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When the American empire start to decline?

8/2/2011

Today is the 21st anniversary of a key date in world history. On this date in 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, setting in motion a train of events that would have fateful consequences for Saddam himself, but also for the United States. Indeed, one could argue that this invasion was the first step in a train of events that did enormous damage to the United States and its position in the world.

Of course, we all know what happened in the first Gulf War. After a brief period of vacillation (and a vigorous public debate on different options), the first Bush administration assembled a large and diverse international coalition and quickly mobilized an impressive array of military power (most of it American). It got approval from the U.N. Security Council for the use of force. Although a number of prominent hawks predicted that the war would be long and bloody, the U.S.-led coalition routed the third-rate Iraqi forces and destroyed much of Saddam's military machine. We then imposed an intrusive sanctions regime that dismantled Iraqi's WMD programs and left it a hollow shell. Despite hard-line pressure to "go to Baghdad," Bush & Co. wisely

chose not to occupy the country. They understood what Bush's son did not: Trying to occupy and reorder the politics of a deeply divided Arab country is a fool's errand.

Unfortunately, the smashing victory in the first Gulf War also set in train an unfortunate series of subsequent events. For starters, Saddam Hussein was now firmly identified as the World's Worst Human Being, even though the United States had been happy to back him during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. More importantly, the war left the United States committed to enforcing "no-fly zones" in northern and southern Iraq.

But even worse, the Clinton administration entered office in 1993 and proceeded to adopt a strategy of "dual containment." Until that moment, the United States had acted as an "offshore balancer" in the Persian Gulf, and we had carefully refrained from deploying large air or ground force units there on a permanent basis. We had backed the Shah of Iran since the 1940s, and then switched sides and tilted toward Iraq during the 1980s. Our goal was to prevent any single power from dominating this oil-rich region, and we cleverly played competing powers off against each other for several decades.

With dual containment, however, the United States had committed itself to containing two different countries -- Iran and Iraq -- who hated each other, which in turn forced us to keep lots of airplanes and troops in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We did this, as both **Kenneth Pollack** and **Trita Parsi** have documented, because Israel wanted us to do it, and U.S. officials foolishly believed that doing so would make Israel more compliant during the Oslo peace process. But in addition to costing a lot more money, keeping U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia for the long term also fueled the rise of al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden was deeply offended by the presence of "infidel" troops on Saudi territory, and so the foolish strategy of dual containment played no small role in causing our terrorism problem. It also helped derail several attempts to improve relations between the United States and Iran. Dual containment, in short, was a colossal blunder.

But no strategy is so bad that somebody else can't make it worse. And that is precisely what George W. Bush did after 9/11. Under the influence of neoconservatives who had opposed dual containment because they thought it didn't go far enough, Bush adopted a new strategy of "regional transformation." Instead of preserving a regional balance of power, or containing Iraq and Iran simultaneously, the United States was now going to use its military power to topple

regimes across the Middle East and turn those countries into pro-American democracies. This was social engineering on a scale never seen before. The American public and the Congress were unenthusiastic, if not suspicious, about this grand enterprise, which forced the Bush administration to wage a massive deception campaign to get them on board for what was supposed to be the first step in this wildly ambitious scheme. The chicanery worked, and the United States launched its unnecessary war on Iraq in March 2003.

Not only did "Mission Accomplished" soon become a costly quagmire, but wrecking Iraq -- which is what we did -- destroyed the balance of power in the Gulf and improved Iran's geopolitical position. The invasion of Iraq also diverted resources away from the war in Afghanistan, which allowed the Taliban to re-emerge as a formidable fighting force. Thus, Bush's decision to topple Saddam in 2003 led directly to *two* losing wars, not just one. And these wars were enormously expensive to boot. Combined with Bush's tax cuts and other fiscal irresponsibilities, this strategic incompetence caused the federal deficit to balloon to dangerous levels and helped bring about the fiscal impasse that we will be dealing with for years to come.

Obviously, none of these outcomes were inevitable back in 1990. Had cooler heads and smarter strategists been in charge after the first Gulf War, we might have taken advantage of that victory to foster a more secure and stable order throughout the Middle East. In particular, we would have pulled our military forces out of the region and gone back to offshore balancing. After all, Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 did not force the United States to choose "dual containment." Nor did it make it inevitable that we would bungle the Oslo peace process, pay insufficient attention to al Qaeda's intentions, or drink the neocons' Kool-Aid and gallop off on their foolish misadventure in Iraq. But when future historians search for the moment when the "American Empire" reached its pinnacle and began its descent, the war that began 21 years ago would be a good place to start.