

GREAT DECISIONS

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As the US draw down progresses does Iraq have the ability to maintain long term security?

It's still in the state of civil war. The Kurds, the Shiites and the Sunni's have not yet reached for balance and understanding of what's going to be the case. Plus, there are other outside forces that are definitely impinging on Iraq, one is Iran, and the other is Turkey, Turkey has an interest in the status of the Kurds, it opposes and autonomous Kurdistan, and it is interested in Iraqi oil in the North.

Iraq is a country that has always been pulled by regional powers rather than by global powers and they manipulate what goes in inside the country, so I think it's very early to say that it's been successful. Certainly those people who criticize the bush administration for creating a hopeless quagmire were wrong, but we can't go from that to the idea that this is going to go smoothly or not break out in other, really violent uprisings.

It seems as though the US draw down has been a rallying point for unification and nationalism for the Iraqis. In some way, Maliki has used that as a rallying point. How do you see the US role progressing in Iraq? Will further withdrawal result in unification or chaos?

Maliki of course is delighted at the US draw down, he represents the Shiites as well as the country, and the Shiites hold allot of the cards both because some of them are backed by Iran and because it's just a larger group. The Kurds and the Sunni are much more uneasy about the American withdrawal. The Americans have come to be seen as the guarantors of their security. The question everyone is asking is as the Americans withdraw, will security be there, will the Shiites respect the Sunni and the Kurdish position, and will the Sunnis respect the Kurdish position. So the real question which really is not going to be answered for another year because the U.S. withdrawal is slow,

the real question as we come toward the end of the US draw down is, how secure to the various Sunnis and Sunni factions feel, do they trust the national

army, will the national army be a truly national one or a balkanized one, divided by groups.

There are many, many questions to be answered before then, but Iraq has a history of chaos vs. dictatorship and it's oscillated between the two, only occasionally stopping at autonomous stable national integrity.

How do you envision the US presence 5 years down the line?

I think the real problem is Iraqis don't want to see the US go, that having entered; many of the groups feel very vulnerable to the current government and see the US as the guarantor of their security. I think the real crisis is going to occur as we draw down past the 50,000 point that groups are going to be asking the US to stay. Groups are going to feel very exposed without the US. I'm not sure the US is going to be able to take the boots off the ground completely. Some residual forces, serving to guarantee the interests of some US clients in the country are going to have to remain to protect them.

Moving on to Iran - do you think it is possible to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons?

The greatest block to Iranian nuclear weapons are Iranians.

The development of enriched uranium is to nuclear weapons what gasoline is to a car, if you have gasoline you can run a car, that doesn't mean you have one. To design nuclear weapons that are usable, you have to miniaturize them so that they can fit on rockets or aircraft, and you have to ruggedize them. Launching a nuclear weapon is a very shaky experience, the vibration; you go to vacuum, extremes of temperature, that's hard.

It's pretty easy to have an explosion underground somewhere; it's very different to translate it to a deliverable nuclear weapon.

The Iranians, while they have the capability with some difficulty to produce enriched uranium, lack many of the technologies that go into building a deliverable nuclear weapon and the missile that can do it.

One of the reasons Iran has not been attacked by the US and Israel is that both countries are aware of the limits of what the Iranians can do. That said, this is an area where a great deal of risk can't be taken. Since no one knows how good intelligence is about where they stand, there has to be a particular stance among the Israelis about how far they are permitted to go. We have to remember that in the case of Iran, strikes only on nuclear facilities are not going to be possible. Iran has a fairly decent air defense system and it will have to be taken out.

The most important thing to remember is if Iran is attacked, it will respond, and its most important response will be mining the Straits of Hormuz and the rest of the Persian gulf, and if that happens, then the consequences to the world economy will be enormous.

So the real question is not can anyone bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, but can the Iranian navy's mining capability be taken out first before any attacks can be made on the nuclear facilities which aren't going anywhere, any mine laying ships will have to be taken out early. So this is a much more complicated operation than in 1981 in Iraq.

Say for example the Iranians do develop the capability to create nuclear weapons. What does that mean for the US? What is their position?

To do that it will be very visible. It will be very visible that they have missiles, you can't hide them very easily, and it will be very obvious that they will be mounting warheads on them. At that point I believe the United States will carry out air strikes. And they will carry out air strikes in preference to having the Israelis carry out air strikes. The goal will be to destroy those facilities. The problem is of course that the Iranians have hardened the production facilities so you may be able to take out the missiles but taking out the production facilities is much more difficult.

What about the geopolitical ramifications? What would a nuclear armed Iran do to the balance of the Gulf region?

Iran already is the major power in the Persian Gulf. Absent the Americans, the Iranians already are in a position with their current military forces, to impose a pax on the region, to dominate the region.

The addition of nuclear weapons really doesn't add to that, what it adds to is the ability to strike outside the region. The reason the Iranians want these weapons is regime survival. They saw what happened in the former Soviet Union, they have seen what happened in Iraq.

They want the Islamic republic to survive, and they are aware that if they have nuclear weapons that can reach allies of the United States or even the US themselves, the US will behave much more carefully. So rhetoric aside, and it's important to ignore rhetoric because everybody can do it, their goal is deterrence.

But, at the same time we have to remember that without the US, they are the dominant power in the gulf. No combination of forces, now that the Iraqi army has been destroyed, can possibly resist the Iranians.

Do you see a conglomeration of the Saudis, some of the other Gulf States, even Egypt, being able to present a counter force without the US behind it?

Egypt is far away and delivering forces to the gulf would be difficult and Egypt's military is not in good shape, but the entire point is that the Gulf States taken together can't begin to measure up to the Iranians; the only regional power that can affect the balance of power in the region is Turkey. Should Turkey choose to get involved, that would be more than a match for the Iranians. The Iranians are very careful not to alienate the Turks and the Turks are very careful not to get drawn too deeply into a struggle against Iran. But the native forces in the gulf are unable to block the Iranians and that really has been the condition since 1979.

Moving onto Russia - do you think it is a mistake for the Obama administration to "reset US relations with Russia" or should the US be more cautious?

The Russians don't want to reset relations with the US. You have to remember that from the Russian point of view, the fall of the Soviet Union was what Putin called a geopolitical catastrophe. The vision that the US has of the period of 1990 to 2004 was that this was a pretty good time in US Russia relations but that's not the Russian perspective so the Obama administration could not have delivered a worse message to the Russians than to say "Let's go back to Boris Yeltsin" let's go back to the early days of the Putin era." There is no reset to this because the entire Russian strategy is to never go back there again.

The Obama administration is essentially following not only the Bush policy, but the Reagan policy. The Reagan policy was to play on the weakness of the Russian economy and if the Russian economy is weak then Russia can't present a threat. This is a deep misreading on the part of the Obama administration of Russia at this point because Russia has never had a good economy. Under the Czar, under Stalin, under Brezhnev, the Russian economy was always a cripple, and yet they were a major global power, fearsome and terrifying. The reason is that in Russia, the economy is dominated by the only institution that efficiently works, the KGB, the NKVD and so on. And they are able therefore through the use of force and terror to transfer from the economy to the military economy any resources they want. So you have an asymmetry in Russia, a weak economy and a very strong military and that's exactly where Putin and Medvedev are going again.

It seems that Obama has taken up this arms issue as a major issue that the US can work with on Russia. Is that going to be enough to overcome some of these other adversities?

The Obama administration followed the thinking of Henry Kissinger saying, let's find an issue we can all agree on and they dusted off an old and tired issue of arms control which really doesn't affect anything right now. Not because anybody takes it seriously but let's get an agreement on something.

The Russian view is that basically the Americans are treating the Russians with contempt by putting this on the table. There are issues that the Russians want to discuss, such as American respect for Russian pre-eminence in the former Soviet Union, American presence in Poland and the Russians see arms control as an American attempt to divert them from real issues.

How far do you think the US should go in supporting some of these issues and bringing Russia's sphere of influence into the US?

In trying to block Russian influence in Ukraine, the first thing we have to ask is can we do it? Very frankly, in Ukraine and the caucuses, Russia is the pre-eminent power, globally it isn't, but regionally, within these areas they have far more influence than the US. Therefore by continuing to push the position that Russia should not be pre-eminent in these countries is a very interesting position, it's not a very practical one. The only thing it does is convince the Russians that the United States continue to intend, not only to dismember the Soviet Union but to dismember the Russian Federation and that they want assets in these countries to help them in this, so it ratchets up the crisis.

Can Western Europe play a role there?

Western Europe has two problems, firstly it has no appetite for conflict, but they have another problem, Russia provides a huge percentage of German natural gas, the Russian have also indicated – they have cut off natural gas – that they are prepared to use this for political ends.

Germany can't survive very well without that natural gas and therefore German room for maneuver is severely limited. If the Germans can't participate, what the French do, or the Italians do really doesn't matter, this is about Germany. The Russians have been very careful to draw the Russians into a relationship of dependence. So, for example, during the General Motors crisis, when the Opel division of GM was on the block, it was a Canadian company that came in to buy Opel, but it was Russian money that financed it, and there was a strategic reason for that.

Do you see US support for countries like Georgia to result in a stalemate?

I don't see a stalemate because in fact, US support for Georgia and Ukraine are primarily rhetorical, there is no substance. Because of the window of opportunity that's been opened because of the imbalance of U.S. forces in their commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan, the US during the invasion of Georgia had no forces that it could effectively deploy that was meaningful. What you have is a situation in which, one, there are no US forces available for deployment, two, there are no allies that want to go with us, three, American economic assistance to Georgia has been and must be minimal because they really can't metabolize it. And therefore, four, the presence of this enormous, economically weak, but powerful presence

of Russia is always a driving reality. So the real question is, how long does American rhetoric hold Russians back, or does it draw them in?

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