



DEADLY TRIANGLE? US FOREIGN POLICY, IRAQ, AND IRAN

It is now a month after President Bush's dramatic pronouncement of a US "surge" in Iraq, consisting of more than 20,000 additional troops and up to \$1 billion in economic projects. Yet, in many respects, it is still unclear what those troops and additional funds are supposed to accomplish. Leave aside that there has been no strategic clarity beyond assertions of an invigorated Iraqi political system and a general triumph over the ill-defined insurgency, there has been little definition of tactical objectives. Who exactly will be confronted and defeated by the additional troops and vanquished by changes that supposedly strengthen Iraqi governance and administration?

While the vast majority of reaction to Bush's plan was critical of its general ambition, the sceptics grappled for an explanation of motive that would prompt the President to reject alternatives such as the proposals of the Iraq Study Group. One assertion was that Bush and close advisors were "delusional"; another that he was hyper-rationally increasing short-term US involvement to hand off a poisoned chalice to a Democratic successor in 2009. Then there was the cynical evaluation that the troop increase was tied not only to Iraqi political "reform" but to passage of legislation giving US firms control over Iraqi resources, including 75 percent of profits from oil revenues.

There may be elements of truth in all the above, especially the silver lining of an economic bonanza whatever the cost in more American and Iraqi lives. I think, however, that the plan behind the "surge" may have only emerged in the days after the Bush speech. Put bluntly, Iraq --- "liberated" and now broken --- may have become a pawn in another US contest, this one with the Iranian Government.

Iran, of course, has never been in the good graces of this Administration. In January 2002 it was placed alongside Iraq in the "Axis of Evil", even though the President at that time was the "moderate" Khatami and the Iranian Government had been supportive of the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan. But while the focus of American efforts was upon the removal of Saddam Hussein, Iran was a secondary nuisance, even if some in Washington were remarking, "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran." Indeed the logic of the US strategy was that, with the installation of a suitable Iraqi Government, the restored American position in the Persian Gulf would effectively contain Iran politically, militarily, and economically.

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That is why the Bush Administration made what may prove to be one of its greatest among many errors, rebuffing Iranian co-operation in the toppling of Saddam and maintaining pressure on Tehran through expanded propaganda efforts and links with Iranian dissident and exile groups. The nuclear issue, elevated in 2003 when Iran admitted to enrichment projects, provided a suitable foundation for the American challenge to a supposed Iranian menace.

The irony was that this linking of a “good” Iraq and a contained Iran would eventually subvert not Tehran but Washington. The Bush Administration tried to isolate key Shi’a political and religious leaders in Iraq, notably Ayatollah Sistani, on the grounds that they were influenced by Iran while installing the right Shi’a --- secular Iraqi exiles like Ahmad Chalabi --- in the Iraqi leadership. By the time that the US Government realised this was leading to chaos rather than a happy, pro-American Iraq, the Sunni-led insurgency was far too advanced to be overcome and many in Shi’a communities were irretrievably alienated from the Coalition Provisional Authority. With each collapse of an American reconstruction project or military offensive, the greater was the chance that Tehran could move --- not with the vaunted Shi’a militias but with propaganda, social, and economic initiatives --- to fill the Iraqi vacuum.

For the reality has always been that much of the indigenous Iraqi leadership emerging after “liberation” would have a cordial relationship with its neighbour to the east. After all, groups like the Supreme Council for the Islamic Republic of Iraq, led by Hakim, were forged in the Iran-Iraq war and maintained during Saddam’s murderous campaigns against Iraqi Shi’a (it is rarely noted in the Western press that Kurdish leaders, notably President Talabani, have also maintained close links with the Iranian Government). A lot of the fencing since the ill-fated attempt to put Chalabi in charge has centred upon putting in place Presidents (Iyad Allawi, al-Jaafari, al-Malaki) who were not too offensive to either Washington or Tehran, but the key figures behind the scenes--- notably Hakim and Ayatollah Sistani --- have remained constant.

Perhaps the one American hope in 2007, at the grand political level, was to find a common front against the new local bad boy, Moqtada al-Sadr. (Forget, by the way, that the American strategy is geared towards defeating an external “terrorist” menace like al-Qa’eda. That has always been a sideshow in Iraq, first to provide an erroneous justification to topple Saddam, then to deflect attention from the growing indigenous insurgency.) That’s because al-Sadr was a threat to all the key factions --- Sunni groups, SCIRI, and Ayatollah Sistani --- as well as the Iraqi Government. Indeed, his emergence from a cleric based in Sadr City in Baghdad to a figure of national standing may be the most significant political fallout from post-liberation chaos.

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On the surface, that's what the US Government was moving towards at the end of 2006. The insistence to al-Maliki that he had to confront the Mehdi Army, al-Sadr's militia, was matched by Hakim's talks in Washington with the Bush Administration and Vice President Cheney's mysterious trip to Saudi Arabia. And, from what can be made from sketchy information about the "surge", the new US units were to join Iraqi Special Forces in an incursion into Sadr City.

Here, however, is where the move of Iraq from focus to pawn intervenes. A logical strategy against al-Sadr would entail co-operation with the Iranian Government, who also see the cleric as an unwelcome challenge to SCIRI and other Shi'a groups. Far from incidentally, this coincides with the Iraq Study Group's recommendation to open discussions with Iran about the Iraqi situation. Instead Bush's speech and Rice's elaboration have made clear that Tehran, as much as and probably more than al-Sadr, was the American target.

The current strategy dates from last autumn amidst "a very active interagency discussion...about measures to take, and sequencing", in the words of a senior official. On the surface, the target was Iran's nuclear programme, with pursuit of a UN resolution endorsing sanctions, but this too was only a manoeuvre in a larger quest. The other US steps --- from international denunciation of President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial to financial and economic measures to choke off Iran's access to global markets to despatch of US carrier groups to the Persian Gulf to cultural outreach such as the tour of Iran by American wrestlers to authorisation to kidnap and kill Iranians inside Iraq, are all part of the "package" to undermine the Iranian regime.

So what does this mean for the "surge"? Logically it means the US offensive is over even as it starts, with the Mahdi Army already following instructions "to melt away and disappear" and al-Sadr's organisation focusing on its own rebuilding projects. It's one matter for the al-Maliki Government to overcome its qualms and join the Americans against al-Sadr's militias, it's another to pursue that risky alliance while showing hostility to the Iranians and risking the alienation of SCIRI and other Shi'a groups. Even if a military push into Sadr City brought a token success rather than expanding the conflagration in Iraq, as the Mahdi Army counter-attacks not only in Baghdad but in other cities including Basra, the political issues--- who governs Iraq? --- are taken even further from resolution.

Now it may be that the Bush Administration is so short-sighted, as the planning for the 2003 war established, that it has not even gotten this far in strategic thinking. Far more likely, however, is a dubious "win-win" strategy. Negatively, the US wins even if this surge fails because blame for its demise can be placed on

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Iranian-supported insurgents. (Lo and behold, certain US press stories after the announcement of the “surge” tried to portray Moqtada al-Sadr as a close ally of Tehran.) Positively, the US “wins” because further Iraqi instability makes its case that Iran must be confronted. Thus episodes such as the raid on the Iranian liaison office in Erbil and the kidnapping of an Iranian diplomat in Baghdad (which followed the detention of two other Iranian diplomats in December) should be seen as symbolic displays of force --- Iraq is ours and if you don't like it, we can take this further. As a US official told the Washington Post, “We're a power, too [is the message to Tehran]. Your power is not unlimited. You can't go anywhere and do anything you want.”

The problem is that, even as the US flexes its muscles vis-à-vis Iran inside Iraq, proclaiming that Tehran is the sponsor of the insurgency, the Iranians proceed by putting money and resources into the country for non-military activities such as hospitals (aid which is suitably hailed by Iranian broadcasting services). And, if it is the Americans rather than the Iranians who are associated with further deterioration of Iraqi conditions, then Washington has to make a more serious decision about a “surge”: does it check the Iranian advance with an escalation not of rhetoric but of operations --- propaganda, subversion, possibly covert operations --- against Tehran? It is then that those who are advocating a violent showdown, such as Vice President Cheney's Chief of Staff with his claim that 2007 is “the year of Iran”, may come to the fore and US air strikes become more than a contingency plan. As Zbigniew Brezinski, the former National Security Advisor, has warned:

If the United States continues to be bogged down in a protracted bloody involvement in Iraq, the final destination on this downhill track is likely to be a head-on conflict with Iran and with much of the world of Islam at large... A mythical historical narrative to justify the case for such a protracted and potentially expanding war is already being articulated.