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Seeking a Goldilocks option for Iraq

By Christopher Preble

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President Barack Obama once famously called the Iraq War a “dumb war.” But, in announcing U.S. airstrikes to counter Islamic radicals gaining territory in northern Iraq, Obama has given hawks a second chance to get the open-ended conflict they always wanted. That would be an even dumber war.

The hawks say Obama’s airstrikes are too limited. The threat of ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), they argue, requires greater U.S. involvement. They claim that none of this would have happened if Obama had left U.S. troops in Iraq after 2011.

But these critics are too confident in the effectiveness of direct military intervention, both then and now.

For his part, Obama might be overly confident that we won’t get drawn in more deeply. Many avowedly “limited” interventions, including those supposedly focused on purely humanitarian objectives, lasted longer and cost more than anticipated (e.g. Somalia, Kosovo and Iraq post-Gulf War). The potential for mission creep is very real.

John Kerry assured Americans last summer that intervention in Syria would be “unbelievably small.” Obama might have erred in the other direction when he said last weekend that this latest Iraq operation would likely last months.

But that still doesn’t satisfy Obama’s most hawkish critics, who want a much larger mission. And if U.S. troops must remain behind for months, or even years, so be it. After all, they point out, we still have U.S. troops in Germany, Japan and Korea.

“If you’re going to get in, get in big and get in decisively now,” Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol said on MSNBC. “If you go in incrementally ... you don’t have the effect you want to have in the region.”

It would be easy enough to dismiss Kristol’s point of view. This is the same Bill Kristol, after all, who sold the idea of war in Iraq going back to the 1990s, and who blithely dismissed warnings that a civil war would likely ensue after Saddam Hussein’s ouster.

Hillary Clinton’s recent comments to the Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg provide the fullest example of the hawks’ critique, and it goes well beyond what is happening now in Iraq: a great nation like

the United States needs “an organizing principle,” she explained, and “don’t do stupid stuff” doesn’t suffice.

A cynic might note that “do stupid stuff proudly” didn’t work very well for her when she decided to be one of only 29 Democratic senators to vote for the Iraq War.

But Clinton’s recent comments about Obama’s foreign policy now win her praise from Kristol’s former Weekly Standard colleague, David Brooks, and that speaks volumes. The neoconservatives have an organizing principle based on the belief that the U.S. military should do more than simply defend vital U.S. interests. Whereas most Americans reject the claim that the United States must be the world’s policeman, Brooks and others celebrate the role.

In that sense, when the hawks screech that Obama isn’t doing enough, what they really worry about is that others might actually be able to do without us, or with only minimal assistance. A newly energized Kurdish militia already appears to have reversed some of ISIS’s recent gains. Syria’s Bashar al-Assad might begin rolling back ISIS fighters there. And a new government in Baghdad might finally be able to fashion a credible military force. At a minimum, even modest political reforms – or the prospect of them – could convince more Sunni Iraqis to fight against ISIS instead of for them.

The critics of Obama’s latest gambit may be wrong. It isn’t obvious that more U.S. involvement – and only more U.S. involvement – will turn the tide. So while the hawks have always wanted a bigger U.S. military presence in Iraq, they still might not get it.

In short, Obama might find that elusive Goldilocks option for Iraq: neither too hot, nor too cold.

But I wouldn’t bet on it.

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