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Military power and foreign policy goals: the Iran–Iraq war revisited

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For every state there exists an interrelationship between the availability of military power and the setting of foreign policy goals. The nature and scope of the quest for military power is a direct consequence of the world view held by a state's leadership, which is in turn translated into national goals. At the same time a state's military capabilities at any given moment can determine the limits of a forceful foreign policy. Any successful pursuit of foreign policy goals depends to a considerable extent on the state's assessment of its military power in relation to its external environment. Since the assessment of military power and the perception of external threats are as much subjective as objective, any state can commit one of two errors in evaluation. It can set itself goals which are beyond its military power to achieve; or it can underestimate its power and pursue policies and goals that are narrower or more limited than its 'objective' power base might make possible.

Though most would agree that setting sights too low can be just as harmful to a state's interests as setting them too high, it is the latter kind of error that generally attracts the attention of analysts. Setting sights too low is usually read as a sign of inactivity, passivity, lack of initiative and missed opportunities. But once a state undertakes concrete action in pursuit of its foreign policy course and fails, the failure is usually attributed to an overestimation of its relative power.

This is the line of thought that has been applied to the decision by Iraq in 1980 to invade Iran, a decision which is commonly explained by what may be called the *grand design* theory. According to this theory, the Iraqi invasion in September 1980 reflected President Saddam Hussein's ambitions—which ranged from the occupation of Iranian territories (the Shatt al-Arab and Khuzestan), through the overthrow of the Khomeini regime, to the desire to assert Iraq as the pre-eminent Arab and Gulf state. It has even been suggested that, by defeating Iran, Saddam Hussein hoped to become the most influential leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.[1] On this line of argument, Iraq's inability to bring the war to a swift conclusion is attributed to the wide gap between these very ambitious goals and the limitations of Iraqi military power. Iraq, so it is said, has committed the common mistake of trying to bite off more than it can chew, having overestimated its own power and underestimated that of its opponent.

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1. See for example A. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the search for strategic stability* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984), pp. 645–6; W. O. Staudenmaier, 'A strategic analysis', in S. Tahir-Kheli and S. Ayubi, eds., *The Iran–Iraq war* (New York: Praeger, 1983), p. 37.

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The present article is inclined to reject this analysis. It will present three interconnected arguments. First, the Iraqi invasion of Iran did not emanate from a premeditated 'grand design' but was a pre-emptive move, intended to forestall the Iranian threat to the existence of the Baath regime by destroying opposing forces and denying territory. Secondly, Iraq cannot be said to have overestimated its relative military power, for in the summer of 1980 it enjoyed an undeniable military edge over its rival. Thirdly and finally, Iraq's crucial mistake was that it did not use its advantage decisively. Iraq's grand strategy failed, therefore, not because it was too ambitious, but because it was too narrow; not because Iraq lacked the military power to attain its national goals, but because it assigned its forces too limited objectives.

Towards the Pax Irana

Much has been written about the ambitions of Iraq's Baath regime to win regional and Pan-Arab pre-eminence. Its vocal adherence to the precepts of Arab unity and its record of interference in the affairs of its Arab neighbours, combined with the country's increasing prosperity in the late 1970s (as well as Egypt's departure from Arab forums), led many observers to view Iraq as the coming power in the region. It is not surprising, then, that the Iraqi invasion of Iran was interpreted in most quarters as a calculated step in the direction of regional primacy.

The events of the 1970s belie such an interpretation. Its 'revolutionary' ideology and far-reaching ambitions in the Arab world notwithstanding, the Baath regime was throughout this period fully aware of Iraq's demographic and geostrategic inferiority in relation to Iran. Iraq refrained from competing with Iran for strategic mastery, and concentrated on developing its defensive capabilities. By and large the course of the Iran–Iraq strategic relationship in the decade leading up to the war was dominated by Shah Mohamad Reza Pahlavi's persistent thrust for regional hegemony. Iraq played a reactive and defensive role.

Alarmed by Britain's pronounced intention to withdraw from its military bases east of Suez in 1968 on the one hand and encouraged by rising oil revenues in the middle and late 1960s on the other, the Shah was determined to establish Iran as the dominant power in the Gulf. This aspiration manifested itself in an impressive expansion of Iran's military capabilities during the 1970s. By the time of the Shah's overthrow in January 1979, the Iranian armed forces had grown from a modest force of some 161,000 in 1970 to approximately 415,000 troops, employing some 1,735 tanks and 447 combat aircraft (compared to 860 and 140 in 1970).[2]

The Shah's Gulf policy, which was received very favourably by the West, did not fail to make its impact on Iraq. In an attempt to match the Iranian arms build-up Iraq concentrated first and foremost on developing its ground forces. This is turn led to a threefold increase in the number of major weapons systems at their disposal: from 600 tanks and 600 armoured fighting vehicles in 1970 to 1,800 of each in 1979. The rate of growth of the air force was less impressive (from 229 to 339 aircraft). The navy hardly grew at all in this period.

The differing patterns of military expansion in Iran and Iraq were the result of the two countries' contrasting perceptions of their regional roles. The more or less balanced and simultaneous growth of the Iranian forces was undoubtedly motivated in

2. *The military balance, 1979–1980* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980). All data cited in this article on military procurement and armed forces are derived from various issues of the IISS *Military balance*.

part by the traditional goals of securing the country's northern and western borders. But the impressive air and, particularly, naval build-up clearly indicated a shift of focus southwards towards the Gulf. Iraq's consuming interest in the development of its ground forces, on the other hand, reflected its essentially defensive posture, its preoccupation with domestic affairs (the Kurdish insurgency, the Baath regime's stability), and the need to deter its two hereditary enemies, Syria and Iran. The lack of any significant naval development would seem to indicate that Iraq was aware of its basic geostrategic inferiority in relation to Iran and its inability to compete with it for Gulf supremacy: while Iran has a Gulf coastline of about 2,000 km, Iraq is virtually land-locked, with a Gulf coastline only 15 km long. Consequently, whereas Iran has five naval bases along the Gulf coast, some of them beyond Iraq's operational reach, Iraq had to rely on two naval bases, Basra and Umm Qasr, which were extremely vulnerable and within range of Iranian artillery. These geostrategic facts explain the historical Iranian association with the Gulf and that of Iraq with the 'fertile crescent'. In a sense, then, the distinct patterns of the military expansion undertaken by Iran and Iraq during the 1970s can be seen as the natural continuation of long historical trends imposed by geography.

The contrasting perceptions of each country's regional role were illustrated further by their Gulf policies in the early 1970s. The increased confidence felt by the Shah in Iran's growing military power led him as early as 1971 to state that 'the Persian Gulf must always be kept open—under Iranian protection—for the benefit not only of my country but the other Gulf countries, and the world'.[3] This assertion of Iran as the sole guardian of Gulf security became a regular theme in the Shah's pronouncements in the following years,[4] and was highlighted in the early 1970s by a series of Iranian actions intended to signal both to the Gulf countries and to the great powers who had the final say in the region.

On 30 November 1971, Iranian forces occupied three strategically located islands near the strait of Hormuz—Abu Musa, and Greater and Lesser Tumbs—which were at the time under the sovereignty of the sheikhdoms of Sharja and Ras al-Khaima. Iran used its historical claims on these islands to gain international understanding for the seizure, but it also justified their capture in strategic terms, arguing that the smooth flow of oil to the West depended on Iranian control of the Hormuz Straits. The increased Iranian interest in the Gulf was further demonstrated by the shift in 1972 of the Iranian naval headquarters from Khorramshahr, at the head of the Gulf, to Bandar Abbas near the strait of Hormuz. Also in 1972 the Sultan of Oman, Qaboos, acknowledging Iran's growing power in the Gulf, sought Iranian assistance in suppressing the Dhofari rebels operating along Oman's border with South Yemen (and supported by the latter). The Shah was ready to provide support.

The Shah also challenged the prevailing *status quo* with Iraq. On 19 April 1969, following an attempt by Iraq to exercise its rights in the Shatt al-Arab according to the border agreement of 1937, the Shah announced the unilateral abrogation of this agreement.[5] The practical consequences of this declaration emerged very quickly. On

3. *Guardian*, 9 Oct. 1971.

4. See for example *Financial Times*, 31 May 1973; *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 July 1973.

5. The 1937 agreement contained two major provisions: first, in designating the low-water-mark on the eastern bank of the Shatt al-Arab as the frontier, it gave Iraq control over the waterway except for the area adjacent to the Iranian ports of Abadan, Khorramshahr and Khosrowabad, where it was fixed at the *thalweg* (median line); and secondly, as a result of that demarcation, it provided that vessels on the Shatt should employ Iraqi pilots and fly the Iraqi flag (again with the exception of those three areas in which the boundary was determined by the *thalweg*).

24 April an Iranian merchant ship, escorted by the Iranian navy and with cover provided by fighters, passed through the disputed waters of the Shatt al-Arab to Iranian ports and paid no toll to Iraq as required under the 1937 agreement. The Iranian show of force, to which Iraq did not respond, was followed by a series of Iranian moves in the early 1970s which served to exacerbate Iraq's feelings of vulnerability, hostility and resentment. Among these were attempts to isolate Iraq politically from other Arab Gulf states, Iran's plan for a regional defence organization comprising Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and, above all, the extensive economic and military assistance provided by Iran to the Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. The growing hostility between the two countries erupted into violence in the winter of 1973–4, with fierce border clashes that involved tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft. The ceasefire of March 1974 did not in practice lead to the cessation of hostilities, which merged into the Kurdish war. Iran went so far as to deploy artillery and air-defence units on Iraqi territory.[6]

Unable to suppress an insurgency that was imposing an intolerable burden on its domestic system, Iraq had no alternative but to seek some kind of agreement with Iran that would lead to the withdrawal of Iranian support from the Kurds. This took the form of the Algiers Agreement of 6 March 1975, which provided for some territorial adjustments, including the demarcation of the Shatt al-Arab waterway's boundary on the basis of the *thalweg* (i.e. median) line.[7]

The Algiers Agreement constituted a formal Iraqi acquiescence in Iranian dominance. While Iraq went out of its way to placate Iran by granting it sovereignty over half of the Shatt al-Arab, Iran made no practical concessions—unless non-interference in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states can be considered a concession. In other words, in the Algiers Agreement Iraq 'bought' the inviolability of its frontier, a fundamental and self-evident attribute of statehood, at the high price of territorial concessions. The weight of the Iraqi concessions is further illustrated by the fact that the Shatt, Iraq's sole point of access to the Gulf, is supremely important for the country's political, strategic and economic needs. Iraq's willingness to make such far-reaching concessions on the Shatt reflected its painful awareness that the effective enforcement of its internal sovereignty depended on the goodwill of its neighbour to the east—and it implied also an Iraqi recognition of Iran's military superiority. For unlike the Iranian armed forces, which because of their expansion had been virtually unaffected by the confrontation with Iraq, those of Iraq were still distracted by the Kurds on the borders of northern Iraq and thus unable to organize, train effectively or absorb their new weapons systems. Iraq was in no position to compete with Iran for hegemony in the Gulf; at the time of the Algiers Agreement, the Iraqi armed forces were on the verge of total collapse. According to Saddam Hussein the Iraqi army had been suffering from 'a great shortage of ammunition' in the winter of 1975, which prevented it from carrying on the war against the Kurds. This shortage was kept secret lest it affect the morale of the army.[8]

6. J. M. Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: the years of crisis* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 142.

7. The Algiers Agreement stipulated the following: (a) demarcation of the land frontier in accordance with the 1913 Protocol of Constantinople and the verbal accord of 1914; (b) agreement to demarcate the Shatt al-Arab waterway's boundary on the basis of the *thalweg* (median) line; (c) agreement to 're-establish security and mutual confidence along their common frontiers' and undertake to exercise a strict and effective control with the aim of finally putting an end to 'all infiltrations of a subversive character from either side'; (d) the pledge of both parties to regard the provisions negotiated at the 1975 OPEC meeting as indivisible elements of a comprehensive settlement, such that a breach of any one would be considered a violation of the spirit of the Algiers Agreement. For the English text of the agreement see *New York Times*, 8 Mar. 1975.

8. See Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran*, pp. 156–7.

The Algiers Agreement thus opened a new—if brief—era in Iran–Iraq relations, the era of Pax Irana. After almost a decade the Shah had managed to achieve his goal—the substitution of a relationship that presupposed unquestioned Iranian dominance for the old Iran–Iraq *status quo* based on the 1937 agreement. Having attained its goals, the Shah's Iran turned naturally from a revisionist into a *status quo* power and began to advocate the perpetuation of the situation in the Gulf. Iraq was neither in a position nor had it the inclination to undermine the newly established *status quo*. Rather the Baath preferred to turn inward, to put down the Kurdish insurgency, to reconstruct its armed forces and to stabilize Iraq's social, economic and political systems. Consequently the agreement was followed by a period of much-reduced tension between Iraq and Iran which lasted for four years—until the overthrow of the Shah.

After the revolution

Iraq's initial response to the Shah's overthrow and the emergence of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was by and large positive. Not only did the Baath regime not attempt to take advantage of the civil strife in Iran to revise the Algiers Agreement, but it was quick to indicate its willingness to continue to observe the *status quo* between the two states: 'a regime which does not support the enemy against us and does not intervene in our affairs, and whose world policy corresponds to the interests of the Iranian and Iraqi people, will certainly receive our respect and appreciation'.[9]

This positive attitude towards the revolutionary regime in Tehran continued throughout the spring and summer of 1979. Thus, for example, the Iraqi government took the opportunity of Iran's formal withdrawal from the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) to offer its good offices in case Iran should decide to join the Non-Aligned Movement; and as late as July/August 1979 Iraqi authorities extended an invitation to the Iranian premier, Mehdi Bazargan, to visit Iraq in order to improve relations between the two countries.[10] The Iraqi leaders at the time referred to Iran as a brotherly nation, linked to the Arab people of Iraq by 'strong ties of Islam, history and noble traditions', and praised the revolutionary regime in Tehran for pursuing a policy that underlined these 'deep historical relations'.[11]

Iraq's shows of goodwill were not reciprocated. In June 1979 the revolutionary regime began publicly urging the Iraqi population to rise up and overthrow the Baath regime.[12] This propaganda campaign was paralleled by widely spread anti-Baath demonstrations in Iran, some of them involving armed attacks on Iraqis and Iraqi installations. In late 1979 Iran escalated its anti-Baathist campaign by resuming its support for the Iraqi Kurds; it also began providing moral and material support to Shi'ite underground movements (in particular the Da'awa Party) in Iraq; and, last but not least, the Iranian government initiated terrorist attacks on prominent Iraqi officials, the most significant of which was the failed attempt to assassinate the Iraqi Deputy Premier, Tariq Aziz, on 1 April 1980.

The Baath regime tried to check these Iranian pressures. In the domestic sphere, Iraq suppressed the Shi'ite underground organizations and expelled Iranian citizens. On

9. Iraqi News Agency, 14 Feb. 1979: see *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (henceforth FBIS), *MEA*, 15 Feb. 1979.

10. R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: challenges and responses in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 58–61.

11. See for example interview with President Baqr, reproduced in *BBC Summary of world broadcasts* (henceforth *SWB*), ME/6122/A/1-2, 22 May 1979.

12. *SWB*, ME/6144/A5, 8 June 1979; *SWB*, ME/6145A7, 9 June 1979.

the external level, Iraq tried to organize a united Arab front to oppose the export of the Iranian revolution; it countered the Iranian propaganda campaign by lauching a series of verbal attacks on the Islamic regime; and finally, it lent its support to Iranian separatist elements such as the Iranian Kurds and the Arabs in Khuzestan. These countermeasures failed to impress the revolutionary regime. Responding to Saddam Hussein's pledge to take revenge for the attempt on the life of Tariq Aziz, Khomeini called on the Iraqi Shi'ites on 9 June 1980 to overthrow 'Saddam's government'. Iran's Foreign Minister, Sadegh Ghotzbadegh, revealed on the same day that his government had taken the decision to topple the Baath regime. The same theme was repeated two days later by the Iranian President, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, who also warned that Iran would go to war in case of a further deterioration in the situation on the border.[13] In April 1980 the Iran–Iraq confrontation had entered a new phase with clashes on the border. These skirmishes, which took place along the whole frontier, continued intermittently until late August. At that point they escalated into heavy fighting, involving tank and artillery duels and air strikes.

Iran's subversive activities in general, and the protracted and escalating border fighting in particular, drove the Iraqi leadership to the conclusion that it had no alternative but to contain the Iranian threat by resorting to arms. With the bitter experiences of the 1974–5 armed confrontration with Iran still fresh in their minds, the Baath leaders had serious doubts whether the Iraqi political system could sustain another prolonged and exhausting confrontation with Iran. These doubts, which were clearly illustrated by reported purges against 'unreliable' elements in the armed forces and the Baath Party in early 1980,[14] were reinforced by the unique nature of the new theocratic Iranian regime.

Iraq had perceived the Shah, for all his military power and ambitious objectives, as rational, if unpleasant. Certainly the Shah's goals were opposed to Iraqi national interests, and they could only be satisfied at Iraq's expense. But the Shah had not sought to unseat the Baath regime, and his intervention in Iraq's domestic affairs had been limited and purely instrumental, designed to prevent Iraq from competing militarily with Iran. Once the Shah's aspirations for Gulf hegemony were recognized, a deal (disadvantageous as it was for Iraq) could be struck and both parties could be expected to live up to it. The revolutionary regime in Tehran was a completely different type of rival—an irrational actor motivated by an uncompromising ideology and pursuing goals which were wholly unacceptable to Iraq. Unlike the Shah, the revolutionary regime did not see its intervention in Iraq's domestic affairs as a means to an end. It actively sought to overthrow the secular Baath regime.

In the Iraqi view, then, the strategic relationship between the two countries had been transformed by the revolution from a *mixed-motive game* into a *zero-sum game*. Given the growing amount of evidence that the Iranian regime was set upon destabilizing the Baath, Iraq came gradually to the realization that the only way to contain the Iranian threat was to raise the stakes for both sides by resorting to armed force.

The balance of advantage

The preceding discussion has indicated that the Iraqi decision to go to war was not taken easily or enthusiastically. Iraq did not go to war in pursuit of some wider

13. *Guardian*, 3 Apr. 1980; *Financial Times*, 12 Apr. 1980; *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Apr. 1980; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Apr. 1980.
14. *Guardian*, 11 Apr. 1980; *Daily Telegraph*, 18 Apr. 1980.

ambition but was pushed into it as a result of increasing anxiety. War, as argued above, was not Iraq's first choice, but rather an act of last resort taken only after all other methods of deflecting the Iranian threat had been exhausted. It was indeed a pre-emptive move, taken when Iraq realized that it could no longer live with Iranian superiority because of the simple fact that that superiority threatened to lead to the overthrow of the Baath regime. If the Baath entertained any hopes or aspirations beyond the containment of the Iranian danger—as they may have done—they did not constitute the reason for launching the war. Rather they represented possible gains.

Against this background the question whether Iraq overestimated its military power and underestimated its opponent's capabilities becomes irrelevant. Since the Iraqi leadership saw war as the country's only option, it had to be launched regardless of the actual balance of forces. True, Iraq's decision to go to war involved the *possibility* of a failure, or even of defeat; but the avoidance of war could only result in the overthrow of the Baath regime.

But even in these circumstances, where strong perceptions of threat outweighed comparisons of military capabilities, Iraq did not in fact overestimate its relative potential. Iraq *did* in fact enjoy a tangible military (and political) edge over Iran in the summer of 1980.

The dethronement of the Shah had thrown the Iranian armed forces into total disarray. Viewing them as the Shah's instrument of oppression and as the most dangerous potential source of counter-revolution, the Islamic regime was determined to emasculate the armed forces by systematic purges as well as by the establishment of a counterweight, the Pasdaran revolutionary guard militia.

The purges dealt a devastating blow to the operational capabilities of the Iranian armed forces.[15] The army apparently lost over half its officers in the ranks from major to colonel; the air force reportedly lost half its pilots and 15–20 per cent of its officers, non-commissioned officers and technicians. The navy suffered least from the purges, which appear to have affected only a few hundred of its personnel. Over and above the purges, about half of the regular servicemen deserted and many more had been killed during and after the revolution. Conscription was not enforced and some fighting formations were dissolved; others fell apart or were much reduced. Even though the revolutionary regime came to recognize the importance of the regular army, mainly because of its relative successes in handling the Kurdish insurgency (where the Pasdaran proved ineffective), and took some steps to enhance its capabilities (such as the reintroduction of conscription), the Iranian armed forces were well below their pre-revolutionary strength by the summer of 1980, with their overall effectiveness considerably reduced.

By the time of the outbreak of war, then, the size of the Iranian army had decreased significantly, from 285,000 to approximately 150,000 (six under-strength divisions), whereas the Iraqi army stood at 200,000 (twelve divisions). This in turn meant that while the Iraqi army could deploy almost all its major weapons systems (2,750 tanks, 2,500 armoured fighting vehicles and some 920 artillery pieces), the Iranian army could hardly deploy 50 per cent of its 1,735 tanks, 1,735 armoured fighting vehicles and 1,000 artillery pieces.

The balance of air forces was no more favourable to Iran. The procurement programmes which had been expected to enhance air force operational potential (particularly the plan to buy 160 F-16 fighters) had been suspended; and the

15. For an excellent account of the purges of the Iranian armed forces see W. F. Hickman, *Ravaged and reborn: the Iranian army, 1982* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1982), pp. 8–18.

post-revolutionary air force also suffered from acute maintenance and logistical problems. Consequently, by the outbreak of war the Iranian air force was unable to fly more than half of its 447 aircraft. The Iraqi air force, on the other hand, had modernized its front-line aircraft and maintained a high level of serviceability (about 80 per cent of its 337 aircraft were operational at the start of the war).

Only at sea was Iran's pre-1979 superiority maintained. Even though the navy did not completely escape the purges of the revolutionary regime and was suffering from maintenance and logistical problems, these things made less of an impact on its operational capabilities than on the air force. Iranian naval superiority was so pronounced that the navy was able to maintain it regardless of the deterioration in its operational strength.

But numbers do not tell the whole story. The quality of military leadership, combat experience, training and command-and-control also count. Indeed, it has been argued that the root of the failure of Iraq's war strategy lay in the incompetence of its military leadership.[16] But this assessment seems to be too harsh. Even though the high degree of politicization in the Iraqi armed forces and the influence of internal problems on their structure and organization cannot be denied, the impact of these factors on the Iran–Iraq balance of power is less clear-cut than is often asserted. Politicization and rigorous control over armed forces by ruling elites is by no means a problem unique to Iraq; the Iranian armed forces were just as tightly controlled, whether under the Shah or the mullahs. In the days of the Shah, for example, there was no Joint Chiefs of Staff organization, nor were the three services linked in any way except through the person of the Shah, who was commander-in-chief of all the armed forces. Every officer above the rank of colonel or its equivalent was personally appointed by the Shah, who employed four different intelligence services to carry out surveillance on the officer corps.[17] Like Iraq, therefore, Iran too had a 'politicized' military leadership, selected and promoted not on professional criteria but by virtue of loyalty to the regime.

The rapid force expansion and modernization programmes had a pronounced impact on the operational competence of the armed forces of both countries. Both Iran and Iraq found it extremely difficult to train, expand and modernize simultaneously. This process was further exacerbated by the poor quality of conscripts in both countries, who found it extraordinarily difficult to get used to handling the advanced weapons systems in a short space of time. As a result, despite the massive advisory assistance provided by the arms donors (mainly the United States and the Soviet Union), both armed forces were more or less incapable of maintaining their advanced major weapons systems. Thus, for example, even before the fall of the Shah the Iranian armed forces appear not to have been able to operate more than 80 per cent of their tanks.[18]

Besides their low technical skills, both forces had very modest combat experience. The Iranian combat experience was limited to the participation of six brigades, along with elements of the navy and the air force, in the suppression of the Dhofari rebellion between 1972 and 1975. But the intervention had been more of a show of force than real combat, since the total strength of the Dhofari rebels had never been more than 2,000, with perhaps 1,000 inside Oman at any one time. Moreover, the Shah's

16. Cordesman, *The Gulf*, p. 74–9.

17. R. Graham, *Iran: the illusion of power* (New York: St Martin's, 1980), pp. 182–4; D. D. Sargent, 'Iran's armed forces: 1972 and 1978', *The Army Quarterly*, July 1979, pp. 277–8; F. Halliday, *Iran: dictatorship and development* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 64–71.

18. Author's own assessment based on the number and structure of Iranian fighting formations at the time.

determination to give as many of his units as possible combat experience led to the rotation of the Iranian divisions in Oman every three months—too short a period of duty to allow them to make the best use of their involvement.

The Iraqi armed forces seemed, on the face of it, to have more combat experience than their Iranian opponents. Not only had Iraqi forces taken part in the October 1973 War, but the army had fought a counterinsurgency campaign in Kurdistan for over a decade. A closer examination of this combat experience, however, reveals its clear limitations. The tactics employed during the Kurdish campaign were hardly applicable to conventional wars. On the other hand, Iraq's preoccupation with the Kurdish insurgency interfered with its regular training programmes and thus served to constrain improvement of its operational capabilities. Iraq's experience in the October War was no more impressive: the Iraqi armoured division that arrived at the Golan front ten days after the war began was comprehensively ambushed by the Israelis and lost some 100 tanks within a few hours.

In the area of command and control it did seem that Iraq had an edge at the outbreak of the war. Whereas there was no Joint Staff on the Iranian side, Saddam Hussein, as commander-in-chief of the Iraqi armed forces, controlled the war from the Revolutionary Command Council where each of the three services was represented. The Iranian President, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, had tried in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces to strengthen the central command and coordinating staff structure, but his efforts were frustrated to a great extent by the power struggle between the Pasdaran and the armed forces. Consequently, at the outbreak of war, Iran had no central command-and-control system that could coordinate the execution of its war strategy.

In qualitative terms, therefore, the two armed forces could be judged to be more or less even. Both suffered to a comparable extent from problems of military leadership owing to the process of selection and promotion; both were poorly trained; and both had low technical skills to maintain and employ the modern weapons systems at their disposal. Combat experience was very limited, and both forces were saddled with inefficient command-and-control systems.

Against this background of approximate qualitative comparability, Iraq's—perhaps temporary—*quantitative* superiority became significant. Recognizing that this situation could not last because of its fundamental demographic inferiority to Iran, the Iraqi leadership hurried to take advantage of a unique opportunity to pre-empt and forestall the Iranian threat to the Baath regime. The means chosen to attain the Iraqi goal was a strategy of limited war. The choice of a strategy, however, reflected a gross misperception by Iraq of the interrelationship between its national goals and the means to be employed in their pursuit. This mistake turned out to be the principal reason for the failure of the Iraqi campaign.

The war

A *limited war* may be defined as one which does not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable, leaving each side's civilian life and armed forces largely intact.[19] More specifically, limited wars involve a small portion of the local armies, are conducted within confined theatre boundaries, and are directed against

19. This definition is based on the definitions offered by Robert Osgood. See R. Osgood, *Limited war: the challenge to American strategy* (Chicago, Ill., London: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 18; Osgood, *Limited war revisited* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1979), p. 3.

counter-force rather than counter-value targets. A war which fails to meet any of these requirements is deemed to be a *general war*.

In the case of the Iran–Iraq war, there is little doubt that Iraq's initial war strategy was limited in all three respects mentioned above. Its territorial aims, as reflected in the general course of the war, did not go beyond the Shatt al-Arab region and a relatively small portion of Khuzestan (bounded by the Khorramshahr–Ahvaz–Susangerd–Messian line). The invasion of Iran was carried out by approximately half the Iraqi army—some five divisions. The initial strategy focused almost exclusively on counter-force targets, taking care to avoid targets of value. It was only *after* Iran had started to strike strategic non-military targets in the Iraqi hinterland that Iraq responded in kind.

More concretely, the Iraqi war plan stipulated three simultaneous thrusts along a front of approximately 700 km. The main axis of attack, involving the bulk of Iraqi forces, was made in Khuzestan and consisted of an armoured thrust aimed at disconnecting the Shatt al-Arab from the rest of Iran and establishing a territorial security belt along the southern frontier. The operations in the central (Mehran, Qasr-Shirin) and far northern (Panjwin) fronts were no more than secondary and supportive efforts, designed to secure Iraq's strategic assets against an Iranian counter-attack. The occupation of the Qasr-Shirin area, which dominated the traditional Tehran–Kermanshah–Baghdad invasion route, was intended to secure Baghdad, situated only 80 miles from the frontier. The operations in the northern front were meant to establish strong defence positions opposite Suleimaniya to protect the Kirkuk oil complex.

These limited objectives were in effect achieved within a few days of the onset of hostilities. In Khuzestan, the only positive goal of the invasion, the Iraqi army managed to sever the Shatt almost completely from the rest of Iran and to occupy the Khorramshahr–Ahvaz–Susangerd–Messian line; occupying also the Mehran and Qasr–Shirin areas, Iraq had secured the important road network linking Dezful with northern Iran west of the Zagros mountains, and forestalled potential threats to Baghdad. At this point Saddam Hussein ordered the halt of his forces, while they were still going forward, and publicly announced in an 'address to the nation' on 28 September, five days after the war began, that Iraq had achieved its territorial aims and that his country was willing to cease hostilities and to negotiate a settlement.[20]

This decision not to follow up Iraq's early military successes had a number of dire consequences which, it could be argued, led to the reversal of the course of the war. In the first place, the Iraqi decision saved the Iranian army from a major defeat and allowed it to remain largely intact. It also gave the Iranians the necessary breathing space to reorganize, regroup and move to the offensive. Last but not least, the voluntary surrender of the initiative to Iran had a devastating impact on the morale of the Iraqi army and therefore on its performance in combat. Finding themselves entrenched for months in hastily prepared defence positions, subjected to the hardships of the Iranian winter and the heat of the summer and engaged in a futile war of attrition, the Iraqi forces began to lose any sense of purpose. The Iraqi loss of will, which was reflected in reports of discipline problems and a growing number of

20. In his 'Address to the Nation', Saddam Hussein also presented Iraq's conditions for a political settlement. They included: (a) Iran's recognition of Iraq's legitimate rights over its land and waters; (b) Iran's cessation of its 'racist, aggressive and expansionist' policies and the end of its interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and the Gulf states; (c) adherence to the principle of good-neighbourly relations; and (d) Iran's return of the three Arab islands to the United Arab Emirates. See *FBIS-MEA*, 29 Sept. 1980.

defections as well as in the large numbers of prisoners taken and weapons abandoned, was exploited to the full by Iran in 1981–2.

Perhaps in recognition of his mistake, Saddam Hussein tried in late October/early November to reverse the tide of events by striking in the direction of Dezful and Ahvaz—only to discover that it was already too late. Had these two cities been attacked in September, Iranian resistance might have crumbled. By November, with the cities transformed into military strongholds and in the face of the winter rains, Iraq found their occupation beyond its power.

The seriousness of Saddam Hussein's mistake is further illustrated by the relatively satisfactory course of the Iraqi invasion. Certainly the Iraqi operation did not resemble Israel's 1967 campaign, nor even the Syrian and Egyptian attacks of October 1973: it lacked proper close air support and was conducted in a cautious, pedestrian and somewhat clumsy manner. Even so, despite the constraints imposed by the terrain (such as the numerous water obstacles in the southern and central fronts), the Iraqi army managed to drive back the Iranian forces and to reach its objectives; contrary to commonly held beliefs the Pasdaran, which took the lion's share of the Iranian defence, proved unable to halt the Iraqi army in open terrain. Not only did Iraq not face great difficulties in overcoming the uncoordinated Iranian resistance in those first days; it did not even use all the forces available within the immediate theatre of operations.

Limited and general wars

Failures in the implementation of national strategies are not necessarily, therefore, the consequence of over-confidence and overestimation of power. They can equally well arise from the employment of a foreign policy instrument—armed force—in *too limited* a way. Iraq did not grossly misjudge the balance of power between itself and Iran prior to the war, for in the summer of 1980 it enjoyed an undeniable military edge over its rival. Nor does it appear that it set its sights higher than its means permitted. Instead it set its military forces tasks that were too limited. By not destroying a significant fraction of the opposing forces, Iraq laid itself open to counterattack and was thus unable to maintain a hold on its limited territorial objectives. To put it another way, Iraq's grand strategy did not fail because its military power was insufficient to attain its national goals, but because it *did not make more* demands on it.

The Iraqi experience should also cast some doubt on the value of limited war as a foreign policy instrument. True, since wars are not waged for their own sake but in pursuit of political ends it is reasonable to expect a direct correlation between the scope and intensity of a given war on the one hand and the political goals it is intended to serve on the other: the less far-reaching the objectives, the more limited a war is likely to be. And yet there remains a great measure of uncertainty about the willingness of the victim of the attack to play 'according to the rules' and refrain from widening the war. Strategies of limited war try to evade this uncertainty by presupposing the existence of some kind of symmetry between the two belligerents in both capabilities and intentions. That is to say, both sides are assumed to have the same interest in keeping the war limited, so long as approximate equality in capabilities will tend to ensure that the outcome of a conflict is not a foregone conclusion.[21]

But the former assumption is questionable, and the latter liable to misjudgment.

21. L. Freedman, *The evolution of nuclear strategy* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 103.

Symmetry in states' interests, stakes and perceptions is not at all common. There are few instances in which one may point to a more or less balanced relationship between pairs of actors in the international arena. As a result 'assured limited war' remains to a considerable extent the exclusive domain of the superpowers. An armed conflict at superpower level may well remain limited because of the fear of nuclear war arising. No such inhibitions affect other, non-nuclear powers. A war between a superpower and a minor power, on the other hand, is likely to be limited as the minor power will lack the means to turn it into a general war and the superpower will not devote all its resources to the achievement of victory. Thus the Korean and Vietnam wars were limited wars for the United States (and the other great powers involved) but a general war for the Koreans and Vietnamese.

Since the potential costs of Third World inter-state wars are significantly smaller than those incurred in a superpower nuclear war, and the ultimate outcome more ambiguous, accurate assessment of the adversary's inclination to widen the war becomes more complicated: what seems an unacceptable cost for one party may be perceived as affordable by the other, with all the subsequent ramifications of that disparity on the limitation of the war.

This was indeed the source of the Iraqi miscalculation. It would seem that Iraq's war strategy was based on the belief that the two states' interests were fundamentally symmetrical—that both sides recognized the undesirability of a general war because of the high long-term costs it would involve. As the Iraqi Deputy Premier, Tariq Aziz, put it: 'We want neither to destroy Iran nor to occupy it permanently because that country is a neighbour with which we will remain linked by geographical and historical bonds and common interests. Therefore we are determined to avoid taking any irrevocable steps.'[22]

This mode of reasoning, however blinkered, apparently led Iraq to conclude that a strategy of limited war would serve its national interest best—and be accepted by Iran for the same reason. The assumption was probably that a quick, limited but decisive blow would suffice to bring the revolutionary regime 'back to its senses'—that is, to make it realize the futility of the idea of trying to overthrow the Baath Party, without at the same time pushing the Iranians into a corner. By imposing self-restraint on the initial conduct of war, Iraq sought to signal to Iran its lack of interest in a general war in the hope that Iran would respond in kind, refrain from broadening the war and be willing to negotiate a settlement. The existence of such expectations is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that Iraq voluntarily halted its advance within a week and announced its willingness to negotiate an agreement.

It was not long before Iraq realized the fundamental asymmetry between its intentions and perceptions and those of Iran. Even though the limited scope of the Iraqi invasion did not place the revolutionary regime in imminent danger, it did not bring it round to moderation. Instead it enabled the revolutionary authorities in Tehran to capitalize on the Iraqi attack, to consolidate their legitimacy, to end (or at least significantly diminish) the power struggle within their ranks and to suppress the opposition to their regime.

Most states would normally react to an external armed interference in their affairs with all available means; but when the regime under attack is a revolutionary one which has not yet gained full legitimacy, it is likely to channel all its national fervour (and in this case religious fervour also) from the domestic to the external sphere.

22. *FBIS-MEA*, 11 Sept. 1981.

Saddam Hussein might well have benefited from President Sadat's warning at the beginning of the war that one should not make war on a revolution.

Conclusion

The general conclusion of the foregoing is obvious, but it is still worth restating. States should strive to keep the maximum degree of correspondence between their foreign policy goals and the instruments employed in their pursuit. More concretely, limited wars in the Third World remain to a large extent the prerogative of the strongest in their dealings with weaker states. In confronting a power with similar potential, a state can hardly expect its adversary to keep the war limited unless the interests at stake are very minor indeed. Instead it should opt to keep the widest possible security margins by preferring a strategy of general war in the pursuit of limited political goals (as with the Egyptian initiation of the October 1973 War) to one of limited war for the attainment of far-reaching political goals (as in the case of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon). In the case of Iraq this meant that in its attempts to contain the Iranian threat to the Baath regime the Iraqi leadership should have taken one of the following courses of action: either to avoid the war and try to forestall the Iranian pressures by other means (as indeed it did between the winter of 1979 and the summer of 1980); or to follow a strategy of general war in pursuit of limited aims. Such a strategy might still have failed, given the nature of the regime against which it was pursued. A strategy of limited war, as pursued by Iraq, could not but fail.