“Strategic State” Instability, Failure, and Collapse: Preliminary Thoughts on Risk, Hazard, Warning, and Response

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Purpose

- Provide key insights on “strategic state” instability, failure, and collapse from a defense policy/strategy perspective.

- Specifically, discuss “strategic state” failure, collapse, or instability from the vantage point of:
  - Key risks and hazards,
  - Iraq as an imperfect but useful archetype;
  - The challenge of warning; and,
  - The contours of a “limited opposed stabilization.”
**First Principals**

- Functioning states — friendly, indifferent, neutral, and even hostile — are essential to the security of core U.S. interests.

- Some states matter more than others; their instability, failure, or collapse would engender enormous risks.

- The USG (and DoD) would assume a lead role in responding to terminal weakness, failure, or collapse of many strategic states.

- Comprehensive stabilization and reconstruction may be ideal; but also expensive, risk-laden, and unrealistic.

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*The strength, weakness, and vulnerability of “strategic state’s” merit equal attention.*
**Key Definitions**

- **Strategic State:** A state whose *stable functioning is uniquely important* to the security of core U.S. interests and a favorable international order.

- **Vulnerable State:** A strategic state that is demonstrating or is in danger of developing the types of political, economic, and security weakness commonly associated with dislocating instability, failure, or collapse.

- **Risk:** Likelihood that a strategic state will suffer loss of functioning order, combined with the level of certainty that its doing so will result in prohibitive strategic costs or consequences for the U.S.

- **Intervention:** The comprehensive employment of state power to prevent or contain the consequences of strategic state’s instability, failure, or collapse.

- **Hub Entity or Hub State:** Reliable partner (state or international institution) that has an equal or greater interest in the stable functioning of a vulnerable strategic state and the capacity to lead or contribute to its minimum essential stabilization.

- **Contending Entity or Contending State:** Transnational, national, or sub-national actors with competing, often unfavorable, and potentially irreconcilable visions for the future disposition of a vulnerable strategic state.

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**Risk: What is a Strategic State?**

- States are “strategic” both because of:
  - The value their stable functioning adds to the broad security of core U.S. interests and the international system; as well as,
  - The latent but grave harm the prospect of their sudden destabilization, failure, or collapse pose to the same.

- States are first identified as “strategic” and then “vulnerable.”

- Strategic states can be friendly, indifferent, neutral, or even hostile.

- There is no static list of vulnerable states:
  - Vulnerability rises and falls;
  - All strategic states will be monitored; those designated “vulnerable” require detailed net assessment and defense-led whole-of-government planning.
**Risk: What is a Strategic State? (Continued)**

- Six categories of strategic state include those that:
  - Possess employable WMD — especially nuclear weapons.
  - Possess substantial strategic resources, economic capacity, and/or dominant geographic leverage.
  - Are in close proximity to the U.S., a key strategic partner, or critical regional “hub” and have a large population vulnerable to mass migration under duress.
  - Could with unanticipated destabilization trigger contagious instability in a important region.
  - Are allies, key strategic partners, or hub states.

*These categories are not mutually exclusive.*
Risk: Three-Tiered Risk Problem

- The likelihood that any specific state designated as “strategic” is vulnerable to sudden failure or collapse varies.

- The consequences associated with strategic failure or collapse range from severe in all cases to unacceptable with respect to a few.

- Once states are identified as “strategic,” there are three general levels of risk associated with them:
  - High Risk: The likelihood of collapse is determined to be high and/or the immediate consequences of collapse are identified as unacceptable.
  - Moderate Risk: The likelihood of collapse is determined to range from moderate to high and the immediate consequences of collapse are severe but identified as manageable.
  - Low Risk: The consequences of collapse will range from severe to unacceptable, but the likelihood of collapse is determined to be very low.
**Hazard: Strategic State Collapse as Complex “Hybrid Challenge”**

- Elms of the armed forces remain under coherent C2 and resist intervention.
- Agents of the fallen regime attempt to defend or restore prior status quo.
- Criminals and “pop-up” militias carve out defensible spheres of influence.
- “Contending entities” and adjacent powers intervene to extend their influence.
- Repressed constituencies exact vengeance on agents of the former regime.
- Local nationalists resist “foreign-imposed” political solutions.
- With sudden and severe dislocation, large segments of the pop resist both external intervention and a natural rebalancing of political authority.
- Supercharged constituencies among the refugee and expatriate communities export human/physical security challenges outside the victim state.

The worst effects of strategic failure or collapse would transcend regions and interest areas in an immediate, profound, and strategically consequential manner.
Hazard: Iraq As Archetype?

- The Iraq experience has been instructive —
  - Stabilization problematic in spite of precise knowledge of the manner and mechanism of the state’s collapse.
  - Even “minimum essential” stabilization, reconstruction, and conflict management — undertaken from a ‘cold start’ — will prove more challenging.
  - A number of prospective collapse or failure scenarios present complexities and hazards that are orders of magnitude greater than Iraq.

Hazards accompanying the next strategic failure or collapse can be made worse by inadequate preparation and disordered response.
Hazard: Iraq As Archetype? (Continued)

- Large, dependent population—some hostile to foreign intervention
- Pervasive state security apparatus
- Relatively sophisticated and capable armed forces
- Dilapidated physical infrastructure
- Competing, informal sources of political authority
- Significant urbanization
- Prolific presence of small arms and explosives
- Ethno-Sectarian Faultlines
- Centralized political authority and decisionmaking
- Weapons of Mass Destruction
- Ungoverned territory and autonomous populations
- Rival sources of resistance/opposition
- Competing regional geopolitical interests
- Net subsistence importer
- Inadequate social welfare mechanisms
- Centralized distribution of public goods
- Primary resource exporter
- Substantial foreign debt
- Significant foreign debt
- Substantial foreign debt
- Ethno-Sectarian Faultlines
**Warning: State Sovereignty Vs. General Harm**

Evolutionary Adjustment/Change  
Radical Adjustment/Change

- More Favorable to Stability

- More Control and Influence Over Outcomes

- Less Favorable to Stability

- Less Control and Influence Over Outcomes

- Instability

- Failure

- Collapse

- Intensifying competition over finite resources, political fortunes, and outcomes
- Increasing civil conflict

Key questions: When and how does one intervene to avoid the most unfavorable outcomes? When is intervention justified in the eyes of key domestic constituencies, key actors in the international community, and the people of the victim state?

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Response: Key Theater Strategic/Operational Objectives

- Rapid restoration of *minimally functioning* indigenous authority and accountability (write offs?);
- Limitation of horizontal regional escalation of conflict and instability;
- Isolation of the victim state (or region) from hostile spoilers;
- Short-term protection of vulnerable populations and critical institutions and infrastructure;
- Defeat of violent threats to internal security — including abuses by surviving indigenous security forces;
- Establishment of responsible control over strategic resources and military capabilities;
- Temporary delivery of essential public goods; and, finally,
- Establishment of basic foundations for indigenously-led national/regional recovery or a larger international intervention.

*The experience of both Iraq and Afghanistan argue for pursuit of more modest objectives in future interventions — ”limited opposed stabilization.”*
New Focus Point for U.S. Land Forces

- U.S. land forces should optimize for circumstances where:
  - The indigenous government has lost control over outcomes;
  - The environment is non-permissive;
  - The degree of violence or capacity for violence is high;
  - The physical threats have some organization and sophistication — network, neighborhood, tribe, province, etc;
  - Finally, and finally,
  - Hostile action emanates or should be anticipated from sources ranging from rogue military units and organized insurgents to common rioters (360° conflict).

U.S. land components to should master forcible entry into and conduct of campaigns against “wars of all against all.”
Conclusion

- Assume strategic state instability, failure, or collapse will challenge core interests and wider international order.

- Change in the political order of some strategic states may be desirable, but evolutionary change is preferable to collapse.

- Future U.S. stabilization efforts will be more modest —”limited opposed stabilization.”

- However, regardless of how limited the objectives, effective responses require early recognition, net assessment, and advanced strategic planning.

- Political sensitivity should not prohibit meaningful strategic thinking on the subject.

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Questions and Discussion
Response and Prevention: Policy Objectives (Ends)

- **Full Sovereignty** — Unconditional restoration of full sovereignty to a new or restored political authority of some immediate, demonstrated capacity.

- **Mentored Sovereignty** — Early conditions-based return of some functional sovereignty to a new or restored indigenous political authority.

- **Containment** — Strategic damage control; physical and virtual containment of horizontal conflict escalation.

- **International Trusteeship** — Internationally mandated stewardship over the internal and external affairs of a collapsed state.

- **Dismemberment** — Deliberate disassembly of an artificial political order into its separate, more natural sovereign entities.

- **Absorption** — Redress of artificial partition and restoration of an historic geographic status quo.

- **Amalgamation** — The intentional combination of two or more of the above objectives into a hybrid outcome.

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Response and Prevention: Policy Options (Ways)

- When strategic state collapse is very likely to occur, imminent, underway, or simply cannot be allowed to begin, there are five unique policy approaches.

  - Managed Transformation: Anticipatory intervention; conservative but increasingly volatile as the pace of political change increases; where possible — the most favorable option; lowest risk.

  - Prevention: Most conservative and stable; may be the “least bad” option; less near-term risk; potential for enormous long-term risk.

  - Pre-Collapse Intervention and Guided Transition: Fragile and difficult to control; may be the next “least bad” option; near-term risk substantial; if successful long-term risk may be much lower.

  - Post-Collapse Stabilization and Reconstruction: Likely most unfavorable; enormous near-, mid-, and long-term risk; intervention may be too late and too incomplete to prevent horizontal escalation.

  - Quarantine: Degree of “favorability” is variable; enormous mid- to long-term risk; size and scope of any one challenge and finite resources militate against sustained success without incurring prohibitive cost.

  - Hybrid Management: Deliberate risk-informed employment of a combination of two or more of these approaches simultaneously in one coherent strategic design.

Most Deliberate and Preventative

Most Demanding and Risk-Laden

Most Likely

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