

A Diplomatic Offensive for Iraq

By Carlos Pascual and Larry Diamond

ABSTRACT



U.S. policy on Iraq must address both diplomatic and military strategy together to realize any chance for sustainable peace. That was one of the central themes of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group report, yet the need for a diplomatic strategy to achieve a political settlement among warring Iraqis has largely been ignored in the debate on whether to “surge” or “withdraw” troops.

U.S. troops in Iraq should aim to provide the security needed to create a political environment to negotiate a peace agreement to end the Iraq War. Throughout recent history, civil wars characterized by insurgency and guerilla fighting have required political settlements to achieve peace. Moreover, weak and failed states have required external assistance to achieve effective self-governance. An urgent and energetic international political effort with focused mediation is required to complement military deployments to Iraq. Both need to advance together to create the basis for sustainable peace. This mediation should be an intensive and well-coordinated joint effort of the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union.

If the parties in Iraq cannot reach a political settlement to reduce the violence and ultimately achieve peace, then military force alone cannot succeed and must be redeployed, if possible to contain the regional spillover from the conflict. Iraqis must understand that if they will not engage in credible negotiations to end their civil war, then the United States must—and will—substantially withdraw its forces from Iraq, while pursuing a diplomatic strategy to advance America’s vast interests in the region. The individual parties to the conflict in Iraq must also understand that their unwillingness to compromise in the pursuit of a peace agreement risks a descent into much wider violence in which their interests could be seriously jeopardized.

POLICY BRIEF #162

In the spirit of a unified U.S. security strategy, we offer the following framework for near-term congressional action on hearings and appropriations to support a policy toward Iraq that is comprehensive and responsible.

Specifically, we recommend six steps:

First, Congress should call on President Bush to unleash, as called for in the Iraq Study Group report, a "diplomatic offensive" to achieve a workable peace agreement for Iraq. The president should vigorously seek the engagement of a special United Nations envoy to serve as a neutral arbiter in helping to broker political accommodation among the conflicting groups in Iraq, just as the United States relied on the United Nations to broker first an agreement on the timing of elections and then the Interim Government for Iraq in 2004. The political process should be divided in two parts.

Immediately the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should begin a regional and international process with Iraq, all Iraq's neighbors, the United States, the EU, and other international organizations to develop and implement a strategy that addresses the humanitarian and security consequences of the two million refugees from Iraq, the one million refugees expected over the next year, and the two million Iraqis displaced within Iraq. These displaced people represent an emerging humanitarian tragedy and security risk for the entire region. This process could build on the results of the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and IDPs inside Iraq and in Neighboring Countries, convened by UNHCR in April.

The United Nations should propose a political process, to be endorsed by foreign ministers participating in the International Compact for Iraq, that can significantly reduce the violence and lead to a viable peace in Iraq. To succeed, this effort must be led by a distinguished UN envoy, with a select team, reporting to the secretary general and working in close partnership with the United States and the European Union or a major EU power, such as Great Britain. This process would address sharing of oil revenues, federal-regional relations, political inclusion (reduction of the scope of de-Baathification), amnesty for some combatants, minority rights, and the disarmament and reintegration of militias.

Such a multilateral initiative is not a substitute for American diplomacy. Coordinating with the UN envoy, the United States should undertake intensive bilateral diplomacy with all regional actors and interested international parties to support such a political process. Further, the United States should use this initiative as an opportunity to achieve a multilateral framework that will broaden international engagement and thus share what is now a largely unilateral and unsustainable burden for peace in Iraq and stability in the region.

Second, the diplomatic offensive should aim to gather representatives of the major political and military forces in Iraq into a "Dayton-style" roundtable peace conference, where all the major issues will be on the table and a comprehensive agreement will be sought. Several months of discussions and negotiations would be necessary to prepare the ground for such a meeting: to identify the actors who would need to be at the table (not just from the current political landscape, but from those elements of the Sunni-based insurgency who are consequential and would be prepared to talk), and to identify the range of positions and possible outcomes on each issue. Once the roundtable negotiations begin, it should be made clear to the parties that failure to achieve a peace agreement would trigger a comprehensive and agonizing reappraisal of U.S. engagement in Iraq.

Third, in parallel with the diplomatic initiative, the U.S. Congress should call on the president to instruct the U.S. military and State Department to prepare contingency diplomatic and military plans for Iraq in the event it is not possible to forge broad agreement among the parties and build a viable peace. Such plans would reflect the historical experience that, without a peace agreement, military forces alone cannot contain the violence or enforce peace when the parties to a civil war are intent on continuing their conflict. Contingency plans should consider at least two options: to contain the regional spillover of the Iraq war by redeploying most, or even all, coalition troops in Iraq and refocusing diplomatic efforts in line with a containment strategy; or to withdraw American troops and actively pursue a diplomatic strategy with regional actors to maximize their capacity to contend with the regional spillovers if a redeployment of troops is deemed to have limited impact.

Fourth, Congress should use the FY 2008 Department of Defense Authorization and Appropriation bills to set a transparent and predictable baseline for military financing through September 2008 that demonstrates the seriousness of American resolve to use its military presence to create the conditions for a political settlement, while making it unambiguously clear that the United States will not continue to deploy forces if Iraqis do not take advantage of a credible international diplomatic initiative to help broker peace.

As part of the overall Defense appropriation and the authorization to spend funds, Congress should make clear the assumptions behind the funding baseline for Iraq, as suggested below. Formally designated "Review Hearings," to make adjustments as needed to reflect progress or setbacks based on performance guidelines (described below), would begin in September 2007 and continue every two months after that, but could be accelerated at the request of the administration or if Congress so chooses. While the Congress will continue many hearings on Iraq throughout this period, the formal designation of Review Hearings will make clear to all parties—in the U.S., Iraq, the region and internationally—a timetable for action that keeps diplomatic and military strategy in sync.

Congress funded the president's supplemental request at "surge levels" through September 2007, providing support through the period suggested by the U.S. military to demonstrate security improvements. The supplemental appropriation also conditions future U.S. strategy in Iraq on the Iraqi government meeting political, economic, and security benchmarks. But the supplemental did not set a timetable linked to performance to guide future funding, nor did it include in the performance benchmarks a plan for U.S., Iraqi, and international action to create a credible and focused diplomatic process to achieve a political settlement. Even before taking action on the Defense Authorization and Appropriation Bills, Congress should issue a resolution that makes clear that future funding for the Iraq War will be linked to performance, including whether an intensive and focused multilateral peace initiative has been established, and whether all key Iraqi parties engage meaningfully.

FY 2008 funding should be set at incrementally reduced levels over the course of the year, making it clear that the U.S. force presence, as stated by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, "is not a commitment to have our young men and women patrolling Iraq's streets open-endedly." From this baseline, funding could be increased to support progress or reduced if lack of engagement in a peace process signals that Iraqis are not ready for a political settlement. For October–December 2007, base funding should be set at a pre-surge level equivalent to when the United States had approximately 130,000 troops in Iraq, with an adjustment to cover the cost of

drawing down from the surge. Base funding for each following quarter would be reduced significantly, perhaps 15 percent, again with adjustments to cover redeployment costs. Review Hearings scheduled throughout this period would assess progress and allow a chance for adjustments. Transparency in the funding stream will give the military a clear framework for planning. Diplomatic and military strategy would reinforce one another as we give Iraqis the option of negotiating peace or carrying the burden of war on their shoulders.

Failure of the roundtable peace negotiations to achieve a peace agreement, or a broad set of constitutional amendments and political reforms to reduce the violence, should be followed by a much more rapid and substantial reduction in the American military and economic commitment in Iraq, and by an American readiness and strategy to impose specific costs on any party that proved to be an obstacle to a compromise agreement. Preparations for a roundtable should begin immediately. A roundtable negotiation should commence by late 2007. Its outcome should be apparent within the first half of 2008, with the test being a viable settlement, not the imposition of a flawed agreement for the sake of an outcome.

In addition to financing for the war, FY 2008 funding should be increased to UNHCR to address the serious humanitarian needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.

Fifth, congressional Review Hearings should assess the progress of both diplomatic and military efforts, as well as Iraqi action on benchmarks proposed by President Bush in his January 2007 strategy on Iraq:

- Is there an effective and mediated negotiating process with the prospect of leading to peace?
- Has the United States vigorously sought to help create and support such a process of political dialogue and accommodation?
- To what extent have the key Iraqi and regional actors participated in support of a political settlement?
- To what extent are the principal Iraqi political and armed groups showing a willingness and capacity to make compromises in pursuit of peace?
- What are the prospects for further progress toward peace?
- How has security developed on the ground? How does it differ between Baghdad and the rest of the country? What have been civilian and military casualties, U.S. and Iraqi? Is the country moving toward stabilization or deepening violence?
- Have Iraqi militias supported or undermined the political process?
- Are certain Iraqi parties or militias acting as "spoilers," rejecting the political process? If so, what is the prospect of isolating and containing or defeating them?
- What is the capacity of American troops to sustain an effective presence in Iraq?
- Have the government of Iraq and its security forces advanced in their capacity to govern effectively and administer the rule of law?
- How have the Iraqi army and police performed? How many Iraqi security forces can act effectively and responsibly without U.S. and other international coalition partners?
- Have Iraqis made progress on legislation critical to the reconciliation process, particularly laws on oil and political inclusion?

- Are Iraqis still being displaced internally or driven across borders? Are they rich or poor, skilled or unskilled? Of particular sects or ethnic groups? Under what conditions do they live?
- Is the Iraqi government able to deliver humanitarian assistance and/or enable relief agencies to support people affected by the conflict?
- Is there a strategy and action to protect and meet the humanitarian needs of refugees and those displaced internally?

If there is significant political and military progress, Congress should support continued diplomatic and military efforts to achieve a political solution to stabilize Iraq. Failure to achieve meaningful progress toward political accommodation, effective governance, and security should lead to a detailed review of the contingency options, so as to redirect diplomatic and military efforts toward either containment or withdrawal, depending on circumstances on the ground. Congress can declare its reasonable expectation that roundtable negotiations should be prepared through intensive international mediation this year, and should begin as soon as possible. Failure to launch such negotiations or to achieve more incremental progress by that time would trigger a resolution to redeploy U.S. forces to contain the conflict or to begin to withdraw.

Finally, Congress should resolve that if a political agreement is achieved in Iraq with broad Iraqi participation and multilateral political, economic, and security backing to implement it, then the United States should support a continued military deployment in Iraq under a United Nations peacekeeping mandate with broad international participation. Congress should recognize that peace agreements require sustained international support as war-torn states rebuild trust in government and establish capacity to govern and maintain security.

CONCLUSION

Peace in Iraq will require both political and military engagement and, as conditions allow, economic support to win the confidence of those whose lives have been devastated by war. U.S. Congress should guide the responsible application of American diplomatic and military capabilities to achieve such a peace. If the warring parties are not ready to compromise for peace, then Congress should use its ability to review, regulate and appropriate in order to press for a measured redeployment of American military and political efforts. The Bush Administration would do well to take the initiative on all these fronts and allow the Congress to provide responsible oversight. But Congress should resolve to play a meaningful role to guide policy if the administration does not.

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