



## The Iraqi "goban"

military-Earth thinking notebook

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In April 2003, by crushing the Iraqi army for the second time in thirteen years, the US armed forces seemed to demonstrate irrefutably the superiority of their operational model. Reasoning in chess terms, they not only managed to have more powerful pieces than their opponent, but, thanks to their superiority, they were also able to use their own chess equipment. riority, to make the latter play "blind" and to impose him a rhythm of "blitz<sup>1</sup>" which he could not follow. From then on, there was no doubt that the "Mate", which took Baghdad, was a reality. With the army defeated, the political power annihilated and the population all the more submissive to the victor since it hated the regime in place for the most part, the logic of the Clausewitzian trinity was thus strategically respected. On<sup>1</sup> May, the announcement of the end of military operations by President Bush against the backdrop of the "mission accomplished" banner hung on the islet of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, therefore seemed legitimate and even obvious.

<sup>1</sup>) Chess game played in very constrained time.

### A new game

Mysteriously, however, a few weeks later, attacks against American occupation troops multiplied in the Sunni Arab provinces. The Pentagon then considered that they could only be a few pawns in the Saddamist "game" that were still moving, an astonishing phenomenon but one that was explained by the flight of the Raïs. Faithful to their quick and direct style, the Americans launched their "pieces" (their air force as Queen and their fifteen or so ground brigades) in search of this hidden King and his last partisans. To their great surprise, they found that not only were rebel attacks not decreasing, but they were actually on the rise. What was presented as a residual phenomenon had become guerrilla warfare and the methods that had worked so well against the regular Iraqi army were

inoperative against an opponent who no longer played Chess but Go.

The game of Go is the king's strategy game in the Far East. Its principles are opposite of those of the chess game for a comparable complexity. In Go, no order of battle with clearly differentiated pieces but a multitude of small anonymous pawns which appear one by one on the board (the goban). Once placed, these pawns do not move unless they are captured. Go players thus progressively build their structure with the objective not to shoot down an opponent's King but to obtain the maximum number of points, by controlling the middle or, secondarily, by causing losses to the opponent. The game does not stop on an objective result but by mutual agreement (in fact when no further action is possible) and one compares the number of points accumulated by the two opponents. The victories are thus relative and not total as with a "Mate". Tactically, many battles take place on the goban but they are settled by smothering the enemy pawns and not by crushing them as on a chessboard.

Go is not practiced in the Middle East, but by relying on their culture and looking for the opposite of the so powerful American direct style, the Iraqi Sunni rebels have come up with a logic which is very close to it. There is no "King" or even a guerrilla steering committee on the "Iraqi game board" because the guerrillas are organized in "cartels" with a total of several dozen different movements. There is therefore no "Mate" possible even after the elimination of a Saddam Hussein or a Zarkaoui. This network guerrilla has small and diverse pawns, cells of former members of the Ba'athist regime's services, "sub-contractors" paid on a fee-for-service basis or simple sympathisers, whose number is practically unlimited as the resources in terms of men, arms and cash are so great. These pawns are placed in Sunni cities along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers or in certain districts of large multicultural cities such as Baghdad or Mosul. They are rooted in local human tissue made up of multiple family or tribal solidarities. These tissues protect them but also fix them. They can only act occasionally outside their area of origin, but there is no question of them settling in the Shiite South or Kurdistan. Radical organisations, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq or Ansar al-Sunna, which are more ideological and more largely composed of foreigners, are a little more mobile but also less ingrained in the host environment. As in Go, with these weak and not very mobile but invisible and numerous pawns, the rebels have only two possible strategies: to extend their control of the Sunni provinces by taking over the "interior" of all the cities or to try to hinder the construction of the opposing system, the "new Iraq" proposed by the Americans, by punctual attacks, assassinations or sabotage.

## Fuseki[1]

In Go, contrary to the cluttered chessboard, the beginning of the game takes place on an empty surface. There is thus for each player a great freedom of maneuver which they generally take advantage of to try to seize the key points as quickly as possible. The action on the environment thus prevails over the enemy's attack and fights are normally rather rare. In the summer of 2003, the Americans, adepts of "blitzkrieg", are not able to move to "blitzkrieg peace". Their large military units consider action on the environment, i.e. economic and political reconstruction, to be the responsibility of the State Department. They therefore remain motionless on what they still believe to be a chessboard, while the State Department, whose action has not been planned, is unable to act effectively and quickly. Only the 101st Air Assault Division, with its sole means and under the impetus of General Petraeus, is trying, in Mosul and throughout the North Iraqi zone, to invest the economic fields (with more than 4.000 projects), political (by re-establishing local institutions as soon as possible) and security fields. By placing its own pawns in this way, it

manages to control the region for one year.

The rebels take advantage of this passivity to establish themselves discreetly and then launch offensive operations against the Coalition's pieces, hoping not to defeat them but to "gnaw" at them enough to undermine the will of American public opinion. Tactically, the result is disastrous, since in order to shoot down a single American soldier, at least twenty combatants have to be sacrificed, but these attacks end up moving the American brigades. In accordance with the US Army's Soldier's Code ('I will destroy the enemies of the United States', not 'I will win'), the brigades embark on major clean-up operations in order to eradicate the terrorists and those nostalgic for the old regime' as quickly as possible. This time, however, it is the opposing pawns who are invisible among the population, while their own movements, scrutinized by a thousand eyes, hold few secrets for the rebels. The American pieces then behave like blind giants who cause considerable human damage by their clumsiness and their propensity to overreact at the slightest contact with a threat (statistically, they need several tens of thousands of cartridges to kill a single rebel). The arrest of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 and the decrease in rebel attacks in the spring of 2004, however, give the illusion of an imminent victory. In reality, the Americans have simply pushed the guerrillas, who are not "decapitable", to act more underground and indirectly against economic targets and "collaborators". All the Sunni Arab cities are then under their control.

### Chuban

Drawing lessons from the first phase, the American divisions that took over in March 2004 are determined to act more flexibly and to invest in the Iraqi environment. In the United States, General Chiarelli, commanding the 1st<sup>Cavalry</sup> Division destined for Baghdad, trained his staff in the management of large cities. For their part, before tackling the difficult province of Anbar, the Marines prepared to renew an experiment attempted in Vietnam of dispersing small units among the population and the new Iraqi security forces. But on their arrival in Iraq, the game is already well underway. The rebel organizations are so entrenched and anti-American resentment so strong that there is very little room for pacification policies. Worse still, a second front has been opened in the Shiite South with the revolt of the Mahdi Army of Ayatollah Moqtada al-Sadr. The concentrations of rebel pawns are now such that many cities are beyond the control of the Coalition or the new Iraqi government, to the point of considering resisting firmly against the Americans. The time has come not for pacification but for the reconquest of these bastions.

Far from the indiscriminate raids of 2003, the American military operations of 2004 and 2005 are still being carried out with chess pieces but with great caution and patience so as to cause the least damage to the human environment. As the game advances and the more numerous, experienced and rooted the enemy pawns are, it then takes months for the Americans to capture each city. The Mahdist rebellion was defeated after seven months and again on Moqtada al-Sadr's promise to renounce armed struggle. After a first failed siege in April 2004, the first Arab victory over the Americans, Fallujah was retaken in November by the Marines and the Army. The Americans thus persisted until the reconquest of Tal Afar on the Syrian border in October 2005. The rebel system was then partially destroyed, thus freeing up space for political reconstruction with the three elections of 2005 and economic reconstruction with, for example, the setting up of the "Provincial Reconstruction Team[2]" (bringing together all the players involved in reconstruction in the most secure areas.

## Shukyoku

This effort, however, represents the culmination of American adaptability. Unable to empathize sufficiently with the surrounding culture to secrete the adventurers who made the British and French empires strong, they also remain firmly committed to a method of solving tactical problems through the direct application of powerful forces. Also despite the energetic efforts of some leaders, the American brigades remain above all chess pieces. With time, they simply see a little better the pawns to destroy and act with a little more subtlety. But since each brigade can only hope to hold, at best, a city or a neighborhood of about 200,000 inhabitants, the Americans can only control at most half of the Sunni Arab population of Iraq. They are therefore condemned to move constantly to take over the same cities with each time more difficulties. In doing so, they spend considerable human and financial resources (at the very least, twenty times more than for civil reconstruction) for gains that are always temporary.

After allowing the Iraqi government to experiment with irregular forces that quickly took on the appearance of uncontrollable death squads, theAfter allowing the Iraqi government to experiment with irregular forces that quickly turned into uncontrollable death squads, the hope, if not of victory, but at least of a withdrawal in honour, appeared in 2005 and 2006 with the accelerated development, still based on the chess model, of the new Iraqi army. The American units believe then to be able to begin a first withdrawal towards giant bases, "mini-Americas" inside Iraq itself. However, this withdrawal proved to be premature, as the Iraqi brigades were very weak and, consisting mainly of Shiites, considered by the Sunnis as hardly less foreign than the American units. All the ground regained in 2004 and 2005 was lost again in 2006 even as the country fell into civil war.

In the game of Go, the end of the game begins when the possibilities of maneuver become much rarer. In the spring of 2006, the entire Iraqi space is occupied by solid organizations: Kurdistan is a de facto independent stronghold held by the two allied Kurdish parties; the Sunni Arab zone is occupied by tribes, the nationalist rebel movement and the "Islamic state"... The Shia zone is divided between the various organizations linked to the ruling parties or the Mahdi army, which are engaged in underground confrontation. The Iraqi army, superimposed on all these militias, is struggling to ensure a minimum of control while resisting the centrifugal forces that are pulling it apart. At the centre of this mosaic, Baghdad has become a "black hole" that attracts chaos. Embedded in all these rival structures, the American pieces, which no longer have the capacity to destroy even one of the organisations present on the territory and which are less than ever in control of an environment that is disintegrating, risk the progressive suffocation of their island bases. In a final "outburst", here they are back in the front line since spring 2007 to regain control of the capital and try to regain a manoeuvring space that allows a departure that does not look too much like a flight. But if the chess "Mate" is impossible, the end, by common agreement, of Go is not as close as it could seem so much the majority of local players, in spite of the speeches, hope for the continuation of the American presence. Iranians and Syrians are too happy to see the Americans fixed in Iraq; moderate Arab regimes fear a Shiite Tehran-Baghdad axis; jihadists can strike America without going there and all Iraqi actors need the Americans to help them against the others. The Lilliputians have tied up a Gulliver who thought he was manipulating them, and the American plays have not finished suffering in this game for which they are not made.

1) Fuseki: beginning of the Go game; Chuban: middle of the game; Shukyoku: end of the game.

[2] Provincial Reconstruction Team

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