A war the U.S. can win decisively

By John J. Mearshimer

Many Americans fear that throwing Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait would be a very tough job for the American military, with U.S. casualties ranging into the tens of thousands. For example, Anthony Lewis of The New York Times claims that a land assault against Iraqi forces in Kuwait is likely to produce ghastly American casualties and resemble the brutal and prolonged trench warfare of World War I. This pessimistic view is incorrect. In fact, the U.S. military is poised to collapse Hussein's forces and score a stunning victory in Kuwait. If diplomacy fails to resolve the present crisis, the American military will sweep Hussein's forces from Kuwait quickly and easily. The campaign should be over in a week or less and probably fewer than 1,000 Americans will die in combat, a very low number for a large army fighting a major armed war.

The massed qualitative superiority of U.S. forces is the first reason the Iraqi army will be defeated. The U.S. armed forces are an advanced fighting force equipped with the best weaponry money can buy. For example, M-1A1 tanks and the Advanced Medium Helicopter (AMH) and Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), are far superior to their Iraqi counterparts and would thus give American forces an important advantage on the battlefield. Furthermore, the U.S. military has spent the last 40 years preparing for a major armored war. The fact that it takes place in the Persian Gulf instead of Europe matters little, especially since the American military has trained its forces in recent years in the California desert. If Erwin Rommel, the renowned "Desert Fox" of World War II, could easily make the adjustment from the battlefields of France to fighting in North Africa, there is no reason the United States cannot do likewise in the gulf.

The Iraqi army, on the other hand, is a Third World military that is incapable of fighting mobile armored battles. This crucial Iraqi shortcoming in tank warfare was demonstrated often in the recent Iran-Iraq war, a conflict in which the manifest deficiencies of the Iraqi military were laid bare. In fact, even by Third World standards, the Iraqi army is a below-average fighting force. It is certainly not in the same league as the North Vietnamese army, and it does not even measure up well to the Egyptian and Syrian armies. If the Iraqis can consistently score impressive victories over the Egyptians and Syrians, even after being completely surprised in 1973, why should we not expect the U.S. military to rout the Iraqis?

The balance of fighting power looks even more lopsided when the United States and Iraq are compared. The United States has an assured nuclear superiority, the threat of which is sufficient to deter a major war. The United States military has far more force on the ground in the Persian Gulf than the Iraqis have in their entire country. American forces in the region are likely to outnumber Iraq's armed forces by a factor of five to one. Moreover, the U.S. military is highly trained and well equipped, while the Iraqi Army is a poorly trained force that is ill equipped and ill equipped.

Thus, the prospects for a quick and decisive American victory look even better when one considers how the rival ground forces are deployed and how the war is likely to be fought. The Iraqis have approximately 26 divisions in Kuwait and southern Iraq. About 14 of those divisions are standard infantry formations with little mobility. As one would expect, these infantry divisions are dug in along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border and along Kuwait's gulf coastline. These forward deployed forces comprise Iraq's Magnificent Line, as they are dug into the ground and cannot shift positions along the line. The remaining 12 Iraqi divisions are mainly armored and mechanized infantry divisions that serve as Iraq's operational reserve. They are deployed well behind the frontline divisions—about 6 of the 12 divisions, the so-called Republican Guards, are reported to be in southern Iraq—and are expected to reinforce the frontline divisions that come under attack.

The key point is that the bulk of Iraqi forces are spread out along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. Consequently, they are vulnerable to the type of attack the U.S. military is most likely to favor: a classic armored battle. U.S. forces can overwhelm an army by concentrating armored forces and air forces along a 30- to 45-kilometer sector of the Saudi-Kuwaiti border so as to achieve a decisive effect. (And so they would.) That superiority will allow our tank forces to overwhelm the outnumbered Iraqi infantry divisions in the breakthrough sector. Since the Iraqis cannot know where the Americans will choose to fight the breakthrough battle, they must spread their forces out along the entire Saudi-Kuwaiti border. This will enable the Americans to gain a decisive force advantage in the breakthrough sector.

Before American armored forces smash into the one or two Iraqi divisions in the breakthrough sector, American airpower will be unleashed against them as well as the Iraqi divisions immediately adjacent to the breakthrough sector. Concentrated B-52 attacks will wreak enormous destruction on those forces, as many North Vietnamese veterans can attest. There has been much handwringing in the press over the fact that the Iraqis are dug in along the Kuwaiti border. Iraqi fortifications may be impressive, but they can be badly damaged, if not torn apart, by "Arc Light" attacks—massive raids by B-52s dropping tons of bombs and napalm. During the Vietnam War, B-52s dropped 30,000 tons of bombs on Hanoi, reducing it to rubble. Here in Kuwait, B-52s would be able to destroy any Iraqi fortification in a matter of days. By the same token, the Iraqis' doctrine is to surround our forces with deep minefields, but our armor will be able to drive through them. Our main problem will be clearing the minefields, but we will have no choice but to achieve a decisive victory in the Gulf. The Iraqis know this.

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