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U.S. troops in Iraq: Permanent military bases won't work

By Kimberly Marten and Alexander Cooley International Herald Tribune

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Both Congress and the Bush administration have been hotly debating the future of the American troop presence in Iraq in the wake of Sunday's elections. A key question is whether some small number of forces should be stationed at U.S. military bases after most troops leave.

Discussion tends to focus on U.S. geostrategic interests in the Gulf, while ignoring experiences with overseas bases elsewhere. The nonmilitary aspects of bases have political consequences that can trump security concerns. Planners might consider three factors that help explain why bases are welcomed (or at least tolerated) in some countries but not others.

First is the economic impact. Despite regular protests against American bases in Okinawa, Japan, for example, they have much tacit local support. On that otherwise impoverished island, the bases employ local contractors, pay rent and bring so-called "burden payments" from Tokyo to Okinawan citizens and municipalities. Similarly, in impoverished Kyrgyzstan, the new U.S. base has a positive employment impact on the capital city, Bishkek, helping to create a small but growing middle class.

In Iraq, the American presence provides jobs and profits for certain Iraqi businesses, but insurgent attacks against Iraqis working for the United States and even against merchants selling to troops make these jobs increasingly unattractive. Economic motives are unlikely to create much support for the U.S. presence.

Second is the question of whether the host country is part of a firm U.S. alliance with a shared purpose or simply being used to launch military operations elsewhere. This has become an issue in South Korea, as U.S. troops are repositioned far away from the border with the North and the Pentagon's Global Defense Posture Review lessens the relative importance of Korean bases. While these moves contribute to U.S. strategic flexibility, they simultaneously undermine an important sense of partnership between Washington and Seoul. Many South Koreans feel they no longer have the "respect" of Washington, given their declining influence over base-related decisions, and since new threats are not defined jointly.

What about Iraq? Each of its three major factions supports and fears different external actors and ethnic groups, leaving Iraqi national interests unclear. Given the uncertainties in an independent Iraq's relations with Iran, Turkey and the Arab world, a standing agreement to come to Baghdad's defense against future enemies would be premature and politically dangerous. Kurds might welcome a long-term U.S. presence, but a base in their territory would heighten suspicions among other Iraqis, and perhaps provoke a reaction from neighboring countries as well. A cohesive set of Iraqi international security interests is unlikely to emerge, and unlikely to match Washington's goals in the region, leaving no basis for alliance.

Third is the perceived impact on local prospects for democratization and political freedom. In Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. base is not much of a political issue at present, as the political opposition is trying to paint itself as more pro-Western than the ruling government. But people there also believe that base-related contracts have lined the pockets of the relatives of President Askar Akaev, and Akaev has used the country's role in the "antiterrorist alliance" with Washington to justify crackdowns against opposition forces. If America ignores potential abuses of the democratic process in forthcoming elections, the



current goodwill toward the base may be squandered.

In Iraq, it seems unlikely that the U.S. military will shake its current negative reputation, in spite of the good intentions of most American soldiers. As a result of mounting civilian deaths, the failure to establish security, and the enduring images of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, America will always be regarded as an unwelcome occupier by most Iraqis. Politicians in a democratic Iraq will have a ready-made election issue to exploit if bases remain.

Considering all these factors, a continuing U.S. base presence in Iraq is unlikely to be politically tenable. When the United States finally decides to leave Iraq, it should remove troops under an interim agreement that allows it to retain its most important facilities only for the few months necessary to complete withdrawal. Any long-term presence, no matter how small, would make American troops the focus of political unhappiness and the targets of violent attacks.

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