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GULF WAR II: LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE

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The recent war in Iraq, which the Americans named Operation Iraqi Freedom, will doubtless be studied by policy-makers and strategic planners the world over. This is all the more so for military forces who have invested heavily in high technology weapons systems, in particular those military establishments that have placed great store in the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Such investments were made precisely because of the widely-held belief in the force multiplier effects of high technology. Nothing encapsulates this belief in the multiplier effect of military technology more than the RMA, or the Strategic Transformation which the RMA can potentially bring about.

In the coming months, much will be written about Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of course it is impossible to know for certain right now, but it seems a safe bet that certain key ideas will emerge from this coming literature – that the war was unprecedented, that Coalition military planning was on the whole quite brilliant (the corollary being that Iraqi military planning was poor), or that the war's outcome was a confirmation that the RMA or Strategic Transformation works. The list of possible assessments is limited only by the imagination.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

It is difficult to dispute the assertion that Operation Iraqi Freedom was to all intents and purposes an unprecedented war. This is an important point – the war against Iraq was indeed unprecedented. No doubt some analysts will seek to draw analogies to Germany's blitzkrieg against France in 1940, possibly even to Sherman's thrust through the Confederate South during the American Civil War. Perhaps the closest analogy is the 1991 Gulf War, when Coalition forces led by the US forcibly ejected Iraqi military forces from Kuwait.

Such analogies are, however, grossly inaccurate. Operation Iraqi Freedom saw the conquest of a country the size of modern France in the space of three weeks! The speed at which the war was won, alone made this campaign unique in military history. Of course, modern transportation technologies made this speed possible. The precision of firepower was also unique – the percentage of so-called 'smart' munitions used in the war is likely to be far higher than in previous wars, such as Kuwait in 1991, and more recently, Bosnia. It is likely that the majority of munitions dropped in the war will be 'smart' rather than 'dumb'.

There were also great disparities in the war; possibly unprecedented. No doubt there will be some who would insist that the technological gap between the protagonists was so great as to be unprecedented. Although this is a claim that is highly problematic (perhaps the

technological gap between the US and North Vietnam during the Vietnam War was even greater?), there can be little doubt that there was a tremendous technological gulf between the Coalition led by the US on the one hand and Iraq on the other. What is also likely to rate a mention is the qualitative gulf, stemming from the technological gulf, between the two sides. This latter point is important, because what has seldom been mentioned in the main newspapers in the US, for instance, is the sheer strategic ineptitude of the Iraqis in this conflict. This point will have bearing on the subsequent discussion.

Lessons and Implications for Singapore

Operation Iraqi Freedom will certainly exercise the minds of key thinkers and planners in the Ministry of Defence and Singapore Armed Forces. The problem with making assessments of the war right now is the lack of clear information; so any conclusions that are reached here are necessarily tentative. That having been said, for those tempted to paint the war in hyperbole, this is a cautionary tale.

The fundamental problem with looking for ‘lessons’ from the recent war is its very unprecedented nature. This was a war fought without parallel. The very nature of the war makes whatever ‘lessons’ policy-makers and strategic planners glean from it inherently problematic.

First, given the technological gulf that existed between the Coalition and Iraq, the outcome was all but guaranteed. There can be little doubt that the technological gulf between the US and all other states is tremendous. In other words, it is possible to posit the US as being in a technological class of its own. However, this technological gulf may not be replicated in future conflicts involving other states. The information gap, for instance, between the US and Iraq was strategically important not only because of the US’ information technology prowess, but also because of the Iraqi inability to exploit similar technologies. It was therefore easy for the Coalition to have total dominance of the information spectrum during the war. In other instances of inter-state conflict, the protagonists may not find such technological disparities in their favour. In such instances, the ability of one side to exploit military technologies in its favour may be hampered, even counteracted, by the other side’s technological capabilities.

Secondly, and more importantly, the strategic gulf between the two sides was similarly overwhelming. The Coalition was strategically superior, but that was compounded by the sheer ineptitude of Iraqi strategic and operational planning. In any conflict that the US might face in the near to medium term future, this strategic and qualitative gulf may – or it may not – exist. For other states embroiled in armed conflict, however, it cannot be assumed that a similar strategic and qualitative gulf will exist between the protagonists. The level of Iraqi strategic ineptitude was truly staggering, and may not be replicated in other states.

Thirdly, the conditions this war was fought under are unique to that region. The Middle East is basically a semi-arid region, with flat open terrain and generally clear skies, and few other geographic or weather-related obstacles apart from occasional sandstorms. Such conditions are perfect for an RMA-driven military establishment configured to wage a conventional campaign. Other regions face different geographic and weather conditions, and these may temper the multiplier effects of high technology weapons systems, if not drastically reduce the combat effectiveness of such weapons systems and platforms.

Of course, it may well turn out that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a universal lesson for all armed forces engaged in their own technology-driven transformations, whether these establishments call it the RMA or by some other term. Or it may not. The point is that policy-makers and strategic planners ought to be careful in gleaning 'lessons' from the recent war. To do this blindly may be to invite hubris at best, outright disaster at worst.

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