

Policy Watch: U.S.' adversaries and Iraq

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A great debate is now taking place in the United States over whether to withdraw American forces from Iraq. Ironically, many of America's actual or potential adversaries, which opposed the U.S.-led intervention there in the first place, would now prefer American forces to remain in Iraq. This is not, however, because they suddenly wish America well. Far from it.

Many of those governments which opposed the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq back in 2002-03 did so because they feared it would succeed. Some -- most notably Iran and Syria, but dictatorships generally -- feared that if the U.S. intervention in Iraq went well, they would be next.

Others such as Russia and China did not fear American intervention against them, but were genuinely worried that an America that prevailed in Iraq would then oust other dictatorial regimes allied to them and set up democracies allied to Washington. They feared that the U.S. would come to further dominate the international relations system that had emerged after the end of the Cold War. Even some democratic governments -- France and Germany in particular -- shared this concern.

None of these governments, however, now fears that America will prevail in Iraq. They see America as being bogged down there instead. And many of them like that. For an America indefinitely expending its resources in a fruitless effort in Iraq is less likely to bother them. Indeed, an America bogged down in Iraq gives them some room to maneuver that they would not have otherwise.

The anti-American regimes in Syria and Iran, for instance, no longer fear an American intervention that would overthrow them. Indeed, this is now so unlikely that Syria has felt free to resume its meddling in Lebanon while Iran has continued work on the nuclear program that Washington so strongly objects to.

The Kremlin and Russian public opinion seems to take great satisfaction from the U.S. being bogged down in Iraq, like the former Soviet Union was in Afghanistan. More practically, Washington's preoccupation with Iraq means that America has less time and attention to devote to countering Moscow's efforts to reassert its dominance over former Soviet states.

A smug "I-told-you-so" attitude has also developed in France and Germany over America's Iraqi predicament. For China, the American preoccupation with Iraq is highly convenient as Beijing expands its political-economic influence in many parts of the developing world.

For the Taliban, America being stuck in an Iraqi quagmire is a godsend. Otherwise, the U.S. would have far more resources available to combat it.

Similarly, North Korea's "Dear Leader" has undoubtedly calculated that America's preoccupation with Iraq allows him to get away with behaving more provocatively since the U.S. does not want to fight him as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan all at the same time.

The Bush administration and many American conservatives worry that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would benefit America's adversaries. While many of them will indeed crow about America's "defeat," a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could actually give these adversaries something to worry

about. With America gone, there would be nothing to prevent Iraqi instability from spilling over into Syria and Iran. While America would act to protect its allies (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and Turkey) from this, neither it nor anyone else may be willing to do anything to help Syria and Iran.

A careful reading of the Iraq Study Group report reveals an understanding of this point. Their recommendation that Washington talk with Damascus and Tehran about Iraq was not based on any idealistic expectation about their willingness to help the United States, but out of the hard-headed appraisal that these two have a strong incentive to work with the U.S. in order to prevent the damage they would surely suffer if America simply withdrew.

Similarly, after withdrawing from Iraq, America would have far more resources available to deal with the Taliban and North Korea. Washington would also be able to devote more attention, as it should have been doing all along, to what the Russians and the Chinese are up to in other countries. There are many other problems in other areas, such as Darfur and Somalia, needing American attention that its preoccupation with Iraq has prevented.

It is not yet clear whether the American debate over Iraq will result in the withdrawal of U.S. forces from that country. What is clear, though, is that many of America's adversaries hope that the U.S. will remain bogged down in Iraq indefinitely.

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