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Strategic Insights: Strategic Questions Loom Large for President Trump in the Middle East

April 11, 2017 | Dr. Christopher J. Bolan

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”

Sun Tzu

The primary shortcoming of U.S. policymakers since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has been a consistent inability to translate tactical and operational military successes into sustainable strategic political outcomes. This was objectively true for both former U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama as evidenced by the long and tragic history of the continued conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq that has yielded wholly unsatisfying strategic outcomes. It remains to be seen if President Donald Trump and his senior officials can successfully reverse this trend. Doing so will require a long-term strategy that first establishes realistic and attainable objectives and then skillfully marshals all instruments of national power—military and non-military alike—to accomplish those goals.

Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, U.S. policy in Syria has been vexed by the inability to either harmonize or prioritize two distinct strategic objectives: (1) the ousting of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who bears primary responsibility for the brutal civil war that has killed nearly half-a-million people and displaced millions more; and, (2) the destruction and defeat of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS), which represents an immediate and existential threat to regional leaders while posing a distant and marginal threat to U.S. citizens.

As my colleague, Steven Metz, recently wrote in *World Politics Review*, U.S. Presidents have often confronted a “dictator dilemma” in foreign policy.¹ In the Middle East, this dilemma manifests itself in the debate over whether supporting authoritarian leaders contrary to American democratic values is sometimes a necessary evil in pursuit of concrete national interests, such as battling violent Islamist extremist groups including ISIS.

In Syria, former President Obama had a declaratory policy that rhetorically sought to resolve this dilemma by calling for both objectives to be accomplished. In reality, however, his policies emphasized and resourced the fight against ISIS while providing only lip service to the goal of fostering regime change in Damascus. Perhaps overly buoyed by the ability of the Arab uprisings to compel the ouster of long-time authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, President Obama sought to quickly get on the “right side of history” in condemning Assad’s violent repression of Syrian protesters. He publicly proclaimed that, “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”² Nevertheless, aside from these lofty political declarations and imposing some limited and targeted economic sanctions on the regime, President Obama only reluctantly offered limited military support to carefully vetted non-jihadi opposition groups. This arm-and-equip program was designed to build a coherent Syrian opposition force, yet it proved to be an abject failure. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense

(DoD) plans to train and equip an opposition force of 15,000, costing the U.S. taxpayers over \$500 million, yielded only a handful of recruits that were quickly rolled up by al-Qaeda linked elements in Syria nearly as soon as they crossed into the country.³ This failure of the train and equip program confirmed President Obama's deep doubts about prospects to build a viable moderate and unified opposition capable of challenging Assad and his backers on the battlefield. The program was cancelled, this strategic objective was effectively abandoned, and all efforts turned to defeating ISIS.

While largely abandoning serious efforts to overthrow Assad, President Obama articulated and executed a balanced and effective strategy that over time has yielded meaningful battlefield successes against ISIS. His address to the nation in September 2014 on the threat posed by the Islamic State could have been written by a U.S. Army War College (USAWC) graduate giving due consideration to the ends (objectives), ways (concepts for employing the instruments of power), and means (resources) of strategy formulation. The objective was clearly expressed as to "degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS."⁴ The plan called for harnessing all instruments of national power toward the accomplishment of this strategic goal: **diplomatically**, the United States would marshal a "broad coalition of partners," it would also take measures to "improve our **intelligence**," it would undertake an **information** campaign to "counter [ISIS's] warped ideology," and it would aggressively interdict the **economic** resources that sustain ISIS. Nonetheless, it was also clear that the strategy would give priority to the **military** instrument of power by "sending arms and assistance to Iraqi security forces and the Syrian opposition [emphasis added]." Finally, President Obama recognized that such a strategy would have to be adequately resourced if it was to succeed and he openly called on Congress to "give us additional authorities and resources."⁵ This strategy has seriously degraded ISIS and brought the United States much closer to attaining this strategic objective. The coalition campaign has dramatically decreased the territory held by ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, killed some 180 senior ISIS leaders, significantly reduced its financial holdings and the flow of foreign fighters, and considerably diminished its propaganda output.⁶

At least in the fight against ISIS, former President Obama dealt President Trump a winning military hand, but not one that guarantees broader strategic success against violent Islamist extremist groups. The United States has forged an anti-ISIS coalition of more than 60 countries. More importantly, coalition forces are now poised to liberate the key remaining strongholds of ISIS in both Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria). This would deliver a serious moral and physical blow to ISIS. Mosul is where the leader of ISIS (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) declared his caliphate and the loss of its hold on these two major cities would lay bare the falsity of his claim to enjoy God's good graces. Military defeats in these two cities would shatter the image of invincibility that al-Baghdadi seeks to perpetuate as a means to draw additional recruits and inspire donations to his warped cause. Practically, the loss of these territories will rob ISIS of an important source of revenue in the form of taxes, bribes, and extortions. As Brookings analyst Ken Pollack warned in early 2015, however, sudden military victories could lead to a "catastrophic success" if not accompanied by detailed plans to occupy vacated territory, heal divided societies, and build effective governance structures capable of meeting peoples basic needs.⁷

It will be up to President Trump to capitalize on these military successes against ISIS and translate them into a meaningful strategic victory that prevents the emergence of other terrorist groups and offers a modicum of hope for a more stable region. The indications that he and his administration are up to this challenge are mixed.

President Trump certainly shares former President Obama's goal of destroying ISIS. Nonetheless, his administration has sent confusing messages regarding American strategic objectives in Syria. As recently as March 30, 2017, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley at the United Nations and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson independently made public statements that the administration was abandoning even the pretense of President Obama's goal of removing Assad from power.⁸ For a few days, this seemed to clarify that U.S. policy would address the dictator's dilemma by clearly prioritizing the fight against terrorism and would consequently tolerate a brutal authoritarian regime in Damascus in pursuit of that strategic objective. However, the Trump administration appears to be reversing course in the immediate aftermath of the Assad regime's apparent and horrific use of sarin gas on April 4, 2017, killing nearly 100 civilians. On board Air Force One on April 6th, Secretary Tillerson suggested that regime change was back on the table. When asked if the United States would be leading a global coalition to oust Assad from power in the wake of this chemical attack, Secretary Tillerson said that, "Those steps are underway."⁹

With this apparent reversal in U.S. policy, the dictator's dilemma has returned with a vengeance to confound U.S. policymakers concerning Syria. What are the U.S. strategic objectives in Syria, and which objectives have priority over others? Is it the removal of the Assad regime from power? Is it the destruction of ISIS? Are these objectives mutually exclusive, are they complementary and supportive, do they work at cross purposes with one another? Moreover, just how do the recent U.S. cruise missile strikes in Syria that targeted the airfield that launched the sarin attacks fit into broader U.S. strategy in Syria? Unfortunately, President Trump's explanation of the missile strikes does little to clarify U.S. strategic objectives in Syria, because he said they were related to neither regime change nor the fight against ISIS, but instead designed primarily to "prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons."¹⁰ Andrew Exum, a former Deputy Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy, argues that while these latest U.S. strikes might be useful in convincing Russia and others of the need to remove Assad, they might also "greatly complicate the fight against the Islamic State" since U.S. forces in Syria could become vulnerable to retaliation from Syria or its military backers.¹¹

Even assuming coalition military success in liberating Mosul and Raqqa, the administration will need to develop a strategy to translate these operational victories into a sustainable political outcome that prevents the resurgence of violent Islamist extremist groups and improves prospects for regional stability. Large segments of Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria remain disaffected and alienated from their governments, which creates fertile ground for continued conflict and civil war. It will require herculean diplomatic efforts to press leaders in Baghdad and Damascus to make necessary political reforms toward more representative governments. It will require the establishment of judicial institutions that restore the rule of law and the creation of truth and reconciliations commissions that can help these societies heal deeply felt wounds. Moreover, the civil wars that have raged in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen have left these countries devastated with reconstruction costs estimated in Syria alone to exceed \$200 billion dollars.¹² The United States will need to both invest financially and lead international efforts to marshal effective economic reconstruction efforts. On this score, the administration's plans to significantly reduce funding for U.S. foreign assistance programs (already representing less than 1% of the federal budget) and eliminate U.S. support for many international organizations will handicap the ability of U.S. agencies to fully employ the non-military instruments of national power and coordinate the participation of other international partners willing to share these burdens. As Trump's Secretary of Defense James Mattis once said to Congress, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition."¹³ Furthermore, the administration will need to move

much more quickly to staff the second and third tiers of the State and Defense departments so that detailed plans can be developed to synchronize and coordinate these efforts both within the U.S. interagency and with many U.S. international partners.

It is clear that President Trump inherited difficult strategic challenges in both Syria and Iraq. These are problems that are now owned by his administration. Developing a long-term strategic plan that draws strength from American values and employs and adequately resources the diplomatic, informational, economic, and military instruments of power to accomplish clearly articulated objectives is a difficult but necessary challenge.

ENDNOTES

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