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October 2011

The United States, Iran and the Continuing Salience of Geography

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ABSTRACT

With recent US political and strategic goals unmet after ineffective diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions, some commentators and foreign policy experts have begun urging American strategists to employ military force to effect change in Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Presumably inspired by American success in establishing a US-friendly regime in neighbouring Iraq, such commentators suggest that a similar strategy of overwhelming military force could overcome the existing military and political structure of Iran and establish a pro-Western regime in its place. Such notions, however, rely on ignorance of one of the most basic elements of Iran: her geography. This ignorance, in turn, renders all such notions of military invasion not only unimaginable in theory but impossible in practice.

The current paper begins with a short précis of the regime change via invasion rhetoric in the United States with particular focus on the recurring references to US air power despite its lack of historical utility in effecting regime change without associated ground forces. Then, drawing on the geopolitical analysis of Gray and Friedman, this paper explains how Iran's geography, while not offering protection from air strikes, does render it largely protected from enemy invasion and occupation. With specific reference to the geographical barriers that are the Zagros and Elburz Mountains and the inhospitable Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut deserts, this paper demonstrates that attempts by enemies of Iran to force regime change through the use of air power alone or a combination of air and land military elements are inevitably bound to fail. In concluding the paper, it is suggested that this inescapable geopolitical reality should encourage US policymakers to consider carefully their positions on Iran and seek non-military means by which to engage with one of Asia's historical and strategic nations.

Keywords: geopolitics, air power, Iran, United States, regime change

Introduction

To claim, as Samuel Huntington did in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* (1999, p.35), that the United States stood astride the post-Cold War world as the sole superpower in a style akin to ancient Rome is to take a non-controversial position. Having dispatched the Soviet Union to the annals of history, having come to dominate Europe through extensive trade and military interests and with future challengers like China and Japan remaining long-term rivals at best, the twenty-first century arrived in global politics with a single power exercising near-hegemonic status for the first time for more than a thousand years. Diplomatically influential, economically powerful and with a military dominance that could only find parallels in Athens and Rome (Pierris 2007), the United States maintained significant interests in almost every part of the globe. Whether being keen to contain Beijing's expansion across the Taiwan Strait (Brookes 2003), reduce transnational violence in the Congo (Rice 1998) or the steady militarisation of inner and outer space (Mowthorpe 2004, pp.11-52), the foreign policy goals of the United States and the pursuit of those goals via its grand strategy saw barely a corner of the globe untouched by the victor of the century's long, Cold conflict, with perhaps no sector feeling that impact more than the resource rich region of South-West Asia.

Significant in South-West Asia is Iran, a populous, mountainous Islamic republic in the region's east. Historically a power of renown in the region, the ancient Persian Empire today exists as a resource-rich, relatively populous nation-state at the geographic nexus of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. Iran has been high on the list of international priorities for the United States for more than half a century, particularly so since the Islamic Revolution that saw the ousting of the US-supported Shah and the rise of the Mullahs. Relation between the US and Iran have been more than strained since 1979: the US embassy hostage crisis, the arrest of all diplomatic relations, US support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and Iranian interference in US-occupied post-Saddam Iraq have all pointed to a problematic relationship between the two states. Yet no issue divides the two today as much as Iran's nuclear program. On the one hand Iran professes to be seeking nuclear energy for entirely peaceful purposes and in compliance with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On the other, the US and its allies continue to submit that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons in contravention of international law and has become increasingly vocal in its rejection of Iranian arguments. Indeed, relations that were already poor have descended even further, to the point where some in

¹ The author is grateful for the support and encouragement of His Excellency S. Mahdi Miraboutalebi, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Iran in France.

the US foreign policy community are mooted military action against Iran in order to ensure that the nuclear program is halted, destroyed and even that regime change is effected in Tehran backed, presumably driven by America's overwhelming military power.

Yet what is the likely success of these proposed military strikes? How effective would the US military be in effecting either a halt to the Iranian nuclear program or effecting regime change in Iran? This paper will address these questions with reference to a key feature of Iran that is seems to be often ignored in calls for US or Western strikes against that state: Iran's geography. This paper will argue that the unique geographic situation of Iran works in the Islamic Republic's favour, protecting it from invasion and making regime change an all but impossible strategic goal for an invading force. Indeed, even the limited objective of arresting progress in Iran's nuclear program is likely to be difficult to achieve as the natural features of the Iranian terrain provide a barrier to all but air power which – despite the Western advantage in this domain – is unlikely to impose crippling long-term effects. Drawing on both international political analysis, geographic analysis and geostrategic assessments of Iranian and American perspectives, this paper will argue that Western objectives in Iran will not be achieved by the use of military power and, for this reasons, Western policy makers should reject military options and instead focus on diplomatic or economic alternatives in order to further their foreign policy objectives in Iran and the wider region.

Western Calls for the Use of Force in Iran

As the West and, in particular, the United States has struggled to come to terms with how to engage with a confident Islamic Republic of Iran, calls for regime change have become more common. Leaving aside diplomatic and economic efforts in the immediate post-revolution period which would prove to be stunningly ineffective, more recent calls for Iranian regime change have increasingly favoured military intervention. Indeed, with the US, NATO and the wider West engaged in conflicts in Iran's neighbours Afghanistan and Iraq, strained but close relations between Islamabad and Washington, and with closer relations being developed with nearby Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait – not to mention longstanding political alliances between the West and Saudi Arabia – the encirclement of Iran is a clear outcome of US policy in the region, if not actually an openly stated goal. Should military intervention be sought, then, it would seem that, superficially at least, the necessary strategic groundwork has been put in place for an efficient, multi-front engagement with Iranian forces and, perhaps, a quick regime change in Tehran. It is no surprise, then, to read such calls for military action against in Iran in Western journals and reported by Western media.

Consider the following from Thomas Holsinger's (2006) *The Case for Invading Iran*:

The only effective way to stop the mullahs from building nukes, while minimizing our losses from their counter-attacks, is to overthrow their regime by invasion and conquest as we did against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Holsinger argues that US military experts believe regime change in Iran via the use of an intervening military force is not only imaginable but also feasible. He cites "Democratic military experts" as suggesting that the campaign to overturn the Islamic Republic's governmental regime as being a simple matter involving:

...twenty days of build-up that will probably not be seen by the world. Thirty days of operation to regime change and taking down the nuclear system, and little or no stability operations. Our objective is to be on the outskirts of Tehran in about two weeks. The notion is we will not have a Battle of Tehran; we don't want to do that. We want to have a battle around the city. We want to bring our combat power to the vicinity of Tehran and use Special Operations to take the targets inside the capital. We have no intention of getting bogged down in stability operations in Iran afterwards. Go in quickly, change the regime, find a replacement, and get out quickly... (Holsinger 2006)

Such experts predict an easy victory for US forces in Iran, demonstrating a confidence in US air and land forces in achieving a regime change similar to that achieved in neighbouring Iraq. Indeed, when a conflict between the US and Iran has been 'war gamed' in the US, the use of air assets has been consistently prioritised, something that *The Atlantic* magazine reported back in 2004 when they called on experts and policymakers to consider a hypothetical strike on the Iranian regime.

The Atlantic brought together area experts such as Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution, Reuel Marc Gerech of the American Enterprise Institute, former Pentagon spokesperson Kenneth Bacon and Professor Michael Mazarr of the US National War College to contemplate "simulating preparations for the US assault on Iran" (Fallows 2004, pp.2-3). Regime change in Iran is presented as incredibly simple for US forces to achieve:

The overall plan of attack was this: a "deception" effort from the south, to distract Iranian troops; a main-force assault across the long border with Iraq; airborne and Special Forces attacks from Afghanistan and Azerbaijan; and cruise missiles from ships at sea. (Fallows 2004, p.8)

All of this was presumed by the experts to be not only achievable but achievable in a very short timeframe. As retired US Air Force Colonel and US National War College lecturer Sam Gardiner explains:

The idea is to give the President an option that he can execute that will involve about twenty days of build up that will probably not be seen by the world. Thirty days of operation to regime change and taking down the nuclear system, and little or no stability operations. Our objective is to be on the outskirts of Tehran in about two weeks...We have no intention of getting bogged down in stability operations in Iran afterwards. **Go in quickly, change the regime, find a replacement, and get out quickly...** (Fallows 2004, p.8, bold added)

The invasion and regime change scenario is presented as if a *fait accompli*, as if it is simply a matter of making a choice for the US President and the national security staff of the United States. A short build up in forces, a month of operations and regime change can be effected without a long term state-stabilising deployment of forces. As to what would influence the president to make that choice, the answer might be found in the words of journalist David Broder.

Described by President Barack Obama as "the most respected and incisive political commentator of his generation" (White House 2011), Broder argued in the *Washington Post* that there was an economic motive for the US to pursue war with Iran:

War and peace influence the economy. Look back at FDR and the Great Depression. What finally resolved that economic crisis? World War II. Here is where Obama is likely to prevail. With strong Republican support in Congress for challenging Iran's ambition to become a nuclear power, he can spend much of 2011 and 2012 orchestrating a showdown with the mullahs. This will help him politically because the opposition party will be urging him on. And as tensions rise and we accelerate preparations for war, the economy will improve. (Broder 2010)

In the eyes of Broder and those like him, the political benefits of invading Iran and effecting regime change would flow on to an American president who is proving domestically unpopular. In addition to providing a political boost to Obama, it would have the added effect of invigorating a US economy still emerging from the 2008 global financial crisis. Thus, according to experts and policymakers, the US has the means and the opportunity to effect regime change and, according to Broder, the US also has a motive. Add to this the achievement by force of long-standing US objectives in Iran, particularly in relation to antagonism towards its post-revolutionary government, and it seems that there is some consensus, at least among hawks in the US, around the notion of regime change in Iran. Yet there remains a significant barrier to effecting this change that is either ignored or downplayed by such hawks and it is precisely this barrier, being the very territory of Iran itself, that is most likely to leave Western dreams of Iranian regime change unrealised.

Iran – A Natural Fortress in South-West Asia

Iran is a fortress. As Robert Kaplan wrote, "it is not an accident that Iran was the ancient world's first superpower" when Iran's natural borders and defences worked only its favour against the "geographically illogical countries of the adjacent regions" (Kaplan 2009, p.105). The combination of mountain barriers, deserts, swamps and unforgiving plains mean that Iran has historically been safe from invasion, though this fortress has also restricted Persian expansion in a Western imperial fashion, too. George Friedman (2008) provides a useful guide to Iranian geography and the elements he engages with will be considered in turn below:

Area. Friedman suggests that in order to understand Iran, the state, it is first necessary to understand its size. Iran is one of the largest states in the world covering nearly 1.7 million square kilometres, an area larger than Western Europe (Friedman 2008, p.2). The sheer size of Iran has, according to Mahmoud Taleghani *et al*, determined the character of country, with the authors speaking of a "spatial inertia" that has affected everything from lines of communication and trading routes through to patterns of urbanisation and the transformation of nomadic cultures (Taleghani *et al* 2005, p.36). Iran is some four times larger than neighbouring Iraq and nearly three times larger than neighbouring Afghanistan making it a formidable geographic space to, in terms of security, attack and to defend.

Mountains. Iran, says Friedman, is "defined, above all, by its mountains, which form its frontiers, enfold its cities and describe its historical heartland" (2008, p.2). Indeed, of all the natural features of the Iranian state it remains Iran's

mountain chains that provoke the most attention for geostrategists. The Zagros Mountains – running from the north-west of Iran to the Strait of Hormuz – present a largely impenetrable land border with Iraq, Turkey and Armenia. Similarly, the Elburz Mountains across the north of the country make penetrating Iran from the Caspian Sea or Turkmenistan difficult and the significantly lower Central Mahran Range provides issues for challengers seeking to enter Iran from the Gulf of Oman. The natural barriers that the Zagros, Elburz and Mahran mountains present to Iran’s adversaries has essentially allowed to remain a “closed citadel” reliant on both space and topography as key elements of a national defence (Haider 2010, p.3).

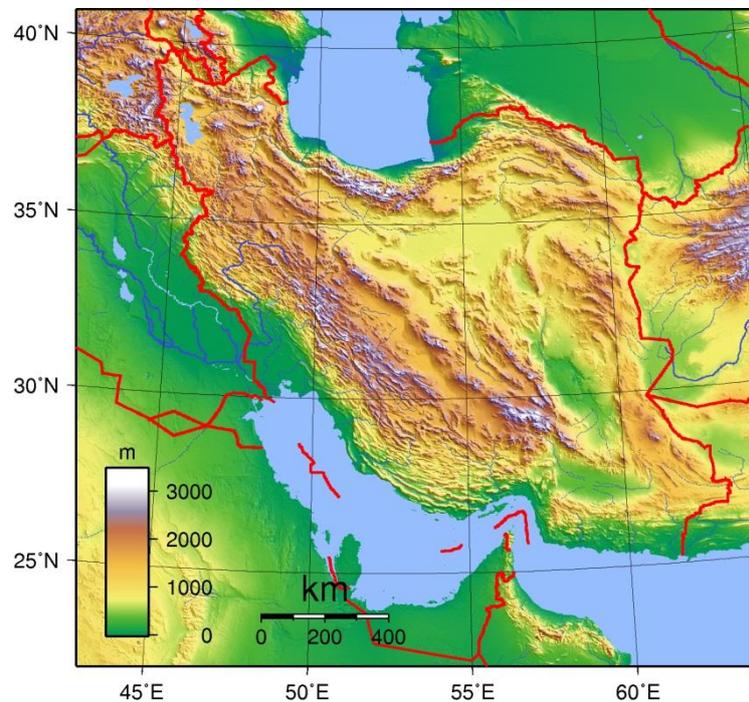


Figure 1: Topography of Iran

Image from cs.wikimedia.org

Deserts. If the mountain barriers of Iran are problematic for attacking forces then the deserts that greet them on the other side of those mountains are equally inhospitable. John Collins of the US Naval Institute writes that the desert environment of Iran with its “salt pans and shifting sand...make cross-country travel wretched for wheels as well as tracks” (Collins 2006). Friedman describes the two large desert plateaus of Iran as “uninhabited and uninhabitable” and reiterates Collins’ attention to the salt-pans adding that “it is easy to break through the salt layer and drown in the mud” (Friedman 2008, p.3). Logistically, then, moving an armed force through Iran’s centre and passing through the Dasht-e Kavir or Dasht-e Lut deserts would face significant problems if not outright defeat at the hands of nature alone.

These three features – area, mountains and deserts – are the key ingredients in Iranian geography and the key geopolitical and geostrategic factors that guarantee Iranian independence and survival. Indeed, so imposing are the geographic barriers of Iran that the modern state has never once been conquered and even imperial Persia was conquered just one time, by the Mongols in the early 13th century. As Friedman concludes, “surrounded on three sides by mountains and on the fourth by the ocean, with a wasteland at its centre, Iran is extremely difficult to conquer” (2008, p.4). Yet such barriers to invasion such as distance (for supply lines and logistic support), area (for control and with regards to the number of troops required), mountain barriers (for obvious strategic and logistical reasons) and deserts (largely immune to wheeled and tracked vehicles) are only barriers for land attacks. Though Iran has always been a land power, mountains, long distance and salt pans are not issues for an adversary who applies air power against the Iranian fortress.

Death from Above: Air Power and the Iranian Fortress

In his book *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (1996) scholar Robert Pape is bullish on the capacity of air power to coerce rivals and ensure foreign policy goals are met. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that “the military services should re-orient their doctrines and organization to focus more on the problem of destroying armies from the air” (Pape 1996, p.330). Eliot Cohen notes the seductive qualities of air power for the modern military strategist who is limited in their options by social, cultural and political mores:

Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment. Francis Bacon wrote of command of the sea that he

who has it “is at great liberty, and may take as much and as little of the Warre as he will,” and a similar belief accounts for air power’s attractiveness to those who favour a modest use of force overseas. Statesmen may think they can use air attacks to engage in hostilities by increments, something ground combat does not permit. Furthermore, it appears that the imminent arrival of so-called non-lethal or disabling technologies may offer an even more appealing prospect: war without casualties. (Cohen 1994, p.109)

The mountain barriers of Iran and its salt deserts that are difficult, if not near impossible, for modern tracked ground elements to traverse are no barrier at all to modern air forces. Stealth technology would allow for strikes against Iranian targets with little chance of lost planes or downed airmen, even considering the anti-air resources that Iran maintains to deter a conventional air strike. Is air power, then, the lever by which external elements can force changes in Iranian international dynamics or foreign policy? While certainly an option, it is, for at least three key reasons, not an attractive one.

Colin Gray argues in ‘The Continued Primacy of Geography’ that air power advocates and their claims that “technology has cancelled geography contains just enough merit to be called a plausible fallacy” (Gray 1996, p.250). He posits three considerations that those who advocate the efficacy of air power and new technologies in overcoming air power generally overlook or marginalise. First is the consideration that “technological progress cannot be owned or retained by one security community alone” (Gray 1996, p.251). That is, while actors external to Iran may be able to develop technologies that are effective in projecting power over mountain barriers and across salt deserts, those same technologies can also be developed by Iran towards the same ends. As Gray notes, any utility developed by one side “is more than a little reduced” when an enemy gains the same power (1996, p.251). Clear examples speaking to such reduced utility can be seen in the Cold War nuclear arms race between the US and the USSR, developments in tank technology in Europe between World War One and World War Two and even the strategy of trench warfare in World War One: in each case the acquisition of technologies that were considered to have defeated geography were reduced markedly as such technologies spread to rivals. Thus, the world witnessed a nuclear standoff between two superpowers able, but not willing, to strike any point on Earth with destructive force, mechanised forces in Europe engaging each other without striking the stunning victory hoped for and a conflict drawn out over years when a strategy adopted by each of the belligerents led to a virtual stalemate on Europe’s western front. Technology may assist an actor in overcoming geographic barriers but it will only ever be a short-term advantage and not one that can inform wider grand strategy.

Gray’s second consideration is neatly summed up by the notion that “conflict cannot occur beyond geography” (Gray 1996, p.251). Writes Gray:

...it remains a fact of enduring significance that the ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with the gun...Human beings can be intimidated by threats from afar, blown apart by bombardment from altitude, and spoken to at the speed of light. But the exercise of continuous influence or control requires the physical presence of armed people in the area at issue (1996, p.251).

Gray does not dispute that intimidation, bombardment or diplomacy are entirely ineffective; indeed, all three would have a place in the grand strategy of any state. Yet he points to the harsh reality that air power alone cannot change the facts on the ground. Most recently the example of Western intervention in Libya speaks to this strategic truth. In 2011 western forces, led by France and the UK, sought to avoid a developing civil conflict in Libya by flying thousands of sorties aimed at arresting state forces in their advance on Libyan rebels and limiting the Libyan dictator’s ability to make war on his own people. Yet while aerial bombardment was successful in stopping much of the violence directed towards civilians, it quickly developed into an international stalemate as the intervening states – not being permitted to send in ground troops for political reasons – realised that Gadhafi could essentially wait them out. With no moves to put a ‘man on the scene with a gun’ in Tripoli, the superior air power of the French and British is incapable of completely stopping internal violence or removing Gadhafi from power. In the case of Iran – with its formidable geography a much greater challenge for intervening ground forces than Libya’s open sandy deserts and more than 1000 kilometres of coastline – the chance of effective numbers of intervening ground forces being deployed is close to zero, and thus the chance of an outside force exercising ‘continuous influence’ over Iran is much reduced, too.

Gray’s third consideration, though, is perhaps the most significant when speaking of Iran and its geographic space. Simply put, even if a state can put a ‘man on the scene with a gun’, that man will need to be supplied with much material in order to exercise the sort of influence and effect the sorts of changes that outside actors seek to make (Gray 1996, p.251). Even where air forces might breach Iran’s mountain barriers and deliver ground troops to its vast centre,

these troops will have to have access to heavy weapons, to ammunition and basic amenities such as food, water and fuel. As Gray puts it, "one can all but cancel geographical distance by the rapid air insertion of paratroops...but with what will they fight, and for how long?" (Gray 1996, p.251). Military supply chains are difficult to establish across Iran's mountains and central deserts and, even if such supply chains could be envisaged, they would serve as prime targets for Iranian forces and even asymmetric elements within the Iranian population. Indeed, history provides multiple examples of military supply chains being essential to the overall success or failure in battle: the Prussian Chief of General Staff Helmuth von Moltke bragged of his superior railway supply lines in advance of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 while the German tonnage warfare in World War Two saw Great Britain under enormous pressure to supply even the homeland, let alone its men under arms. With existing air assets alone, the notion as to whether outside forces could land troops in Iran is not in question; however, the ability of outside forces to resupply those troops certainly is questionable and remains, alongside Gray's two earlier considerations, a serious obstacle to overcome if regime change in Iran is a serious goal.

Conclusion

It's often said that the plans of politicians fail to account for realities on the ground in military theatre. In the case of US or Western visions of an easily conquered Iranian state or a change in regime won by military force in a matter of weeks, it is not a matter of realities *on* the ground but realities *of* the ground that should give war planners pause. Iran remains, as it has been for centuries, a geographic fortress in South-West Asia. It's mountain chains provide effective barriers to external ground forces, it's area means that supply and logistics lines, even when they can be established, will be open to counter attack, it's central deserts will play havoc with ground and support forces and it's mountainous capital will pose great difficulties for any occupying forces. Unable to first insert and then support and supply Gray's 'man on the scene with a gun', Western forces will not succeed in defeating Iranian forces, let alone effecting regime change. It is not that their air power is not superior; it clearly is. It is not that its ground forces are not as well equipped; they are, indeed the US ground forces are the best equipped in the world. It is not even that the US lacks a reason or motivation to execute a regime change mission in Iran; suspicions of illicit nuclear weapons activity and long-standing discord between Washington and Tehran provide plenty of both. Instead it is the geography of Iran that will provide the most formidable threat to advancing Western forces: the US might outnumber and outgun Iranian land and air forces but they are little match for Iranian mountains, deserts and salt plains.

As a direct result of this geopolitical and geostrategic reality, then, it is necessary for the US and the wider West to consider alternatives to military-induced regime change in Iran. Where Iranian and Western interests diverge it seems likely that diplomatic and economic avenues will be more effective at effecting changes in Tehran. While preparing for potential military action should and will remain within the purview of military commanders, political leaders need to understand that something as basic as geography means that something as desirable as regime change in a rival is likely unachievable through the use of force. Energies need to be directed towards negotiation instead of confrontation and compelling change rejected in favour of influencing actions favoured by the West. As long as the Zagros and Elburz Mountains stand, as long as the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut exist and as long as Iran maintains its essential spatial inertia, so too will Western military invasion fail in Iran. The salience of geography in international politics has not yet been diminished.

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