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U.S. Masochism: Trying to Stay in Iraq and Afghanistan

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August 9, 2011

Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr has issued new warnings about the possible consequences if Washington reneges on its commitment to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of the year. He emphasized that such troops would then be entirely legitimate targets for attacks. One hopes that U.S. leaders heed his warning. Indeed, they should not be contemplating an extended U.S. military presence in that country even absent a new round of threats from Sadr or other radical figures.

Unfortunately, at least some military leaders, politicians and pundits apparently want the United States to remain in Iraq for years, if not decades. A similar unsubtle lobbying campaign is taking place with the goal of having “enduring” U.S. military bases in Afghanistan.

Some proponents note that the United States still has troops in such places as Germany, Japan and South Korea more than six decades after their introduction. The implication is that Washington can achieve a similar outcome in Iraq and Afghanistan and that such a long-term presence would benefit both the host countries and America.

That notion proves that a little historical knowledge can be a dangerous thing. There are huge differences between those long-time U.S. allies and clients and the volatile war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. Most notably, Germany, Japan and South Korea are all stable, cohesive societies that—with the partial exception of South Korea—exhibit consistently friendly attitudes toward the United States.

Conversely, Iraq and Afghanistan are fragile, fractious political entities where major segments of the population have an abundance of hatred for America. There was never any serious danger of German, Japanese, or South Korean insurgents regarding U.S. troops as an illegal occupation force and using bullets, grenades and IEDs to try to drive them out of the country. That is an ever-present danger in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and there is no indication that the situation will change for the better in the foreseeable future.

The seemingly never-ending U.S. military presence in Europe, Japan and South Korea is obsolete and counterproductive for other reasons, but at least American troops do not have to face lethal internal adversaries. Any assumption that a similar benign environment exists—or will ever exist—in Iraq or Afghanistan is naïve in the extreme. If the Obama administration adopts the foolish course of trying to establish a long-term presence in either of those countries, unlucky U.S. military personnel will pay a very high price for that miscalculation.