

US Military Dominance in Mideast Proven a Costly Myth

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The arguments for maintaining a major U.S. combat force in Iraq at least through 2011, escalating U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan and assuming a confrontational stance toward Iran appear to assume that the United States remains the dominant military power in the region.

But the pattern of recent history and current developments in the region has not supported that assumption. Not only has the United States been unable to prevail over stubborn nationalist and sectarian forces determined to resist U.S. influence, but it has not been able to use its military supremacy to wage successful coercive diplomacy against Iran.

Furthermore, even the ability of the United States to maintain troops in Iraq and Afghanistan turns out to be dependent on regimes which are by no means aligned with the United States.

Six years ago, after the United States had removed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the U.S. appeared to be militarily dominant in the region. Apart from its nearly 200,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States had surrounded Iran with a network of airbases scattered across the region from the Persian Gulf sheikdoms through Iraq and Afghanistan to the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, along with aircraft on U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf.

Since 2003, however, events in the region have dealt a series of blows to the assumption that the U.S. military presence in general and ground forces in particular confer real power in the region. The first blow was the U.S. failure to subdue the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. By mid-2005, U.S. commanders in Iraq were admitting publicly that the U.S. military occupation was generating more resistance than it was eliminating.

The next blow was the Sunni-Shi'a civil war in Baghdad in 2006, which U.S. troops were unable to prevent or stop, even after the Bush "surge" of additional troops. The "cleansing" of Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad by Shi'a militias with the tacit support of the government ended only after a large swath of Sunni neighborhoods in the capital had been taken over. That fact contradicts the later boast by Gen. Ray Odierno, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, that "coalition forces" had "broken the cycle of sectarian violence in Iraq."

The decision by Sunni insurgents to cooperate with the U.S. military in 2006 and 2007 was not the result of U.S. military prowess but of their defeat at the hands of Shi'a militias and the realization that the Sunnis could not oppose three enemies (the U.S., the Shi'a militias and al Qaeda) simultaneously.

It also enabled the Shi'a government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, which had close ties to Iran, to consolidate its power and to achieve a crucial degree of independence from the United States.

The George W. Bush administration and the U.S. military command continued to assume that it would be able to keep its Iraqi bases indefinitely. In mid-2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates invoked the Korean model – a decades-long garrisoning of tens of thousands of U.S. troops – as the plan for Iraq.

But in July 2008, the al-Maliki government began demanding that all U.S. troops leave the country by the end of 2010. After initially refusing to believe that the troop withdrawal demand was serious, the Bush administration was forced eventually to agree to withdraw all U.S. troops by the end of 2011.

The evolution of Iraqi politics belies the popular narrative that Gen. David Petraeus miraculously rescued the U.S. war from a bad strategy and ultimately prevailed over U.S. “enemies,” including Iran.

In its conflict with Iran over its nuclear program, the Bush administration tried to intimidate Tehran by seizing Iranians in Iraq and wielding indirectly the threat of attack against its nuclear facilities. But coercive diplomacy did not work, largely because Iran could credibly threaten to respond to a U.S. or Israeli attack with unconventional attacks against U.S. bases and troops – and possibly even warships – in the Persian Gulf region.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, where the United States had appeared to be in control from 2001 to 2005, the Taliban and other insurgent groups have grown rapidly since then and become the de facto government in large parts of the Pashtun region of the country. The U.S. military presence has been unable to slow the rise of the insurgents in those rural areas.

The most recent blow to the image of U.S. military dominance in the region has been the revelation that the United States lacks a reliable access route for supply of its troops in Afghanistan. The U.S. military has long relied on the route through the Khyber Pass in Pakistan to transport about 80 percent of all supplies for Afghanistan.

But in 2008, allies of the Taliban began disrupting the U.S. logistics route through the Khyber Pass so effectively that it could no longer be counted on to supply U.S. forces. That meant that United States had to find another access route for supplying its troops in Afghanistan.

David Petraeus, the new CENTCOM commander, traveled to Central Asia to secure promises of a new route into Afghanistan from Russian ports overland to Kazakhstan and then through Uzbekistan to northern Afghanistan.

But this alternative scheme would rely on Russian cooperation, giving a rival for power in Central and Southwest Asia a veto power over U.S. military presence in the region. The Kyrgyz president announced during a trip to Moscow in early February that he was ending the agreement on U.S. use of the air base at Manas. That was a signal that Russia would cooperate with the U.S. military only insofar as it was consistent with Russian dominance in Central Asia.

Relying on Uzbekistan for transit of NATO supplies for Afghanistan was another highly

tenuous feature of the Petraeus plan. The Karimov regime, notorious for its abuse of human rights, faces an Islamist insurgency that could well disrupt supply routes through the country.

A much shorter and far more secure route into Afghanistan would be from the Iranian port of Chabahar through the Western Afghan city of Herat to the Ring Highway which serves all major Afghan cities. NATO's top commander in Afghanistan said on Feb. 3 that NATO would "not oppose" bilateral deals with Iran for supplying troops through that country.

Significantly, the Pentagon has made contingency plans for the use of the Iranian route, according to one well-informed former U.S. official. That suggests that the Russian-Central Asian route was regarded as far from certain.

On the other hand, the U.S. military is not likely to regard reliance on its regional rival for power in the Middle East as a solid basis for its military presence in Afghanistan.

Obama administration officials are still talking about Middle East policy as though the U.S. military presence has conferred decisive influence over developments in the region. However, the events of the past six years have shown that to be a costly myth. They have underlined a truth that few in Washington find palatable: geography and local sociopolitical dynamics have trumped U.S. military power – and are very likely continue to do so in the future.

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