STRATEGIC EFFECTS OF CONFLICT WITH IRAQ: POST-SOVIET STATES

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FOREWORD

War with Iraq will signal the beginning of a new era in American national security policy and alter strategic balances and relationships around the world. The specific effects of the war, though, will vary from region to region. In some, America's position will be strengthened. In others, it may degrade without serious and sustained efforts.

To assess this dynamic, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) has developed a special series of monographs entitled *Strategic Effects of Conflict with Iraq*. In each, the author has been asked to analyze four issues: the position that key states in their region are taking on U.S. military action against Iraq; the role of America in the region after the war with Iraq; the nature of security partnerships in the region after the war with Iraq; and the effect that war with Iraq will have on the war on terrorism in the region.

This monograph is one of the special series. SSI is pleased to offer it to assist the Department of Army and Department of Defense in crafting the most effective strategy possible for dealing with the many consequences of war with Iraq.

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STEPHEN J. BLANK has served as the Strategic Studies Institute's expert on the Soviet bloc and the post-Soviet world since 1989. Prior to that he was Associate Professor of Soviet Studies at the Center for Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education, Maxwell Air Force Base, and taught at the University of Texas, San Antonio, and at the University of California, Riverside. Dr. Blank is the editor of *Imperial Decline: Russia's Changing Position in Asi*a, coeditor of *Soviet Military and the Future,* and author of *The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Stalin's Commissariat of Nationalities, 1917-1924.* He has also written many articles and conference papers on Russian, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Eastern European security issues. Dr. Blank's current research deals with weapons proliferation and the revolution in military affairs, and energy and security in Eurasia. His most recent SSI publications include "The Foundations of Russian Strategic Power and Capabilities," in *Beyond Nunn-Lugar: Curbing the Next Wave of Weapons Proliferation Threats from Russia*, edited by Henry D. Sokolski and Thomas Riisager, April 2002, and *The Transatlantic Security Agenda: A Conference Report and Analysi*s, December 2001. Dr. Blank holds a B.A. in History from the University of Pennsylvania, and a M.A. and Ph.D. in History from the University of Chicago.

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Conclusions:

A short war with rapid decisive victory minimizes future risks connected with Iraq to our force stationed in the former Soviet Union. However, it does not eliminate existing threats or allow for reduction in force unless we prosecute the war in Afghanistan much more intensively and accelerate the rebuilding of that state.

No feasible scenario allows for immediate reduction of troops in the Transcaucasus or Central Asia, but many conceivable scenarios of a war gone wrong in Iraq could lead to the need to send more forces into these theaters.

An American-led war with Iraq will affect the international state system profoundly, particularly the potentially volatile set of regions that comprise the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Because the war with Iraq is not directly related to prevailing security conditions in the FSU, we can make the following predictions with reasonable certainty. Some, if not all, currently existing strategic factors in the FSU will continue, whether or not the United States goes to war with Iraq, and whether or not the war is short or long, conventional or one that witnesses the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and other forms of unconventional warfare. They also will require the continuing presence of U.S. forces at the level of their current deployments there. While the trigger for more violence in the FSU is not directly connected to Iraq or the Gulf, the possibility of serious military repercussions does exist, but they would have to be triggered initially from outside and then evoke a major reaction within the FSU.

The strategic trends that make for volatility within the FSU are located in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus where both the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. European Command (EUCOM) already have forces deployed and important U.S. interests are at stake. The war against Iraq, no matter what its course may be, will not terminate the war against global terrorism that emanates at least in part from Central Asia and which has at least some presence in or around Georgia beyond Tbilisi's ability to face that threat. Indeed, the recent discovery of ricin in Georgia underscores the potential for very serious threats in this part of the world.[1]

Neither will the course and outcome of the war with Iraq immediately resolve the domestic "security deficits" in the FSU that raise the possibility for violence attendant upon a war with Iraq. Therefore the war against Iraq will not and cannot directly enhance the security of either Georgia or Azerbaijan or allow the United States to remove forces from those states. The same conclusions apply as well for U.S. Central Asian deployments. On the other hand, if things go badly for the United States in Iraq or the war significantly confounds U.S. plans, the situation could deteriorate quite visibly and rapidly in the FSU. American forces there may be called upon to play a role in the war against Iraq should unforeseen contingencies ensue. While arguably the United States cannot reduce forces in those theaters, if anything, and depending on the course and outcome of the war with Iraq, the United States may have to put in more. This assessment stems from the following facts:

> The war against global terrorism is by no means over, nor is any end in sight.
>
> Afghanistan is nowhere close to a level of stability and security from revived warlordism and terrorist penetration (perhaps abetted by rogue elements in Pakistan) that can allow the United States to withdraw forces from there. And without stability in

Afghanistan, Central Asia comes under immediate and direct risk.

The "non-terrorist" or indigenous threats to the security of states in the former Soviet Union will not have been lessened by the course of war in Iraq. If anything, a long war or one featuring either WMD or other forms of unconventional warfare could lead to more threats against American and allied forces in those areas. The reasons behind this argument are given below.

Those regional and adjacent sources of potential violence in the FSU comprise the following phenomena whose presence has little or nothing to do with Iraq and even Al-Qa'ida, but which could be exploited by them or others to attack U.S. forces, assets, allies, and interests. Those phenomena are both structural and the result of deliberate policies by local governments that interact with those structural characteristics. They comprise:

Insecure borders and thus ethnic and territorial conflicts;

Great and grinding poverty alongside of spiraling wealth for a few, and massive official corruption;

Very high degrees of environmental degradation leading to rivalries over water and energy;

Ethnic and/or religious tensions that are manipulated easily by the local authoritarian governments;

Repressive authoritarian regimes;

Weak militaries and weak civilian democratic controls over the means of violence—a factor that entails weak states, weak governments, and can easily spawn paramilitary, insurgent, or terrorist formations;

> Enormous state corruption and deeply-rooted transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) whose main source of profits is the drug trade, but who also are involved in WMD smuggling across borders. In addition, many signs, including recent ones, indicate that the Chechens or other terrorists linked to Al-Qa'ida are searching for WMD.[2]
>
> Some analysts and commentators believe there are links between many of these groups to states and various insurgent and terrorist formations, in particular but not only to Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Service Institution) are well-known.
>
> The willingness of foreign regimes to subvert local governments, wage or threaten economic warfare against them, launch coups, incite terrorism, or actually threaten or use force against them, and to threaten the use of force due to rivalries for energy assets that can become pretexts for violence (e.g., Iran and Azerbaijan in 2001). Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China have engaged in one or more of these behaviors in the past decade and could do so again.
>
> The belief in Moscow that the United States should only stay in Central Asia for the duration of Afghanistan operation. Moreover, China and Iran have frequently publicly voiced opposition to the U.S. position in Central Asia and are clearly cooperating with each other.[3]

A prolonged war in Iraq plus protracted presence in Central Asia could lead to a revival of the strong ties between and/or among Russia, China, and Iran that would be based on the common aim of forcing the United States out of the area. Admittedly this is something of a worst case scenario, but Iran alone or any of the other two could, with the passive support of the others, undertake such actions.

One way to do so would be support, both overt and covert, for attacks upon U.S. Central Asian positions.

These external rivalries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and around Central Asia are so intense in some cases that they have spawned classical alliances for war, e.g., the new Indo-Iranian alliance that gives India "the right to use Iranian military bases in the event of a war with neighboring Pakistan, in exchange for India providing Tehran with military hardware, training, maintenance, and modernization support."[4] Thus the possibility of outbreak of conflicts in and around Central Asia is real and not necessarily tied to conditions in Iraq. But a war with Iraq could be exploited by third parties to attack U.S. interests, allies, and assets in the FSU. Indeed, U.S. naval forces are in Azerbaijan and ground forces in Georgia precisely to ward off threats from Iran against Azeri oil and coastal assets, from Russia and/or Chechen terrorists against Georgia, and to help train and modernize those states' armies and navies and to guard Azerbaijan's coastal assets.

Possibilities also exist for more cooperative military relations with other actors who might be willing under certain circumstances to upgrade their contribution to a cooperative security regime in these places. NATO and the European Union have shown a rising interest in the Caucasus and to a lesser degree Central Asia, especially as expressed at the November 2002 Prague summit. Those regions are no longer "out of area," and both NATO and Central Asian states seek deeper and broader contacts among their armed forces.[5] Russia has already accepted the potential benefit of this presence and raised the possibility for cooperation with NATO in Central Asia.[6]

On the other hand, Russia's military is resisting this cooperation. Complications in Iraq would fortify this resistance and increase the voice of the obstructionists within Russian policymaking. Similarly China, alarmed at NATO's rising profile in Central Asia, has initiated regular

consultations with the Alliance.[7] While the possibility for future conflicts in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus remains reasonably high, there also are real grounds for working towards a more cooperative multilateral security regime in these areas.

Nonetheless, the positive trends are embryonic. If subjected to strain, they may fall apart. Putin and the Russian military are striving to create a CIS military modeled after the Warsaw Pact.[8] Such an organization might liaise with NATO but would preclude effective bilateral cooperation with the armed forces of member states. Meanwhile existing rivalries continue and, as in the Indo-Iranian deal, may be growing. So the United States cannot assume either a conflict-free environment there or that the great powers will happily cooperate with each other in these zones.

Exchanges and exercises involving U.S. troops to help train local forces to defend against invasion from outside or from domestic insurgencies are two of the most effective ways of cementing partnerships.[9] It is vital to continue this. U.S. forces involved in this effort must include a significant Army presence to train and advise, as well as to help secure American installations. But a vital issue is the extent to which U.S. forces will directly or indirectly help protect friendly regimes. The new Russian deployment at the air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, is widely suspected of having a mission of defense of the government against domestic unrest, i.e., counterinsurgency or something close to it.[10] U.S. allies in Central Asia undoubtedly expect a similar or analogous response or at least training of their own forces whose first mission is defense of the regime.

If the war with Iraq drags on or WMD are used, Saddam Hussein or those sympathetic to him may attempt to open a second and even third front, much as the terrorists did by striking at Kashmir in late 2001 to relieve the pressure on Al-Qa'ida. Except for Chechnya, the regions of the former Soviet Union have not evinced the rabid anti-Americanism

seen elsewhere, but groups inclined this way do exist and are connected either to Al-Qa'ida or state sponsors—Chechens to Saudi Arabia, and Hizbollah and other groups to Iran. Rogue elements within Pakistan probably can provide significant assistance to them as well. Under such circumstances, American forces stationed in the FSU could become targets. Attacks could include terrorism and guerrilla operations that might threaten the logistical bases and communications of U.S. and allied forces. Terrorists and other enemies will believe that an America embroiled in protracted war in Iraq is weak elsewhere and vulnerable to attack. This would be true particularly if the conflict with Iraq leaves the United States diplomatically isolated. Escalating terrorism against the United States could deter the FSU states from preserving their partnerships with Washington. Even in lieu of this, the United States might have to inject more troops into the theater to counter the terrorist challenge.

Economic Considerations.

However the war goes, it will have a significant and discernible impact on the global economy. First, the advent of war, whether prolonged or rapid, means rising U.S. Government deficits. Those will force an increase in both the interest rate here and abroad as well as in domestic taxes. It will further slow worldwide growth while forcing global interest rates up and crowding other governments out of the capital market. Those former Soviet states without energy resources will be affected adversely by those trends in the short and middle term. But a prolonged war means even more distress for them since it will bring about international energy shortages, heightened fears of even more shortages, greatly increased prices for energy, possible boycotts of the United States by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) or some of its members, and thus a chain of events that will worsen domestic conditions and possibly provoke instability in their countries.

Oil producers may, on the other hand, enjoy a windfall from a long war. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that, despite being major producers of oil and gas, many of these states can neither produce nor distribute enough to meet their own needs and are thus importers who must compete in the world markets. Kazakstan may be an exception but not by much. Since they must buy oil and gas on the markets, their foreign revenues and economies will not escape the expected impact of this war. Further economic distress, especially if it is protracted and severe and part of a larger progression of political and socio-economic breakdown or anomie, often generates a causal chain with discernible political outcomes that point toward enhanced instability or at least the potential for it.

Therefore, a very short or short war followed by rapid reconstruction of Iraqi energy infrastructures is the only or most beneficial outcome for these countries from the standpoint of global economics. Otherwise the economic, strategic, and political outcomes of the war could easily interact with their domestic conditions to generate a spiral of political unrest and possibly violence against the United States or friendly regimes. Any scenario other than this also means much greater middle and long-term chances for unrest and even violence. That violence could threaten U.S. forces abroad and force the United States to defend what have become important, and possibly in some places vital, interests by finding reinforcements who can perform stabilization and/or counterinsurgency, and counter-terrorist missions in the FSU.

Even if the war with Iraq leads to a rapid, decisive victory, many officials and insiders hold that the United States will still need to maintain at least the present number of forces in the former Soviet Union. However, should events deviate significantly from that scenario, the United States may have to add to the existing troop levels in the FSU.

Russia.

The United States has no troops inside Russia or the western former Soviet republics like Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, and no plans exist for deploying forces to those states. Still, different courses and outcomes of a war against Iraq could substantially affect Russia's calculus to support or withhold support from other FSU nations and thus oblige the United States to redeploy forces.

Specifically, if the war appears to threaten important or vital Russian interests, Moscow might consider providing intelligence support or other forms of assistance to America's enemies. The United States would then encounter even more adamant political and diplomatic resistance to any unilateral action it might take. Moscow's continuing (and, in its own mind, principled) support for the United Nations (U.N.), which is designed to restrict American use of force, would increase. Moscow would then use its membership in the Security Council to support hostile forces and obstruct the unhampered use of American power. If that worked, Moscow might modulate its opposition and refrain from supporting enemies of the United States.

Assessing Moscow's likely response to a U.S. war with Iraq requires an understanding of Russian national interests. These include:

> Accessing the Iraqi energy market, and recovering debts.
>
> Developing and sustaining a balanced partnership with the United States. For Russia, this partnership entails regular joint consultation, compromises that meet both sides' interests, and a balanced relationship, not a surrender of Moscow's standpoint to Washington's.[11]

Constraining the use of force by the United States and NATO, preferably via the U.N.[12]

Restoring influence in the Middle East. As the enjoyment of such a role in the Soviet era also entailed a large volume of arms sales, and proliferation to Iran is continuing and may be resumed with Syria, this possibility should not be overlooked in U.S. calculations.

Protecting the partnership with Iran. Moscow and surely some in Tehran might fear that a successful and especially a fast campaign against Iraq could embolden Washington to start putting political pressure on Iran. The United States also could apply much more pressure on Russia to abandon Iran, which it considers, not without reservations (mainly about Tehran's ambitions in the Caspian Sea), an ally.

Russia's economic interests point in many directions at the same time. First, as virtually all official pronouncements state, the purpose of foreign policy is to create conditions that are auspicious for the reconstruction of Russia's economy.[13] Moreover, the oil and gas sector is crucial, providing almost 40 percent of Russia's hard-currency earnings and most of the foreign trade surplus. This makes members of the energy lobby, who do not have uniform interests all the time, the most powerful and important lobby in Russian politics, domestic or foreign. Regarding Iraq, Moscow certainly wants to recover the $7 billion owed to it by Baghdad and claims to have lost $30 billion there since 1990. But equally importantly, its oil firms see the potential to earn billions more in revenues if they can work in unhampered fashion in Iraq.[14]

Russian observers fully understand that, despite the lucrative profits Russian firms have made by circumventing the U.N. embargos, if Iraq remains under Saddam Hussein's control, this debt is probably unrecoverable. Moreover, a Russia that is too close to him will not enjoy

much popularity with a successor regime preoccupied with rebuilding Iraq and beholden to the United States. So unless Moscow can dance at two weddings at the same time and convince Iraq and Saddam's rivals that it is defending their interests, recovery of this debt (much of it owed to energy companies) is a hopeless quest. At the same time, Moscow and its oilmen are exquisitely sensitive to the possibilities offered them by the American market.

In the event of a short, victorious war, the United States will have leverage over reconstruction of the Iraqi energy industry and thus hold a major card in determining global output and price levels. Moreover, reconstruction of the Iraqi system would then be a less costly and more rapid affair. The United States and the new Iraqi regime could then bring more oil online quickly, pushing down global petroleum prices. This would increase U.S. leverage over Russia which could, in turn, be used to prevent Moscow from balancing or constraining American actions. The United States also could use market access and investment so that Russian energy receipts are not affected adversely (and along with them the entire economy of Russia). The United States would also then be able to encourage and regulate the degree to which Russian oil firms participate in Iraq's reconstruction and perhaps devise creative ways for Moscow to recover the Iraqi debts.

As it is, the United States has encouraged Russian firms to support the Iraqi dissidents, painting this as a way to recover debts and enjoy good relations with America.[15] This temporarily cost them access in Saddam's Iraq.[16] In a short, victorious, and purely conventional war where the political heat upon America is minimal, those industries would lobby for support for America in order to get in on postwar reconstruction contracts, recovery of debts, new markets to the West (including the United States), and investment in their infrastructure.

However, a long war, especially one that generates intense hostility in Europe, Russia, and in Islamic

communities, will affect the economics of the situation. It will raise the costs of reconstructing Iraq afterwards, thereby delaying its return to the market, create probable shortages or sharp price rises, and create immense domestic pressures upon the government in Moscow to oppose Washington regardless of the energy lobby's interests. The anti-American elites would be strengthened.

Although it does not always acquiesce to American policy and Washington's demands, Russia has served as America's strategic partner since September 11. This has led to expanded American military access to the FSU and Afghanistan, with Moscow's support, intelligence sharing, and a diminution of opposition to NATO's expansion and to withdrawal from the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty. This policy is known to be highly unpopular among military and foreign policy elites. They have constantly sought to erode, undermine, limit, and obstruct it. The worse the war with Iraq goes, in other words, the greater the pressure on the Russian government to support America's enemies, whether covertly or overtly.

Russia itself might become a second front for the terrorists using assets in Chechnya or elsewhere. The recent discovery of ricin in Georgia underscores the possibility for chemical or biological attacks either in the former Soviet republics or in Russia itself. It is all too possible that Al-Qa'ida, the Chechens, or other associated parties might attack Russia to force it to abandon Washington. As the United States cannot predict the nature and scope of such attacks, it cannot predict their effects. But this possibility must not be neglected in any assessment of wartime or postwar contingencies.

A cardinal point of this partnership and of Russian foreign policy in general is opposition to any use of American forces (other than self-defense) outside of the U.N. Russia will not accord the U.N. a role in Chechnya, but it has steadfastly maintained that the United States cannot use force in Iraq or elsewhere under any auspices other than

that of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Its intention is to obtain, thereby, a veto over U.S. defense policy. Accordingly, any military action against Iraq that is not sanctioned by the UNSC will cause an enormous spike in Russian political opposition. Elements within the Russian elite could solicit and perhaps even obtain support for actions explicitly intended to prevent the United States from attaining its objectives in Iraq and in the war on terrorism. Again a short, conventional war will curtail that explosion although the resentment will last. But if a long war or the use of WMD takes place, and even more if the ensuing likely "second front" is one where Moscow perceives its vital interests to be engaged, the United States then runs the risk of rupturing the coalition with Russia. Russian spokesmen have repeatedly warned that this would happen if we went to war unless the UNSC sanctioned it.[17] Indeed, according to their General Staff, they were trying to organize a military coup against Saddam to avert a war and thus exclude the United States from Iraq.[18]

If the war with Iraq goes badly, especially if Russia's vital interests are threatened, one result would be opposition to U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus along with an upsurge of gun running and intelligence cooperation with various anti-American forces in the area, including even some of the anti-regime elements in Central Asia or Afghanistan. Certainly, in the past, Russian intelligence agencies have had some rather interesting relationships with many of these groups and the use of such groups has been a centuries old tactic of Russian policy.[19] The war with Iraq may not lead to direct Russian military threats against U.S. forces in neighboring states, but may spark indirect opposition, particularly support for anti-American movements in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus.

Concluding Remarks.

The upshot of the previous analysis is that a fast, decisive, exclusively conventional war followed by a successful and rapid reconstruction of Iraq's overall economy and polity will allow the United States to minimize the risks and costs associated with the possible rise of a "second front," presumably terrorist attacks on American and/or allied assets, forces, or interests. The United States probably cannot escape some of these attacks, but victory of this kind can reduce the cost and allow the United States to maintain other troop deployments in the FSU and elsewhere at current levels. Conversely a long, unconventional, and/or highly destructive war magnifies the costs and risks the United States runs not only in Iraq but in other "theaters," including the FSU, and could easily oblige the United States to send more troops. The United States need not undergo the full range of those contingencies for this conclusion to hold. Any one of the three conditions of prolonged or highly destructive war could require greater force deployments. Many of those forces, given the nature of U.S. vulnerabilities, assets, and threats to them in those theaters, would necessarily be ground forces.

Regardless of how the United States wages war with Iraq, the war on terrorism is not and will not end soon. Hence opportunities and incentives for striking at U.S. interests will not immediately decline subsequent to victory over Iraq. But they may well increase if the war does not follow the "rosy scenario" offered by many. War with Iraq will almost certainly intensify the terrorists' desire to strike at American interests and targets. A short, decisive war, followed by Iraqi public rejoicing at liberation, will give some people second thoughts about doing so. But a long, unconventional, and highly destructive war will only confirm existing predispositions and encourage others who might have been dissuaded by the more optimistic scenario to join in that cause.

Recommendations.

Saturate Iraq with forces to achieve rapid, decisive, overwhelming victory and then rapidly scale back to involve allies in subsequent peace operations.

Intensify and accelerate peacebuilding operations and the war in Afghanistan.

Intensify and deepen bilateral and multilateral forms of military cooperation with former Soviet states.

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