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US Situation In Iraq: Comparison With Vietnam

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Mission Impossible

The acronym METTS is familiar to military commanders the world over. METTS consists of a problem solving approach to military scenarios under the following headings; Mission, Enemy, Troops, Terrain, Space and time. When applied to the situation facing US commanders in Iraq - as the June 30th deadline for transition to power expires - many challenges become apparent.

In terms of mission, the situation is complex. The military are favourably predisposed to simple mission statements that contain clearly articulated aims and objectives within a definite time-frame. The invasion phase of the war in Iraq was a classic example of such a clearly defined mission. Simply stated, the mission consisted of a rapid armoured advance on Baghdad, the removal of Saddam's regime and the destruction of his military infrastructure. These were clearly identifiable deliverables that were quantifiable and reasonably predictable in terms of operational planning and logistical support. The resulting campaign was an American Blitzkrieg that secured all three objectives. By April the 17th, D plus 30, Saddam's statues were being toppled in central Baghdad.

The occupation and nation-building phases of the war have proven far more complex. The first objective in this mission – to provide a secure environment with which to facilitate reconstruction projects, consensus building and democratic structures – has not been achieved. Nor is there a clearly defined time frame for the achievement of a stable democracy. There is no withdrawal date for US troops and no consensus between the White House and the Pentagon as to precisely how long American troops should stay in Iraq. Such an open ended arrangement inevitably leads to what the military term 'mission creep'. In the absence of a clear exit strategy, US troops on the ground in Iraq will become involved in an increasingly complex and hostile environment, characterised by increasing casualty rates and few concrete successes on the battlefield.

In terms of command and control, as Iraqi insurgents seek to further destabilise the newly established fledgling state, it is not clear as to who has ultimate authority over coalition troops in Iraq. Centcom has already had to defer to US Secretary for Defence Donald Rumsfeld's so called 'invasion-lite' concept for the conduct of the war in Iraq. After the June 30th deadline, Centcom will also have to deal with further political interference from the newly established Iraqi interim government. In this uncertain environment, the only clear direction given to US commanders under the new UN resolution is to the effect that the force 'shall have the authority to take all necessary measures to contribute to the maintenance of security and stability in Iraq including by preventing and deterring terrorism'. In other words, the US military must remain on a war footing whilst deployed within Iraq.

In terms of the enemy, the threats to the newly established Iraqi democracy include both internal and external elements. Internally, coalition forces have failed to destroy the many Shia, Kurdish and Sunni militia within the country. Centcom's original intention was to replace factional militias such as the Shia Badr Brigades, Dawa and Mehdi armies along with the Kurdish Peshmerga with inter-ethnic government controlled security forces. The objective was to disrupt local paramilitary command structures and to break

up mono-ethnic sectarian forces whose internecine rivalries threatened to plunge post-invasion Iraq into civil war. This objective has not been achieved.

Indeed, in the north of the country, approximately 60,000 Kurdish Peshmerga have simply donned Iraqi Civil Defence Corps and Iraqi Police uniforms. Their local commanders - along with their original designs for Kurdish autonomy and independence – remain more or less unchanged. In the south of the country, the Shia Badr Brigades and Dawa army, under pressure from Ayatollah Ali Sistani have been tolerated by coalition forces and are becoming integrated into the security environment of the new Iraq. Even Moqtada al Sadr's infamous Mehdi army has been allowed to remain in existence. Major General Martin Dempsey of the US 1st Armoured Division has even suggested that up to 4,000 Mehdi army members might become the core element of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps assigned with the security of the cities of Najaf and Kerbala. In Fallujah, many Shia leaders are dismayed at the creation by US forces of a predominantly Sunni security force consisting of many former members of Saddam's former Republican Guard.

The failure to disband these militias and to create a non-sectarian security alternative for Iraq may pose serious problems for Iraq both internally and externally. In the short term, they may provide some limited security dividend, but in the longer term, they may well divide Iraq along armed sectarian lines. This might lead to the prospect of civil war. Such a civil war might also destabilise the region by embroiling Turkey and Iran in Iraq's internal affairs.

Turkey has already stated that it will not tolerate autonomy or independence for Iraq's five million northern Kurds for fear that it would reawaken Kurdish nationalism among the ten million Kurds living in south eastern Turkey. Turkey may well be prepared to intervene militarily in northern Iraq in order to prevent a repeat of its internal war between the Turkish government and Turkish Kurds which lasted from 1984 to 1999 at a cost of at least 37,000 lives. With a modern, well equipped armed forces consisting of almost one million troops, Turkey would represent a considerable military threat to the sovereignty of the new Iraq. This is especially so given recent warnings by Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan that he strenuously opposed Kurdish autonomy.

Iran might also become involved in Iraq's internal affairs. There are strong ideological and religious links between the Shia communities in Iran and Iraq. Many of the Badr Brigade, Dawa and Mehdi army commanders were trained in Iran by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. If the Shia community in Iraq does not achieve its ambitions under the current transition to democracy, its leaders might well seek military assistance from Iran.

Al Qaeda

Terrain Boots on Ground

Space and Time mission impossible