

An exit strategy mean

DURING HIS ELECTION CAMPAIGN LAST YEAR, President George Bush described the war in Iraq as integral to the war on terror, trying to debunk his rivals' claim that it was a mere digression, an unnecessary war waged to hide Bush's failure to capture Osama bin Laden.

In the run-up to the war, the Bush administration could not provide substantial evidence to prove that Saddam Hussein harboured terrorist outfits such as Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, it did manage to sell, at least to the American public, the idea of a 'conceptual affinity' between the two.

The presence of guest militants in Iraq — who arrived in that country *after* the Saddam regime was ousted — also afforded some credence to the administration's projected claim.

Thus it is somewhat ironic to see the administration now treating Iraq as a stand-alone project. For only last month, the US president compared the situation in Iraq to World War II, insisting that the fight in the Arab state must continue until 'victory'.

Such obsession could prevent Washington from changing its strategy in the war on terror. But it must change its course, given that the war in Iraq has not gone particularly well for America and its forces are completely bogged down in the battlefield.

Still, the administration refused to give a timeframe for troop withdrawal from Iraq while recently holding talks with the Association of Muslim Scholars. Apparently, it is committed to testing a new two-pronged strategy in that country: it wants to move Iraqi security forces to the front-line to minimise American operations (and casualties) against the insurgents; and it wishes to launch a diplomatic offensive ahead of Bush's forthcoming visit to Europe in an attempt to secure some real international support to stabilise the situation in Iraq.

But this strategy is unlikely to work. Here is why.

Firstly, the Iraqi security forces lack the capacity to effectively fight the insurgents. Several security experts have pointed out that these forces are unable to operate without the assistance of coalition forces. They are merely foot soldiers, with little experience of working with strong airpower or sophisticated artillery.

VIEW



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But this is not all. The insurgents have already penetrated the Iraqi security forces. According to the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "dozens of Iraqi police and military personnel, including some high-ranking commanders, have been dismissed on suspicion they provided information or other assistance to

insurgents". The CFR adds that "insurgents frequently appear to have inside information about the movement and routines of Iraqi and US troops that they use to mount deadly attacks".

It is hardly the smartest move, therefore, to ask these forces to win peace in Iraq. Moreover, peace can only be won provided a political solution is in place. A military response alone will not succeed as should be clear from the events so far.

It is difficult to see, given this, how Bush would use his charm offensive next month to get substantial support from Europe, especially France and Germany.

According to an American political commentator, recently travelling in that region, "Mr Bush is more widely and deeply disliked in Europe than any US president in history".

"There is nothing that the Europeans want to hear from George Bush," wrote Thomas Friedman in his *New York Times* column on Thursday. Friedman's counsel to the president: Don't speak, just listen.

So, what then should be the US strategy in Iraq? It should perhaps consider the following approach.

a) Swallow its pride and admit the shortcomings of its Iraq strategy. This is the most logical (though painful) thing to do. There is no gainsaying that the US is stretched thin in Iraq. It needs more boots on the ground. In fact, recent reports in the American media suggest the army is, for the first time, placing women in support units at the front lines of combat because of a shortage of skilled male soldiers available for duty in Iraq. This overstretch has precipitated a repeal of the US law that prohibits women from being deployed with combat forces.

In addition, the occupation forces have lost popular support: Iraqi nationalism is on the rise; guest militants have gained ground with the people; and America's presence in Iraq is not helping the situation.

The US must therefore prepare itself to surrender any strategic benefits its policymakers associated with its presence in Iraq — benefits the US op-ed warriors wrote columns about.

Iraq was supposed to be the first step to taming Iran

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and Syria. That has not happened. If anything, Washington has been complaining that both Tehran and Damascus have snagged several coalition operations in Iraq.

b) Announce a timeframe for troop withdrawal.

This is the most sensitive issue since the US allegedly wanted to maintain a military presence in the region, especially since it has withdrawn troops from Saudi Arabia. However, the situation in Iraq is increasingly working against this objective.

Washington must realise that its military presence in Iraq cannot be open-ended. Besides, its stubbornness may impact its relations with its staunchest ally Britain, whose prime minister, Tony Blair, is seemingly trying to convince the Bush administration to announce a timeframe for a pullout. Blair is trying to soften the blow by enticing Washington with the prospect of plugging the US back into the international community. The Blair factor may also increase America's clout within Europe. Hence the White House may find it hard to ditch the British leader in the run-up to his electoral showdown in May.

If Blair can secure a timeframe from Washington before the British general elections, it will boost his rating and help him maintain his reputation as a dove among Bush's hawks.

c) Announce terms for a pullout. This is the trickiest part. The Iraqi nationalists may want US forces to withdraw as quickly as possible. But this is certainly not desirable from an American (or even an Iraqi) perspective.

The US should give a timeframe that is neither too long nor too short. Perhaps it should tell the people of Iraq that it would exit in about eighteen months. During this time, Washington must try and accomplish some very important tasks, including helping Iraq get a new constitution.

But it must also be careful while dealing with the people of Iraq and unconditionally guarantee them that:

- It will not interfere in the country's domestic politics;
- It will maintain its presence in Iraq primarily to train Iraqi security forces and help the newly elected government build state institutions;

- It will not favour one ethnic community over another or pit one against the other;
- It will participate in reconstruction work; and
- It will help Iraq with the oil extraction process.

Ideally, these pledges should have been made when the US team was trying to negotiate a deal with the Sunni leaders of the country. They would have alienated the guest militants who have been thriving on Iraqi nationalism, while also giving some hope to the Sunnis who have so far been viewed by the occupation forces as fifth columnists.

The US should also have assured the Sunnis that the newly elected government would address their concerns regarding the allocation of oil revenue and encouraged them to participate in the elections to win substantial representation in the political process of the country.

Such a step would not have been an indication of America's weakness. Rather, Washington could have put a positive spin on the situation, pointing out that having liberated the people of Iraq it was leaving them to discover their destiny.

It would have allowed the Bush administration to extricate from a difficult situation without looking bad. But it missed its chance. Nevertheless, the January 30 election still offers America the chance to devise a political solution to the question of Iraq.

The important thing to remember is Bush's original position on that country: Iraq was never a stand-alone project. It was to bait terrorists who indeed gathered in that country to bleed America — helping Washington take the war to its elusive enemies instead of letting them bring it to its own doorstep.

But America has paid the price for its policy. And since this price is no longer affordable, it is only prudent that the US abandon it.

As for the unintended consequences of a pullout — regional instability or consolidation of terrorist networks in the Middle East — a US which is not tied down in Iraq can deal with these problems better in cooperation with the international community.

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