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War drive

The Iraqi puzzle

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The reaction in the Indian media to US preparations for launching a war on Iraq has been one of surprise. Why is the US diverting its attention from the war against global terrorism in this way and risking, through such unilateralist behaviour, its goodwill?

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/09_F16_fighters.jpg]

Iraqi oilfield under attack by USAF F-16s

However this is not the real puzzle. While the US after September 11 did become seriously concerned about possible future terrorist attacks on it, the real purpose of its 'war on global terrorism' was its value in providing a magnificent cover for the US pursuit of global hegemony. International endorsement of its attack on Afghanistan and of its general war on terrorism (in self-defence, no less!) both gave to the US, and legitimised for it, a new freedom and flexibility of military operation of a kind that it never had before. The US was now defining who its 'terrorist' enemies were as well as the goals, methods, forms, targets, scale and duration of attacks on them.

It was not as if the US ever hid its wider ambitions. Shortly after September 11, the US Ambassador to the UN, John Negroponte informed the Security Council that this was a limitless war: "We may find that our self-defence requires further action with respect to other organizations and states." In that sense, the planned assault on Iraq with or without the fig leaf of a UN manipulated endorsement, is very much in the logic of things. Surprise is not called for, especially when there were many, who hostile to the US's post-September 11 behaviour, repeatedly warned that such an attack would be forthcoming in the near future as the US pursued unilaterally and aggressively its wider hegemonic ambitions. But nonetheless there remains a puzzle.

If all these years Washington did not feel impelled to unseat the Saddam Hussein regime why is it planning to do so now? The declared reason is but an excuse not the cause. Anybody familiar with the history of UN inspections on Iraq will know that not only has Hussein's military capacities in general, let alone his ability to produce weapons of mass destruction, been severely dismantled but that these very inspections were often suborned to CIA espionage purposes. No country in the whole of the twentieth century, even those suffering a defeat in wartime, has been forced to suffer so traumatically from peacetime sanctions. The idea that Iraq under Hussein, today or tomorrow, represents a serious threat to the US is so ludicrous that even within normally belligerent and supine Republican circles doubts and criticisms have been raised.

Nor is the claim that unseating Hussein represents 'unfinished business' at all convincing. To understand the falsity of this claim we need to step back into pre-and post-1991 history to grasp why the US felt compelled to attack Iraq when it could have, by diplomatic means, restored the status quo ante before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; and why after its Gulf War victory it deliberately chose not to overthrow Hussein when it could so easily have done so. Hussein, the benefactor of US support during his 1980-88 war with Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, was himself astonished at the American reaction to his invasion of Kuwait, failing to realize that the very reason why Washington supported him against Iran also necessitated turning against him.

One of the key strategic purposes of the US in West Asia has always been to prevent any major regional power (let alone regional hegemon) emerging, which might de-stabilize its own web of alliances with Israel and the oil-rich conservative regimes of the Gulf region. The Iranian revolutionary danger was its paramount preoccupation from 1979 onwards till subdued by a combination of factors. The collapse of Communist East Europe and the deep turmoil in the USSR dramatically changed the relationship of forces worldwide and regionally (the second Intifada beginning in 1987 had ended) in favour of the US. The war with Iraq had bled and debilitated Iran when in the later years Iran's 'human wave' military counter-offensive was successfully resisted by Iraq. The latter's invasion of Kuwait, however, threatened the establishment of a new and major regional power with uncontrolled consequences (on other Arab

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client states) if Iraq went unpunished.

The US has also had two other strategic objectives in West Asia: first, to keep control not just of the key sources of oil production but of the vast rentier 'lakes' of oil revenues to be directed into the US financial system through petrodollar accounts. Second, to prevent entry into the region of any major rival, above all Russia. That is why when Baghdad agreed to a Russian plan to retreat from Kuwait before the ground war started, this was promptly rejected by the US because it would have greatly raised the stature and importance of Russia in West Asia. Similarly, when Iraq called (very correctly) for the two occupations of Kuwait and Palestine to be treated according to common principles and offered to withdraw from Kuwait in return for the establishment of an international conference to discuss Palestine along these lines, this was again unacceptable to the US for it would have given great prestige to Iraq and undermined American determination to dominate West Asia.

Domination of the region remains the unchanged purpose whether under the elder or the junior Bush but the seeming paradox of defeating Saddam Hussein but not unseating him after the 1991 victory is easily explained. The basic problem has been the strength and coherence internally of the Baathist regime in Iraq. The US does not want the break up of Iraq nor so weak an internal leadership that Shia resistance in the South could erupt to dangerous proportions with inevitable effects elsewhere in the region, and/or Kurdish resistance burgeoning to the point where it causes serious problems to its Turkish allies or demands a redrawing of the regional map.

Without an alternative leadership from within the Baathist regime itself, the US had to settle for Hussein as the least bad alternative given its wider and deeper strategic concerns in the region. The US has done everything in its power to gravely weaken the Iraqi government but always remaining careful to allow it some level of military-political coherence so that it does not collapse or become too easy a prey for neighbours like Iran.

Eleven years after that Gulf victory, nothing has changed except the imposition of immense suffering on the Iraqi people. The US still does not want a break up of Iraq or too weak a regime in which internally fissiparous forces like the Kurds and the Shias are emboldened. Moreover, despite efforts, there is no evidence whatsoever that they can set up an alternative regime that can command strong Baathist allegiance, nor can they destroy that Baathist framework and replace it with something as stable or coherent. Whether morally or in terms of international law it is not for Washington but for the Iraqi people to carry out a regime change.

When the US flouted such principles in its attack on Afghanistan, there were many people and governments outside the US who were prepared to justify this. This time there are fewer takers for the same argument - namely, that American self-protection demands the imposition of a 'regime change'. But this time it does not even make much sense, strategically speaking, from the US's own point of view, to attack Iraq as it is planning to do.

When a puzzle is not explainable through sound, rational argument then perforce we need to look at the less rational domain. An aggressive US unilateralism has become some kind of intoxicant in its own right. In such a situation, simplification of complex issues becomes the norm. If West Asia remains an area of turmoil and a breeding ground for generating hostility to the US, as it certainly does, then apparently the solution is to impose even more strongly than ever, an American fiat. Even if the war on Iraq creates new and unforeseen problems, apparently such is the power that Washington believes it possesses that it is confident it can cope with and manage them. The world then is now a laboratory where the US can afford to 'experiment' with its exercise of power largely detached from the considerations of others, allies or opponents. The enhanced American political insularity is not of geography but of the mind.

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