

THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY IN THE GULF WAR

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author analyses and discusses why war planners did not misunderstand Iraq's Centre Of Gravity (COG) but rather, failed to reach a consensus on a common and well-developed COG for the campaign. He also considers why failure to identify a common COG did not hinder the campaign's success, but nevertheless remains an important step to undertake for future campaigns. The author first examines the difference in perspectives of war planners and why they identified Iraq's COG the way they did. Next, he examines the friction that arose because of the failure to agree on a common COG. Finally, the author also examines why the differences in COG identification did not matter to the campaign's outcome. In conclusion, the author also explains why the appropriate utility of the COG concept remains important and how differences in perspectives can be managed.

Keywords: Planning; Gulf War; Strategy; Utility; Military Theory

INTRODUCTION

The identification of a Centre of Gravity (COG) has long been the cornerstone of operations planning in the US military. However, the military has also consistently struggled to understand and properly apply the concept, often leading to confusion.¹ The Gulf War was a clear example of how the COG concept was applied differently by various war planners, without any deliberate attempt to agree on a common COG for the campaign. While the resulting friction did not affect the campaign's successful outcome, it might not always be this way for future campaigns.

In this essay, the author analyses and discusses why war planners did not misunderstand Iraq's COG but rather, failed to reach a consensus on a common and well-developed COG for the campaign. He also discusses why failure to identify a common COG did not hinder the campaign's success, but nevertheless remains an important step to undertake for future campaigns. The author first examines the difference in perspectives of war planners and why they identified Iraq's COG the way they did. Next, he examines the friction that arose because of the failure to agree on a common COG. Finally, the author discusses why the differences in COG identification did not matter to the campaign's outcome. The author concludes by explaining why the appropriate utility of the COG concept remains important and how differences in perspectives can be managed.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON IRAQ'S COG

To ascertain if war planners understood Iraq's COG, the author examines what the definition of a COG means to each war planner (i.e., US Army, US Air Force, Pentagon's politicians) and whether they applied it correctly based on the context and their perspectives. First, the United States (US) Army defined the enemy's COG as its 'source of strength'.² True to the Clausewitzian meaning as the 'hub of all power and movement on which everything depends', the Army identified it as the key capability or attribute from which the enemy derived its physical or psychological capacity for battle that would impede the Army's achievement of its mission outcomes.³ This also implies that the Army's operational technique is to mass and concentrate superior combat power on a single COG for maximum effect. To this end, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General (GEN) Schwarzkopf had initially identified three distinct COGs—in no specific priority—of the campaign: (1) The Republican Guard; (2) Iraq's Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) capabilities; and (3) Saddam Hussein.⁴ True to the Army's definition, however, his focus was subsequently narrowed towards a single COG—destruction of the Republican Guard, while dealing with the Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) capabilities and Saddam's ability to command was left to the Air Force. GEN Schwarzkopf's view was that destruction of the Republican Guard would evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait,

as it was the regime's only unit strong enough to match up against the coalition's armoured and mechanised forces, thus maintaining Saddam's will to fight in Kuwait.⁵



General Schwarzkopf talks with General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a press conference regarding the Gulf War.

In contrast, the US Air Force's definition was formed on the notion of multiple COGs within each of the enemy's 'outer layer', protecting the enemy's most critical vulnerability—the core of leadership—as the true COG.⁶ The 'outer layers' usually consisted of production capabilities transportation infrastructure, local populace, and military forces. Hence, its concept of striking key strategic targets to achieve enemy paralysis and penetrate the 'outer layers' into the true COG.⁷ This also implies the Air Force's operational technique, of being able to employ its airpower with flexibility and versatility, thus allowing it to assign multiple COGs throughout the operations theatre. To this end, Joint Air Force component commander Lieutenant General (LTG) Horner and his team of air planners—nicknamed 'Black Hole'—led by Brigadier General (BG) Glosson had identified a list of 12 target sets, each on its own constituting as a COG.⁸ This ranged from production facilities—oil/electrical production and Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) sites, transportation infrastructure—railroads, airfields, the Republican Guard and Scud missile launch sites. True to the Air Force's definition, key target sets identified were leadership and communication facilities—command-and-control centres, communications centres, presidential enclaves, Baath party headquarters, amongst others.⁹ Their intent was to 'incapacitate Saddam's regime' such

that Saddam could no longer communicate with Iraqis or command his military forces. Both the Army and Air Force had understood and rightly identified the COGs from their services' perspectives.¹⁰

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The politicians at Pentagon—backed by Secretary of Defense Cheney—had another perspective. While not explicitly articulated as a COG, the Pentagon had viewed Iraq's Scud missile threat to Israel in a similar light. Their notion was that the Scuds indirectly served as Saddam's source of power, as it gave him the capability to fracture the coalition's unity with its Middle Eastern counterparts and disrupt the campaign.¹¹ Saddam's provocative firing of Scud missiles into Israel would trigger the political calamity of Israel's involvement in the war. Concomitantly, Israel's involvement would see its encroachment into Jordanian airspace, thereby triggering Jordan's involvement and the rest of the Arab world. The Scuds' importance was also reinforced during the campaign when it was claimed that the ground offensive 'did not go far enough west to solve the Scud problems, one of the major motivations for Cheney's plan'.¹² At first glance, it may seem that the war planners had misunderstood Iraq's COG given the different identifications. However, war planners had all rightly identified the COG based on their own services' perspectives, with the intent of achieving a common 'End'—end of Iraqi aggression in Kuwait and restoration of Kuwait's government back to legitimacy.¹³ However, due to the different perspectives, their 'Ways' were not aligned.

FRICION FROM THE DISSONANCE ON IRAQ'S COG

The difference in 'Ways' across the war planners and failure to agree on a common and well-developed COG for the campaign, eventually resulted in friction during the campaign. Throughout the planning phase and up till the execution phase, constant conflicts plagued the identification of a common enemy COG. The first conflict was between the Army and the Air



Military personnel examine the remains of a Scud tail assembly during the Gulf War, 26th May, 1992.

Force. The Army's 'Way' to force the capitulation of Saddam's regime was through the destruction of the Republican Guard, which it saw as a key pillar propping up Saddam's regime in terms of military might. GEN Schwarzkopf had consistently viewed the Republican Guard as the regime's source of power and wanted to pin them down with air strikes at the earliest opportunity before destruction by the ground forces.¹⁴ However, LTG Horner did not echo similar thoughts. The Air Force's 'Way' to force the regime's capitulation was premised on the indirect effect that would be achieved from its strategic bombings—disruption to Saddam's ability to command and communicate with the military forces and populace, and the rousing of disgruntlement amongst the local populace because of the chaos. This conflict remained apparent even till the day before the air campaign, where LTG Horner had felt it important to first remove the Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) threats protecting the Republican Guard—along with other strategic targets—before targeting the Republican Guard.¹⁵ Determined to rid its failings from the Vietnam War, the Air Force had termed the air campaign as 'Instant Thunder'—an intensive campaign designed to paralyse Saddam's ability to effectively command and communicate, in the shortest possible time.¹⁶ This contrasted against 'Rolling Thunder'—the long-drawn

air campaign in Vietnam which was escalated gradually, and inadvertently gave the enemy time to react. Hence, 'Instant Thunder' did not accord destruction of the Republican Guard as top priority. The deep division in 'Ways' showed how each commander envisioned achievement of the war objectives and how they remained rooted to their decision based on their service teachings and past experiences in Vietnam.

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The second conflict, was the divisive view between military commanders and politicians on the significance of Saddam's Scud missile threats to Israel, against the campaign's objectives. The Pentagon's 'Way' was to essentially prevent disruption of the coalition's war efforts—in a sense, its 'capitulation'—against Saddam's regime. First, it was driven by the political

need to keep Israel out of the war, to prevent unwanted tensions from arising in the Arab world and convoluting the coalition's efforts. Second, it was to prevent the coalition's unity—predominantly with its Middle Eastern counterparts—from being threatened and breaking apart because of Israel's involvement. However, from the onset, GEN Schwarzkopf had viewed targeting of the Scuds as a distraction, because of its inaccuracy and overall ineffectiveness as a weapon against the coalition.¹⁷ Given the versatility of airpower, LTG Horner had featured the targeting of Scuds in the air campaign but paid little attention to it in terms of priority.¹⁸ It was clear, however, that the politicians held the threat significance of the Scuds in high regard. This was apparent during much of the planning phase after it was first identified as one of the key targets to destroy in the 'Western Excursion' plan.¹⁹ It became pronounced during the campaign when Secretary Cheney threatened to confront GEN Schwarzkopf because of the lack of targeting against the Scuds.²⁰ The Pentagon's failure to convince the military commanders—especially GEN Schwarzkopf—on the ramifications of Israel's involvement in the war because of the Scud threats eventually created greater problems. The regime's mobile Scud launchers often had time to disperse after every time they fired, which impacted the coalition's intelligence collection on their locations for targeting.²¹

While the friction from these differences did not impact the campaign's successful outcome, it surfaced a deeper concern. There was a clear lack of effort and attempt by war planners to harmonise the differences and agree on a common COG for the campaign.

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WHY THE DIFFERENCES DID NOT MATTER TO THE CAMPAIGN'S OUTCOME

Fortunately, however, the failure to agree on a common COG did not matter to the campaign's successful outcome due to two reasons. First, the campaign was one with clear, but limited objectives. The six military objectives identified were to: (1) attack Iraq's political and military leadership and command-and-control facilities; (2) cut off Iraq's supply lines; (3) secure and sustain air superiority; (4) destroy Iraq's Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical (NBC) capabilities; (5) destroy the Republican Guard in Kuwait; and (6) liberate Kuwait.²² The 'End' was centred on evicting Iraqi Armed



A Kuwaiti M-84 tank during Operation Desert Shield in 1990.

Forces from Kuwait and restoring Kuwait's government back to legitimacy, instead of effecting the end of Saddam's regime and annihilation of the regime's offensive capabilities. Hence, the identification of a COG for such situations might be artificial and redundant, as the original definition by Clausewitz was designed for campaigns that required total enemy defeat, in conjunction with political objectives; much like what was achieved in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.²³

Second, the coalition's superior overmatch of combat power against the Iraqi Armed Forces, was a significant lever that facilitated a swift and decisive victory in the campaign. The six-week campaign—which culminated in a 100-hour ground offensive—saw sufficient Iraqi offensive capabilities destroyed to achieve the campaign objectives.²⁴ The coalition enjoyed an abundance of weaponry and well-trained forces which allowed them to attack every target that was identified as a COG by the various war planners during the planning phase. This was evident from the sheer amount of bombing missions conducted during the coalition's air campaign (69,000 missions) as compared to the Iraqi Air Force (910 missions).²⁵ At the end, the coalition had sustained only 240 fatalities, against the Iraqi forces' estimated hundreds of thousands.²⁶ Iraq's offensive capabilities were also decimated with an estimated 70% (3,800) of its tanks destroyed.²⁷

CONCLUSION

It was clear that war planners had understood and rightly identified Iraq's COG based on how it was defined by their services and job nature. However, neither service—military nor civilian—attempted to synchronise the differences in terms of the definitions and nature of the COG, to agree on a common COG for the campaign. While the friction from this divergence was apparent throughout the campaign, it did not have an adverse impact on its successful outcome of evicting Iraqi Armed Forces from Kuwait and restoring Kuwait's government back to legitimacy. This was due to the campaign's limited objectives set, and the coalition's superior overmatch of combat power against the Iraqi Armed Forces. However, such abundance of resources and combat power overmatch against the enemy might not necessarily occur for future campaigns. Hence, two areas should always be analysed when dealing with such situations. First, is the utility of the COG concept in campaigns with limited objectives. In some cases, simply translating these objectives to a set of actionable operational outcomes would suffice.²⁸ Second, is the handling of disagreements that arise from differences in the COG concept. One way to manage, could be to develop a common framework to clarify assumptions on the concept's employment and addressing the underlying differences.²⁹

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