

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE GORDIAN KNOT OF STRATEGY

A MISMATCH OF UNLIMITED AIMS AND LIMITED MEANS IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

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THE GORDIAN KNOT OF STRATEGY

It is September 1980 and Iraqi forces are invading Iran – escalating what had been a conflict of words and mutual political interference into open war. Saddam Hussein stands before the Iraqi National Assembly and declares that the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iran had been violated and is now void. Were the Iraqi actions part of a rational political strategy that balanced ends, ways, means, and risks? Or was the Iraqi invasion a shortsighted action that failed to support strategic political objectives? Our conclusion: Iraq made a rational, last resort, choice in going to war, but Saddam miscalculated the nature of his conflict with Iran. His mistaken belief that limited means could achieve unlimited aims led to political stalemate, dismal results on the battlefield, and near destruction of Iraq's economy. Failure to achieve his grand political objectives did not, however, prevent Saddam from achieving the goal he valued most. At the end, he remained in power with a greatly reduced internal and external threat. Yet Saddam did not clearly link his national security and military strategies, and his Pyrrhic victory highlighted his failure to understand the more complex components of the national security decision-making process.

THE PRELUDE TO WAR

Hostilities emerged from a fabric of Iran and Iraq's divergent worldviews and perceptions of each other's interests, intentions, threats, and relative capabilities. Immediately following the successful Islamic revolution in Iran the power dynamics of the region shifted, throwing the two nations onto a collision course. To understand the situation, we must step back and see the world from the perspective of the Iranian and Iraqi leaders in the summer of 1980.

Iran. With the Shah's overthrow in 1979, the Iranian revolution achieved Ayatollah Khomeini's long-held goal of establishing a Shi'a Islamic government. Khomeini was an uncompromising religious leader, ready for protracted revolutionary struggle and not open to political accommodation.¹ Even before consolidating power Iranian Islamic revolutionaries viewed Iraq as their next target. The choice made sense: (1) 60% of Iraq's population were fellow Shi'as, a group repressed since the Ottoman Empire; (2) southern Iraq held some of the holiest Shi'a sites; (3) Iraq's secular government was deemed heretical by the Iranian mullahs; (4) Khomeini was intimately familiar with Iraq, having used it as his revolutionary base for years before Saddam expelled him in 1978; and (5) Iraq was Iran's only competitor for regional hegemony and the next step on the road to Islamic revolution in the area.

The Iranian world centered on Islamic revolution. While the Algiers Agreement of 1975 between Iran and Iraq specifically forbade interference in each other's internal affairs, this prohibition was meaningless to the Iranian mullahs. Their intent was for individual nations to dissolve and then unite under a greater Iranian Islamic banner. To start the process, the Iranians opened an ideological offensive against Iraq. They actively supported Shi'a dissidents and Kurdish rebels, publicly urged the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, and aided assassinations of Iraqi officials.

Although Syria had quickly recognized the revolutionary government, Iran pursued its goals largely isolated from the international community.² Other Gulf states such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia feared an assault on Arab nationalism and the potential threat to both oil revenues and regional stability. Certainly the U.S.S.R. watched the situation closely. With Iran out of the U.S. fold there were opportunities for the Soviets to expand their influence;

however, they tempered their approach to avoid Islamic agitation in Soviet Central Asia and disputes with Iran over action in Afghanistan.

Under the Shah, Iran was the undisputed regional hegemon. That status was implicit in the 1975 Algiers Agreement that ceded to Iran part of the ethnically Arab Shatt al-Arab area.³ Revolution appeared to change things. Conventional armed forces appeared fairly evenly matched, although Iranian military leadership purges (many of whom fled to Iraq) had weakened the central army. The Iranian economy was in shambles and international economic sanctions were in place. Domestic turmoil and negative international reactions diminished Iran's strength just as their revolutionary fervor spurred them to exercise power on the international scene.

Iraq. Saddam Hussein was the strongman of the totalitarian Ba'ath regime in Iraq. He gained control in July 1979 and his primary interest was retaining and enlarging that power. Ironically, the Shi'a insurgency that Saddam relied upon to consolidate power in Iraq was later responsible for escalating hostilities with the Ayatollah Khomeini. Former Iraqi president Bakr had favored compromise with the Shi'a while Saddam urged repression and execution.⁴ Saddam arrested President Bakr, who later resigned for "health reasons."⁴ Saddam executed or imprisoned top party officials and civilian and military leaders, and purged dissident elements throughout Iraqi society including members of the trade unions, the army, student unions, and local governments.⁵ Not only was he violent, aggressive and ruthless – Saddam was clever. In late 1979, along with the ongoing repression, Saddam offered the Shi'a positive incentives for supporting his regime. New development projects and promises of expanded political participation appealed to the Iraqi Arab, not Shi'a Muslim, identity. Throughout the country, portraits and statues of Saddam went up as internal propaganda machines made him the

personification of Iraqi aspirations and power. By 1980, Saddam's control over Iraq was complete and he had to accommodate few domestic political constraints.

Iraq's economy was prospering in 1980 thanks to increased oil revenues and liberalized trade. New pipelines through Syria and Turkey built the growing oil production and processing industry along Iraq's Persian Gulf. Iraqi standards of living were rising and consumer goods were available to a growing middle class. Economic progress accompanied a larger stance on the regional stage. Egypt had been ostracized for making peace with Israel so there was potential for Iraq to assume the role of pan-Arab leader. In February 1980 Saddam proposed an Arab Charter to solidify the Arab front against external and superpower aggression. He also planned to host an upcoming conference of nonaligned nations. Iraq began looking towards the Gulf region, harboring aspirations of leadership among the wealthy oil producers. Saddam could see just a few obstacles ahead in his quest for dominance – and these obstacles were in Iran.

STATECRAFT AND THE CALCULATIONS FOR WAR

National security strategy has three essential parts: (1) the national interest, (2) the perceived threats to that interest, and (3) the plan for coordinated use of state power to defend and advance the national interest. First, identify the interest, then determine the nature of the threat and only then build a relevant strategic plan. At that point, judge the balance between intentions and capabilities, risks and costs, and means and ends.

Interest and Threat. As leader of the totalitarian Iraqi regime, Saddam had one overarching national interest: to sustain his own position of power. Only with his power base secured could he pursue a secondary goal of expanding Iraqi leadership on the international scene. So the first

item on his agenda in 1980 was to stop the direct threat posed by the Iranians. The insurgent Shi'a majority in his own country damaged Saddam's Arab credentials and could incite Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq. Despite internal controls (army, police, and intelligence units), external Iranian actions could spark enough internal unrest in Iraq to lead to civil war, ultimately unseating the Ba'athist regime. Saddam had good reason to fear potential insurgencies.⁶ He had just seen the Shah's government in Iran unravel under revolutionary pressure. Khomeini had both the intentions and capability to be a credible and dangerous threat.

The Islamist threat was readily apparent in February 1979 when the fundamentalists promised to spread their revolution across the globe.⁷ Somewhat surprisingly, the Iraqi autocrat's first response was to select the tool of statecraft normally associated with a more 'rational' actor—diplomacy. Iraq welcomed the new Iranian theocratic regime with rhetoric that anticipated continuing the status quo relationship of non-interference.⁸ However, Iraqi diplomacy was ineffective. Iran countered with calls for an Iraqi Shi'a uprising and Iranian support for insurgent groups within Iraq. Saddam tried propaganda to moderate the threat, issuing statements on Arab unity. The stakes increased after Shi'a terrorists nearly succeeded in assassinating Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz in April 1980. At that point Saddam turned to more coercive and punitive statecraft tools. He expelled people of Iranian descent, demanded Iran vacate three Arab islands in the Gulf, ordered the bombing of an Iranian border town, and executed the Iraqi Shi'a leader Ayatollah Sadr.⁹ Saddam's thought may have been to punish the Shi'a terrorists and eliminate their leadership – but the execution enraged Khomeini who responded by calling directly for Saddam's overthrow and beginning to train guerilla fighters.¹⁰ In turn, Iraq turned to subversive direct action in Iran by supporting dissident Arab

groups in the Iranian border province of Khuzistan. Anti-Khomeini Iranians, including the last premier under the Shah and former joint chief of staff, found ready Iraqi support for their efforts to overthrow mullah rule in Iran. Iraq allowed them to broadcast anti-Khomeini radio messages and provide advice to Iranian partisans.¹¹

Choices and Calculations. Diplomacy, propaganda, threats, covert and overt aid to insurgents – all these tools had failed to subdue the implacable Iranian threat to Saddam's regime. Could the threat be neutralized without going to war? Looking over the statecraft options available to Saddam, and their likely leverage over Khomeini, the answer is probably "no." Diplomacy had failed. There was little likelihood of finding a third party to mediate a peace. Iran was on a successful holy crusade, not open to compromise, and their diplomatic isolation made finding a credible negotiator difficult. (Syria was on good terms with Iran but was comfortable with the counterbalance that Iran posed to an ambitious Iraq.) The Ba'athist in Iraq had nothing short of war to sway Khomeini from his revolutionary path. In the autocrat's world even the perception of weakness is often a fatal flaw; as a result, Saddam could not offer concessions to get the revolutionaries to just go away. Economic sanctions were already in place against Iran. Saddam did not look further in his nonmilitary options (for example, mobilizing troops or seeking international intervention); in his view the choices were very much limited to (1) doing nothing, (2) supporting a proxy antagonist to weaken Iran, or (3) go to war to neutralize or eliminate the Iranian threat.

Failure to act, and thus allowing the undeclared subversive and overt hostilities to continue, was not an acceptable alternative. It risked both the appearance of weakness and could bog down the regime in actions that could over time strengthen Shi'a and Kurdish insurgents and

erode support in Iraq's growing middle class. Saddam had to respond to growing Iraqi casualties by taking firm action. A simmering crisis was not consistent with his aggressive leadership style. Saddam had to neutralize or eliminate the Iranian threat. For a while, it appeared that another protagonist would confront the Iranian mullahs. Iraq did what it could to support a build up in anti-Khomeini forces (pro-Shah leaders and Arab tribal insurgents in Iran) to disrupt the revolution. But when coups by pro-Shah military officers failed in July 1980 the chance for peace short of Iraqi war vanished.¹²

Saddam may have seen no choice but to confront the Iranians in terms sufficiently strong that the Iranians would desist from further interference in Iraq. Timing for the offensive was important. Saddam would have to strike before the U.S. settled the hostage crisis and restored ties to Iran. The attack had to occur before Khomeini consolidated power in Iran, while society was still in turmoil. Morale was low in the Iranian armed forces and Khomeini's support was weak within the Iranian professional classes. Also, Saddam could not risk waiting and letting Iran's revolution expand into Bahrain, whose high percentage of Shi'as made it another target ripe for revolution. From Bahrain the Iranians would be in position to threaten Iraqi shipping.¹³ Iraq had to attack in that limited window of opportunity while they had the favorable balance of power.

For Saddam, war was the only means available to secure his objective of eliminating the Iranian threat. However, the now-pending war with Iran also opened up opportunities for Saddam. There is some divergence of opinion as to whether Saddam's ambition was to be leader of the pan-Arab movement or to focus on the Gulf state region.¹⁴ Regardless, a first step to any larger regional role was regaining the Shatt al-Arab. Saddam had signed for Iraq on the hated

1975 Algiers Agreement, which ceded to Iran this Arab territory along the Gulf. Exploiting Iranian aggression against Iraq gave Saddam the chance to blame Iran for the hostilities and restore the Shatt al-Arab to Iraq. This action would enhance his Arab leader credentials, extend his holdings on the Gulf, and shift the regional power balance in Iraq's favor. Taking a step further, Iraq could gain oil-rich Khuzistan (and significantly cut Iranian oil revenues), enlarge Iraqi presence on the Gulf, and liberate the Arabs from Persian rule. Confronting the threat would rally the Iraqi citizens to the Ba'athist cause and strengthen the national identity. If successful, Saddam could secure his power and become the regional hegemon. This potential pay-off was a heady opportunity. So in his decision for war, Saddam had a muddled combination of defensive and offensive political objectives.¹⁵ First, contain the Islamic revolution outside of Iraq and secure his power. Second, regain the Shatt al-Arab. Finally, a third objective may have been to gain Khuzistan and permanently change the regional balance of power.

Did Saddam have the means to achieve these ends? Certainly, Iraq and Iran had roughly equivalent military forces, although Iraq held the edge in military leadership. Saddam enjoyed the advice and insights of the recently removed pro-Shah military leaders. Additionally, Saddam could be relatively certain that neither the U.S. nor U.S.S.R. would intervene on behalf of Iran. Saddam conferred with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in August 1980 and gained their moral and financial support for action against Iran.¹⁶ The key assumption was that the war would be short and over before instability disrupted oil sales. Saddam thought he had the military means to successfully defeat a disorganized adversary with no significant international support. With this

optimistic calculus, the risk and costs of war were seen as lower than the near-term alternative of civil war in Iraq and Saddam's loss of power.

Clausewitz warned that the “most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”¹⁷ Had Saddam taken the time to evaluate the political goals held by each party, he may have realized that Iraq and Iran would be fighting two entirely different types of war. For Saddam, the context was regional power politics and a war for his own regime and Iraq's survival as an independent Ba'athist nation. For Khomeini, it was a cultural war for Islamist revolution and survival of the mullah regime against the heretic. (Or from a political theorist perspective, Iraq-Iran may be called “Morgenthau versus Huntington.”¹⁸) These fundamentally different motives and reference points would make it very difficult to contain or conclude the conflict.

THE COURSE OF THE WAR

It is unlikely that Saddam had any idea that war against his neighbor would last eight years, bring two million casualties, and create over two million refugees—at a cost of over two billion dollars to Iran and Iraq. The war jeopardized over fifty percent of the world's proven oil reserves. How did a conflict that at first appeared to be so limited soon threaten to disrupt the entire industrialized world? If Saddam's overarching political objective—keeping power with a greatly diminished internal and external threat—was reasonable, the dismal results of the war prove that there was a fatal flaw in the link between political objectives and military strategy.

Iraq's Political and Military Objectives. A decade after the end of the Iran-Iraq war it remains difficult to unearth clear-cut Iraqi military objectives. This is by itself a searing indictment of failure somewhere within the Iraqi senior leadership. It is important nonetheless to trace the evolution of the military strategy used to bridge the gap between Iraqi political objectives and what could not be accomplished through other tools of statecraft. As a critical first step in designing military strategy Saddam Hussein had to define various centers of gravity (COG). It seems as if Hussein, as expected of an autocrat, relied more on intuition than serious analysis in doing this. Certainly he identified his own Ba'ath leadership as the Iraqi COG. (As the president's most loyal protection force, the Republican Guards were a critical vulnerability but not a COG.) The world's industrial powers were extremely important since they could influence the war's outcome by providing money and weapons to either belligerent. Basically, their COG was the ability to receive an uninterrupted supply of Gulf oil. Saddam understood all too well the risks of adversely affecting this COG and crafted his military strategy to ensure it was never seriously threatened (until the latter part of the war, that is, when his surprisingly shrewd moves forced superpower intervention and thus helped to end the war.) There is no evidence that Saddam ever defined his Gulf neighbors' centers of gravity, but he knew they faced potentially severe Iranian retaliation if he escalated his war aims and drew them into conflict.

It appears that Hussein regarded the will of the Iranian people as his opponent's COG. This inference was partially correct but Hussein failed to understand exactly *how* the Iranian revolution had affected that will. In 1980, Saddam believed that the disorder and turmoil of the Iranian revolution had sapped the strength of the Iranian people; not an unexpected conclusion

given Hussein's own experience with internal uprisings and his appreciation of centuries of middle eastern upheavals. Saddam expected two things to happen if he invaded Iran. First, Iran would be in such disarray that they would gladly give up disputed border territory in exchange for a more stable peace in their country.¹⁹ Additionally, the border territory Arabs would readily rise up against Khomeini's regime when given the opportunity and a promise of military support.²⁰ This misinterpretation of the Iranian COG was a crucial flaw. For the *real* will of the Iranians, personified by the Ayatollah Khomeini, resided in national support for the Iranian revolution. Once Saddam rejected nonmilitary alternatives of meeting his political objectives his only hope of directly attacking this true Iranian COG was to drive to Tehran and depose the revolutionary government. Given the nature of the two autocracies and the relative equality of Iraqi and Iranian military might, this was hardly a realistic outcome. Saddam's mischaracterization of the Iranian COG had a dramatic and unintended consequence: when Iraq invaded Iran, Iranians rallied to defend against the external threat, strengthening Khomeini's power base.

If Saddam Hussein stumbled in determining the Iranian center of gravity, it follows that his selection of military objectives to meet political ends was also grievously defective. Iraq's primary military objectives were threefold: contain the Ayatollah Khomeini and his ability to export revolution to Iraq; regain territory ceded as part of the Algiers Accord; and liberate the Khuzistan Arabs and gain access to its oil deposits. More specifically, Saddam intended to invade Iran with a main thrust along its southern border, establish control over key border cities, control the oil fields and major cities of Khuzistan, and liberate the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa. Khomeini would be shocked into negotiation and settlement by the rapid and

overwhelming intrusion into a limited Iranian border corridor that was not heavily defended. Saddam's perspective was that Khomeini could not afford to fight Iraq while consolidating power within his own highly unstable regime. The logical next steps would be rapid diminution of Khomeini's power, containment of the Iranian revolution, a dramatic increase in Iraqi strategic oil reserves (and thus implied wealth) and, with the 'liberation' of the Gulf islands, recognition of Hussein as a decisive Arab leader who got results. A quick, violent invasion would also put a damper on any thoughts of a coordinated Iraqi Kurd-Shi'a rebellion. In essence, Saddam could gain his first and most important political objective—maintaining power with a significantly reduced threat to his east—through a limited invasion of Iran during a small 'window of opportunity' shortly after the Iranian revolution. Cascading effects would help him to then secure his other, more expansive political objectives.

Military Capabilities and Vulnerabilities. Saddam had to have analyzed both static and dynamic indicators to determine the military balance of forces between Iraq and Iran. Disinterested analysis would have showed relative parity between the two sides but Saddam Hussein's analysis suggested instead a significant Iraqi advantage. In static terms, a relative balance between predominantly Soviet-equipped Iraq and United States-equipped Iran tipped quickly in Iraq's favor after the Shah's fall, since the flow of United States military equipment and technical assistance had dried up. Iran had a three to one advantage in overall population but Iraq had the early advantage in military manpower, due primarily to the effects of Iranian military purges. In 1979 Iraq had 535,000 total active military manpower, compared to Iran's 240,000.²¹ Iran suffered from a severe shortage of spare parts for its military hardware; for instance, almost all of its 77 F-14s were grounded in 1980. It had severe logistics problems and

had great difficulty in operating and maintaining its military equipment.²² In 1980 approximately 30 percent of Iran's land force equipment, 50-60 percent of its aircraft, and 60 percent of its helicopters were not operational. Moreover, Iranian revolutionary purges of the armed forces were devastating—the Iranian military lost 25-50 percent of its majors and field-grade officers and thousands of skilled technicians and junior officers.²³ Since it faced threats from many directions Iran had posted only four of its nine under-strength divisions along the 800-mile Iraqi border; of those, only one armored division was in oil-rich Khuzistan—certain to be on Iraq's most likely invasion route.²⁴

In contrast, Iraq had been modernizing and diversifying its armed forces. Its army and air force were better than Iran's; relative naval inferiority did not make naval forces a decisive element for Iraq when grading the military balance of forces, the result of a combination of planned Iraqi naval equipment purchases and the assumed primacy of ground battle. Saddam had 12 army divisions at his disposal, including 3 armored and 2 mechanized divisions in or near Basra. Iraq had been buying military hardware mostly from the Soviet Union, but received additional equipment from Brazil, Spain, Italy, and France as these countries bartered modern arms for Iraqi oil. In 1981 Iraq was scheduled to receive modern military equipment for all three services.²⁵ Iraq's combined 1979-80 arms imports were over \$7 billion, as opposed to Iran's relatively paltry \$2.5 billion worth of imports.²⁶ In 1980, Saddam assumed that Moscow would continue its arms sales to Iraq even if he invaded Iran, while calculating that the United States would never resume arms exports to Iran as long as Khomeini reigned.

Not surprisingly, the dynamic indicators were much more difficult to judge. Given Iranian turmoil immediately following the Shah's overthrow, however, Saddam must have sensed a

strong comparative advantage here as well. To begin with, Iraqi command and control was competent and reasonably experienced, with a Revolutionary Command Council that was willing to carry out Saddam's orders faithfully. Iraq's Soviet-supplied military had fought in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and had more recent experience fighting Iraqi Kurds. By comparison the Iranian revolution had split its military into two divisive components—the regular military led by Bani-Sadr and the revolutionary guard militia, or Pasdaran. In addition to lowering morale throughout the military, this division led to a sort of 'schizophrenia' as the two factions often sought different objectives and fought among themselves. The military became increasingly politicized as fears of additional purges caused allegiance to Khomeini to be an overriding concern throughout the Iranian officer and enlisted corps.²⁷ Iraq did not have much combined arms combat experience, but the Iranian military services had no recent combat experience at all.

Iraq had advantages in several other areas related to dynamic balance of force indicators. Iran's relative global isolation after the revolution contrasted with Iraq's friendly relations with all its neighbors. Iraq had relatively effective national logistics, combat, and combat service support systems, whereas Iran's logistics system—its combat lifeline—was weak. Iraqi military morale was higher than Iran's and was expected to rise exponentially with a quick victory over Tehran. Iraq had large financial reserves and excellent credit and financial backing from the Gulf states; Iran also had large cash reserves and continued to receive substantial oil revenues. One of Iran's major vulnerabilities was that its oil reserves in Khuzistan were uncomfortably close to the Iraqi border. Iraq's vulnerabilities included lack of strategic depth, tension between the Sunni leadership and Shi'a troops, and fear of both northern and southern rebellion.²⁸

Iraq had no official allies but in early 1980 Saddam Hussein assumed he would continue to receive military equipment from Moscow, Paris, and other nations with whom he had made prior arms sales agreements. Saddam had strong indications of tacit and even overt Arab approval of his invasion plans, while certain that fear of international isolation would deter other Gulf states from providing Iran with new financial or military support. Initially, the Omani government was even willing to let Iraq base its equipment in Oman to support an Iraqi invasion of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, although this support later crumbled under western pressure.²⁹

Iraq's Strategic Concept. Iraq's president assumed Iran's political *and* military objectives centered on overthrowing the Iraqi government, with Baghdad as the ultimate military objective.³⁰ His move against Iran was designed to preempt this very danger. Additionally, Saddam concluded that his invasion of Iran would likely precipitate an Iranian counter-invasion. To protect against this his invasion plan had to keep sufficient force at border weak points, concentrating in particular along the shortest central routes to the Iraqi capital. He also had to keep sufficient forces in reserve to check potential Kurd-Shi'a rebellion. Given these factors the Iraqi leader concluded that both static and dynamic balance of force indicators gave him a marked advantage over Iran. With time and weather as additional constraints, Saddam decided to invade in September 1980.

Saddam Hussein relied upon the risk-minimizing strategy of a 'defensive invasion': after exhausting nonmilitary options Saddam determined invasion was the only means to contain the Iranian revolution before Khomeini consolidated power and either invaded Iraq or incited a firestorm in Iraq's non-Sunni ethnic groups. In a limited war Iraqi forces would seek military objectives, keeping the civilian population out of the line of fire as much as possible.

Conventional force would meet conventional force in a symmetric strategy concentrated against a handful of well-known military-industrial objectives. Escalation would be circumscribed for fear of igniting a much wider conflict that would endanger the civilian population, potentially sparking Shi'a and Kurd rebellion. Saddam's invasion would combine air and ground forces to invade southern Iran, destroy Iran's air forces, block Iranian counter-invasions in the north, and suppress potential Iraqi rebellion. Mobilization was not considered seriously before invasion, as Saddam anticipated quick Iranian capitulation.

When Iraq finally invaded Iran there was not much of a true combined arms approach to battle—the use of air power and ground forces worked at best to achieve sequential objectives rather than taking advantage of coordinated attacks necessary to achieve simultaneous effects throughout the battlefield. Aircraft attacked air bases and Iranian aircraft but did little to support Iraqi ground offensives. Baghdad's choice of a risk-minimizing direct approach demonstrated consistent restraint. Iraq did not want to antagonize its Gulf supporters and worried that large scale attacks on Iranian civilian targets would lead to rapid war escalation. Both air and ground forces were more interested in avoiding conflict than seeking it out. Saddam was not willing to risk losing his air force as that remained his most effective reserve force.³¹ Tariq Aziz left little doubt about the invasion's underlying defensive orientation: in claiming that Iraq's military strategy reflected its political objectives, he stated Iraq wanted “neither to destroy Iran nor to occupy it permanently.”³² The risk-minimizing strategy Saddam selected acknowledged the reality that Iran and Iraq were the two major Mid-East powers. If the war ended as quickly as Saddam expected (with low casualties on both sides), he would soon have to deal once more with Tehran's government to return stability to the region—a government from which, he hoped, the Ayatollah Khomeini would be absent.

With time as both restraint and constraint Saddam elected to halt his invasion only a week after it started. He gained much of the initial territory he wanted but failed to take several key border cities (again, a result of his risk-minimizing strategy). His announcement that he was willing to negotiate a settlement so early after initial large-scale contact highlighted dramatically his failure to understand the nature of the war he started. Saddam fully expected revolution-weary Iran not only to desist in their calls for Iraqi revolution, but also to cede the border territory Iraq had already captured. Instead, the lack of a rout on the battlefield turned into a surprise for Saddam, as Iranians rallied behind the Ayatollah. Khomeini consolidated his power and turned the latent fury of his nation against Baghdad. The war quickly reached stalemate, highlighted by direct-style defensive attrition warfare, continued risk-minimizing strategies, and rational, slow-paced escalation into the tanker wars, city attacks, and even use of poison gas.

The Character and Conduct of the War. The “paradoxical trinity” helps explain the Iran-Iraq war’s character and conduct. Based on previous experience Saddam must have expected Khomeini to react as a typical Mid-East autocrat. That is, creativity and passion would be subordinate to the autocrat’s rationality. A risk-minimizing approach to war ensured neither chance and probability nor passion would usurp the autocrat’s authority. (The undesirable by-products, of course, were absence of maneuver warfare and battlefield creativity.) To keep power the autocrat must subdue primordial violence and passion. Revolution in Iran changed the trinity completely: primordial violence and passion not only influenced the Iranian trinity, they dominated it—it was passion, after all, that sparked the Iranian revolution in the first place. The magnitude of Saddam’s distorted perception of the Iranian trinity was painfully apparent when he offered to negotiate with Tehran so soon after invasion. Khomeini’s best hope of

consolidating power was to focus Iranian passion against Baghdad instead of Tehran. Khomeini *wanted* to keep fighting as it gave him exactly the opening he needed to turn Iranian passions outward; Khomeini was a religious leader, not the archetypal ‘rational’ Mid-East autocrat Saddam expected. Since Saddam was not willing to risk a drive to Tehran to depose the Iranian government, yet still feared Tehran’s designs against his Ba’ath government, he had to accept battlefield stalemate. He no longer had any realistic alternatives: only total war could achieve his political objectives, yet he was unwilling to risk the loss of power that was an inherent risk in such a war. Nonmilitary options to end the war—such as renewed negotiations, mediation, or simply a prolonged cease-fire—were available but discarded. The only successful diplomatic efforts stemmed from military actions: the tanker war brought in the superpowers, whose desire to avoid further disruptions to the flow of oil helped moderate the negotiations that eventually ended the war. Hussein allowed his military commanders to exercise creativity only late in the war, resulting in a series of five battles that were “decisive in ending the Iran-Iraq war.”³³

Potential Results. Since Saddam did not understand the true Iranian COG, any Iraqi cost-benefit analysis of the defensive invasion strategy was inherently flawed. Invasion promised to be high payoff, low risk, and low cost. In fact, based on his assumptions regarding the Iranian trinity, the risks associated with not invading far outweighed those of invasion. Saddam expected quick Iranian capitulation but in its absence was willing to accept battlefield stalemate. Attrition warfare would erode his opponent’s military power and sap its political strength, reducing any threat to Baghdad of invasion or internal rebellion. If the most likely ‘worst case’ outcome was a return to pre-revolution *status quo* absent the threat of overthrow, invasion was an obvious choice.

The most critical assumption Saddam made was that Iran would buckle after invasion, acceding to Iraq's limited territorial gains. When this proved wrong Saddam was mired in a war without passion or creativity. Iraq's invasion plan did not consider many branches or sequels; the plan with a single aim proved to be Liddell Hart's "barren pole."³⁴ Defensive invasion was the only option that would minimize risk to his power base; only total war, however, could possibly succeed in gaining the political objectives he sought. Consequently, his risk-minimizing, symmetrical strategy could do no better than to match escalation with escalation; moderation with moderation. Saddam was constrained from first use of weapons of mass destruction, fearing that a like response by Iran would endanger his cities and incite panic conditions that could precipitate his downfall. He kept the initiative by invading first, increasing greatly the likelihood that Iran would match symmetry with symmetry; Khomeini, after all, had his own power base to worry about. On the other hand, Saddam virtually ignored the causes and effects of friction. He did not foresee the unintended consequences of massive cuts in oil revenues, elimination of prodigious amounts of external aid and arms, and the destructive effect on the Iraqi economy of giving up butter to buy more guns. All occurred soon after the momentum of attrition warfare drove both Iran and Iraq away from rational judgment and the war took on a life of its own. For Saddam, the war became linked to only one objective—keeping power. The war would not end by destruction of Iranian popular will or by overthrow of Baghdad's Ba'ath regime, but by total national exhaustion on both sides of the Shaat al-Arab.

CONCLUSION

In his failure to understand the true nature of the war he intended to fight, Saddam Hussein started an eight-year conflict that became extraordinarily difficult to end. His most egregious

mistake was to invade a country that was in the middle of recovery from revolution. The next was to fight a limited war to achieve essentially unlimited aims. Nonetheless his miscalculations were not fatal. In fact, his decision to adopt a risk-minimizing strategy against Iran was rather rational. After all, since assuming power this modern-day Machiavelli gone bad has outlasted four American Presidents. Saddam remained in power, strengthened his position as autocrat, severely diminished the threat of imported revolution, and retained an iron grip on Iraqi Kurds and Shi'as. He retained a military good enough to invade and capture Kuwait shortly after the end of war against Iran. He failed in that he did not become the pan-Arab leader, lost most of the territory he took during the initial 1980 invasion, and nearly destroyed Iraq's economy.

The fact that Hussein has remained at the top for so long is *prima facie* evidence of an effort to craft a national security strategy. The lack of a coherent link between his 1980 national security strategy and subsequent military strategy against Iran has, however, highlighted his inability to look much beyond one dimension. In 1980, Saddam viewed strategy as a linear process; that is, he viewed the route from point A (limited invasion of Iran) to point B (suppression of Shi'a and Kurd movements, defeat of Khomeini, and recognition as the pan-Arab leader) as a straight line. In fact the road from A to B was considerably more tortuous. Hussein faced a Gordian knot of strategic issues, not a linear problem.³⁵

By viewing national security strategy as a multi-layered, intricately entwined knot Saddam Hussein would have realized in September 1980 that he could never achieve his grand political objectives with his proposed military strategy. In fact, he really had only two choices: forgo the journey from A to B, or modify his political objectives before embarkation. A more thorough analysis of the context of post-revolutionary Iran would have proven that despite rhetoric to the

contrary, Tehran was in no position to overthrow Baghdad's Ba'ath regime. Saddam could have used a wider variety of diplomatic, economic, informational, political, and even psychological tools of statecraft to shape his national security strategy more favorably. Even simply massing troops on the Iranian border would have been far superior to an invasion, as it would likely have allowed Saddam to maintain his most important objective of staying in power. Fearing imminent loss of power, however, an autocrat such as Saddam Hussein relies on intuition more than critical analysis. In 1980 Saddam's intuition told him it was time to go to war against Iran. His decision to fight a limited war against Iran to achieve unlimited objectives failed miserably, at least from a national security strategy perspective. Yet Saddam Hussein is still in power today—having achieved and maintained his primary political objective. From the autocrat's perspective, he was victorious. If Saddam failed in trying to link political objectives to military strategy, the fact that he remained in power at war's end suggests his *coup d'oeil* was, if far from perfect, good enough.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dilip Hiro, 'Roots of Conflict: After the Iranian Revolution,' in *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34.

² Hiro, 27.

³ Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, "Deciding on War," in Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography (New York: Free Press/MacMillan, 1991), 136.

⁴ Hiro, 29.

⁵ Hiro, 30.

⁶ Hiro, 37.

⁷ Hiro, 32.

⁸ Karsh and Rautsi, 137.

⁹ Hiro, 35.

¹⁰ Hiro, 35.

¹¹ Hiro, 36.

¹² Hiro, 36.

¹³ Stephen C. Pelletiere, "Iraq's Decision to Go to War," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, (New York: Praeger, 1992), 28.

¹⁴ Pelletiere, 29. Philip Robbins, "Iraq in the Gulf War: Objectives, Strategies and Problems," in Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick, *The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 48.

¹⁵ Hiro, 39.

¹⁶ Hiro, 38.

¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88

¹⁸ Hans Morganthau outlined a realist model of international relations where nation states are driven to action by their perceptions of national interests and actions are understood as the rational exercise of power to attain specific goals. Iraq's approach to the conflict with Iran fit the mold of a rational decision to protect critical interests. Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" offers a perspective where culture and ideology become the focal identities superceding the traditional nation state. Conflicts occur as different cultures strive for dominance; not as rational nations protect or advance their interests. Revolutionary Iran may be described, in part, as driven by ideology not national interests. For discussions of these different descriptive models see: (1) Hans Morganthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) and (2) Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, 22-49.

¹⁹ Efraim Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," *Orbis* (Spring 1989): 211.

²⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War*, vol. 2, *The Iran-Iraq War*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 13-14.

²¹ Cordesman and Wagner, 57.

²² William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, ed. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger, 1983), 31.

²³ Cordesman and Wagner, 34.

²⁴ Staudenmaier, 34.

²⁵ Staudenmaier, 37.

²⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, 46.

²⁷ Staudenmaier, 32.

²⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, 40-45.

²⁹ Staudenmaier, 42.

³⁰ In fact, Khomeini's primary political objective was to consolidate power as Iran's new leader while returning the balance of power with Iraq to *status quo ante*. By all indications he was willing to accept total war to achieve the former. Staudenmaier, 46-47.

³¹ Staudenmaier, 43.

³² Karsh and Rautsi, "Deciding on War," 148.

³³ John F. Antal, "The Iraqi Army Forged in the Other Gulf War," *Military Review* (February 1991): 67.

³⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (New York: Meridian, 1991), 330.

³⁵ In Greek mythology, the Gordian knot was a complex knot tied by Gordius, king of Phrygia and father of Midas. In gratitude for his fortuitous selection as king, Gordius dedicated his wagon to Zeus and placed it in the grove of the temple, tying the pole of the wagon to the yoke with a rope of bark. The knot he used was so intricate it was considered impossible to untie. Word spread that whoever could undo the knot would become the ruler of all of Asia. According to legend, even Alexander the Great was unable to untie the knot. Yet in a moment of frustration and inspiration he drew his sword and cut through the knot with a stroke. The expression "to cut the Gordian knot" refers to a situation in which difficult problems are solved by quick and decisive action. It is easy to see that there are actually several layers of meaning when applied to the Iran-Iraq case. Information on the Gordian knot obtained on line from Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia, available from <http://encarta.msn.com>; Internet; 1997-2000 Microsoft Corporation; accessed 28 September 2000.