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Iraq and the limits of US power

By Paul Mutter

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"Washington has lost a valuable opportunity to nurture and support a key counterweight to Iranian influence among Shi'ites in the Arab world," lament Danielle Pletka and Gary Schmitt of the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute in an op-ed for the Washington Post. They subsequently call on the Barack Obama administration to bulk up its already grossly overloaded staff at the gigantic US embassy in Baghdad. But in these few words, the two writers fleshed out a more fundamental concern for hawkish pundits in the Middle East: the fear of a "Shia Crescent" of Iranian-backed regimes in Bagdad, Beirut, and Damascus linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Indeed, with Iran now able to meddle in Iraq in ways it never could have with Saddam Hussein in power, the country will be more able to contest US-Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. The grim irony, notes Ted Galen Carpenter, is that by invading Iraq in 2003, "the United States has paid a terrible cost - some \$850 billion and more than 4,400 dead American soldiers - to make Iran the most influential power in Iraq". Few, if any, of the war's architects and boosters will now concede this, even as they raise alarm over Iran's influence in Iraq.

Looking East

But where today's neo-conservatives see an encroaching Iranian Islamist threat in the Middle East, an older guard has reached back to the not-so-distant Cold War past for parallels. Notably, many leading neo-conservative lights hold out hope that Iraq can be turned into an Arabian version of post-war South Korea and Japan.

Prominent neo-conservatives draw heavily on the memory of America's seizure of Japanese hegemony in Asia after 1945. The United States worked steadfastly with post-war Japanese and South Korean governments to build the two countries up as buffers to Soviet and Chinese influence during the Cold War - efforts that were, by Washington's standards at least, quite successful. Despite challenges from a resurgent China, the Pacific Ocean was (and still is) an American lake.

In a 2010 op-ed for the New York Times, leading Iraq war agitator Paul Wolfowitz invoked this history explicitly, treading breezily past US support for authoritarian South Korean regimes. "The United States stuck with South Korea even though the country was then ruled by a dictator and the prospects for its war-devastated economy looked dim," he wrote. Wolfowitz noted that Iraq's struggling democracy and central location were not unlike South Korea's during the Cold War.

However unseemly, there is some truth to Wolfowitz's recollection. It may be impossible to imagine a fifth column of South Korean agitators helping Pyongyang take over Seoul today, but during the Cold War this was a real concern for the United States. So Washington chose to prop up feudalistic landlords and former Japanese collaborators as Seoul's ruling class, stiffening South Korea's sinews against the appeal of the North Korean model with a glut of military and economic support. Today, Japan and South Korea remain firmly within the US fold.

Moreover, these alliances continue despite the brutal wars that spawned them. US-led forces laid waste to the Korean peninsula with saturation bombing in the 1950s, but Washington could always count thereafter on "our men in Seoul". Japan is an even more extreme case. After several years of firebombing and blockading the country, the United States annihilated two of the Japan's cities with nuclear weapons. And yet Japan plays host to US troops even today.

Those who fear that the United States "lost Iraq" because Barack Obama went through with the US withdrawal schedule negotiated by President George W Bush are clearly thinking about longer-term issues of American hegemony (see Mitt Romney's foreign policy white paper and list of advisers for good examples of this kind of thinking). It's simple logic, really: everything with Iraq keeps coming back to the dual-track policy of containment and rollback the United States has pursued against Iran. Iraq is a vital piece of this strategy; Juan Cole's map of American bases around Iran is unimpeachable evidence of this.

American neo-conservatives may hope that a US-buttressed military-political establishment in Iraq could form a bulwark against a potential "Shia Crescent" led by Iran, just as South Korea and Japan helped stem the red tide spreading through East Asia during the Cold War. They may even have some reason to hope that Iraqis will overlook their resentment over the immensely destructive US war on the country.

Wishful thinking

Just as in South Korea and Japan, there are Iraqis who see the United States as a partner - or at least as a cash cow that can be milked by exploiting US jitters about Iran. In contrast to most Iraqi politicians, who have been almost uniformly opposed to an ongoing US military presence

in Iraq, there are Iraqi military officers who wanted to maintain ties with the US military because they doubted their own forces could keep the peace.

There are always people within a country's security establishment who can be made into agents of American influence. But in Iraq, the United States is confronting a much less homogeneous society than in South Korea or Japan, and it faces a much better equipped rival for hegemonic influence in Iran. As Washington's influence in Baghdad recedes, Tehran's hidden hands in Iraq are coming to the fore.

It's not that Iran doesn't have its own baggage to contend with in Iraq as it vies with the United States for influence - Iran wasn't winning Iraqi hearts and minds, after all, when the two countries were busy destroying each other in the 1980s. But a key distinction for Iraqis between that war and the US invasion was that the Iran-Iraq War was launched by their own Saddam Hussein, driving thousands of Iraqi Shi'ite refugees into Iran by the end of the 1980s. By all appearances, America's war on Iraq was purely voluntary and imposed on Iraqis from the outside. Moreover, Iran has from at least 1982 on been working to build up its own agents of influence in Iraq's security and religious establishments.

Most importantly, an Iraqi alignment with Iran is the result not only of two decades of Iranian intrigue, but also of two decades of US sanctions, war, and occupation. Especially since the US occupation, Iraqis have viewed Iranian machinations in Iraq - and even Iran's quiet participation in Iraq's horrific sectarian violence - as just another symptom of a plague brought by the US invasion.

A lack of options

Suppose Obama came into office determined to overturn the withdrawal agreement and keep US troops in Iraq. What tools would he have to force Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to reverse himself in the face of an angry Iraqi public and threats by some Shi'ite groups to take up their arms again if the US military presence continued? What could Obama do to "reclaim the partnership with Maliki", as Danielle Pletka and Gary Schmitt ask?

The answer is surprisingly little, mainly because the US-Iraqi relationship was never a partnership to begin with. It was, from the start, an occupation. The US presence in Iraq - where it tried not just to police the country but at times even had Provincial Reconstruction Teams stand in for civil society - meant that Maliki had little agency of his own. Additionally, holdouts like the Sadrists, Sunni tribal militias, and the Badr Brigades had little reason to lay down their arms; it was fight or collaborate, and they chose to fight.

But ever since the United States enabled Maliki to build his own security forces, electoral bloc, and bureaucracy - and thus achieve an understanding with members of the "insurgency" - he has found other people he can depend on to bolster his rule. He doesn't need US forces to intimidate, capture, or kill people for him; his own people are quite capable of doing that.

Far from being run out of the country after detaining hundreds of former Ba'athist officials this winter, Maliki has apparently managed to use such heavy-handed actions to his advantage. As

paper by the neo-conservative Institute for the Study of War recently noted, "It is clear that Maliki has come out as the winner . . . He has made it more difficult for his Shi'ite rivals to dissent while simultaneously confining his Sunni opponents in a position suitable for exerting pressure and exploiting divisions within their ranks." For all of the rampant disunity and criminality of the Iraqi government, its leadership has been able to achieve ever-greater independence from its US backers.

Most importantly, Iraq has little reason to sully an important relationship with its Iranian neighbor just to please Washington. Moreover, it's uneasy about having such a long border with a regime change target and has no wish to get involved with the nuclear question that so preoccupies Israel and the United States. "Iraqis," Adil Shamoo notes, "can tell the difference between mutually beneficial programs and those that create the impression that the US is powerful and can do what it wants in Iraq".

Out of cards

Even "our man in Iraq" Ahmed Chalabi - who swept back into the country by way of Langley, Virginia after a decade of agitating for US-led regime change in exile - wanted the United States out of Iraq because he thought it would be political suicide to keep associating with the country that paid his organization \$335,000 a month during the first year of the occupation.

If the United States could not secure gratitude from a man who spent over a decade working with the CIA to overthrow Saddam Hussein, then from whom in Iraq can it call in any favors? Short of sectarian violence reaching the level it did in 2005, gratitude is the only thing that would compel Iraqi officials to reverse course, let US troops back in, and focus their foreign policy efforts on a dual-track policy of rollback and containment against Iran.

Unfortunately for neo-conservatives, Iraq is no South Korea or Japan, and "gratitude" seems to be in short supply.