big increase came in 2003, with a total spending of \$455 billion, compared with \$362 billion the previous year. Two years later, the Fiscal Year 2005 budget reached \$520 billion, with a basic budget of \$420 billion and supplementals for war costs of another \$100 billion. The supplementals for the current FY 2006 period (October 2005 to September 2006) amount to \$115 billion on a basic budget of just over \$440 billion. With a total defence expenditure for the year of \$556.8 billion we are now at levels that compare with Cold War peaks.

There is, though, one important difference. At the height of the Cold War, the United States maintained much larger forces, including a 500-ship Navy, very large heavily-armoured ground forces in western Europe and strategic and tactical nuclear forces of over 20,000 weapons. These were directed at facing down the Soviet Union, then seen as a massively resourced superpower that had to be met on a more or less equal footing. Whatever the realities of actual Soviet power, US defence policy and budgets reflected a response to a formidable enemy with millions of troops at its disposal.

Now, the United States faces a few tens of thousands of insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the prospect of a conflict with a state, Iran, which does not even remotely begin to compare in military power even with US forces in the region. Even under these circumstances, the United States is facing severe overstretch in its Army and Marine Corps while it faces substantial increases in its defence budget in order to try and control protracted insurgencies.

For now, though, there are few indications of any substantial rethinking of military strategies. Indeed, the publication of the Quadrennial Defence Review in February showed a commitment of more of the same. Donald Rumsfeld's characterisation of the new era as a "Long War" replacing the "Cold War" is indicative of the persistence of the current security paradigm. As we move towards the fourth year of the Iraq War, there is little or no sign of change.

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