

Withdrawal is not an option

Henry A. Kissinger

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President Bush's bold decision to order a "surge" of some 20,000 American troops for Iraq has brought the debate over the war to a defining stage. There will not be an opportunity for another reassessment.

The Baker-Hamilton commission powerfully described the impasse on the ground. It is the result of cumulative choices -- some enumerated by the president -- in which worthy objectives and fundamental American values clashed with regional and cultural realities.

The important goal of modernizing U.S. armed forces led to inadequate troop levels for the military occupation of Iraq. The reliance on early elections as the key to political evolution, in a country lacking a sense of national identity, caused the newly enfranchised to vote almost exclusively for sectarian parties, deepening historic divisions into chasms. The understandable -- but, in retrospect, premature -- strategy of replacing American troops with indigenous forces deflected U.S. forces from a military mission, and it could not deal with the most flagrant shortcoming of Iraqi forces, which is to define what the Iraqi forces are supposed to fight for and under what banner.

These circumstances have merged into an almost perfect storm of mutually reinforcing crises: Within Iraq, the sectarian militias are engaged in civil war or something so close to it as to make little practical difference. The conflict between Shiites and Sunnis goes back 1,400 years. In most Middle Eastern countries, Shiite minorities coexist precariously with Sunni majorities. The civil war in Iraq threatens to usher in a cycle of domestic upheavals and a war between Shiite and Sunni states, with a high potential of drawing in countries from outside the region. In addition, Iraqi Kurds seek full autonomy from Sunnis and Shiites; their independence would raise the prospect of intervention from Turkey and Iran.

The war in Iraq is part of another war that cuts across the Shiite-Sunni issue: the assault on the international order conducted by radical groups in both Islamic sects. Functioning as states within states and by brutal demonstrations of the inability of established governments to protect their populations, such organizations as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Mahdi Army in Iraq and the al-Qaeda groups all over the Middle East seek to reassert an Islamic identity submerged, in their view, by Western values. Any enhancement of radical Islamist self-confidence therefore threatens all the traditional states of the region, as well as others with significant Islamic populations, from Indonesia through India to Western Europe. The most important target is the United States, as the most powerful Western country and the indispensable component of any attempt to build a new world order.

The disenchantment of the American public with the burdens it has borne largely alone for nearly four years has generated growing demands for some type of unilateral

withdrawal, usually expressed as benchmarks to be put to the Baghdad government that, if not fulfilled in specific time frames, would trigger American disengagement.

But under present conditions, withdrawal is not an option. American forces are indispensable. They are in Iraq not as a favor to its government or as a reward for its conduct. They are there as an expression of the American national interest to prevent the Iranian combination of imperialism and fundamentalist ideology from dominating a region on which the energy supplies of the industrial democracies depend. An abrupt American departure would greatly complicate efforts to stem the terrorist tide far beyond Iraq; fragile governments from Lebanon to the Persian Gulf would be tempted into preemptive concessions. It might drive the sectarian conflict in Iraq to genocidal dimensions beyond levels that impelled U.S. intervention in the Balkans. Graduated withdrawal would not ease these dangers until a different strategy was in place and showed progress. For now, it would be treated within Iraq and in the region as the forerunner of a total withdrawal, and all parties would make their dispositions on that basis.

President Bush's decision should therefore not be debated in terms of the "stay the course" strategy he has repeatedly disavowed in recent days. Rather, it should be seen as the first step toward a new grand strategy relating power to diplomacy for the entire region, ideally on a nonpartisan basis.

The purpose of the new strategy should be to demonstrate that the United States is determined to remain relevant to the outcome in the region; to adjust American military deployments and numbers to emerging realities; and to provide the maneuvering room for a major diplomatic effort to stabilize the Middle East.

Of the current security threats in Iraq -- the intervention of outside countries, the presence of al-Qaeda fighters, an extraordinarily large criminal element, the sectarian conflict -- the United States has a national interest in defeating the first two; it must not involve itself in the sectarian conflict for any extended period, much less let itself be used by one side for its sectarian goals.

The sectarian conflict confines the Iraqi government's unchallenged writ to the sector of Baghdad defined as the Green Zone. In many areas the militias exceed the strength of the Iraqi national army. Appeals to the Iraqi government to undertake reconciliation and economic reforms are not implemented, partly because the will to do so is absent but essentially because it lacks the power to put such policies in place, even if the will to do so could suddenly be mobilized. If the influence of the militias could be eliminated -- or greatly reduced -- the Baghdad government would have a better opportunity to pursue a national policy.

The new strategy has begun with attempts to clear the insurrectional Sunni parts of Baghdad. But it must not turn into ethnic cleansing or the emergence of another tyrannical state, only with a different sectarian allegiance. Side by side with disarming the Sunni militias and death squads, the Baghdad government must show comparable

willingness to disarm Shiite militias and death squads. American policy should not deviate from the goal of a civil state whose political process is available to all citizens.

As the comprehensive strategy evolves, a repositioning of American forces from the cities into enclaves should be undertaken so that they can separate themselves from the civil war and concentrate on the threats to international security described above. The principal mission would be to protect the borders against infiltration and to prevent the establishment of terrorist training areas or Taliban-type control over significant regions. At that point, too, significant reductions of U.S. forces should be possible. Such a strategy would make withdrawals depend on conditions on the ground instead of the other way around. It could also provide the time to elaborate a cooperative diplomacy for rebuilding the region, including progress toward a settlement of the Palestine issue.

For such a strategy, it is not possible to jettison the military instrument and rely, as some argue, on purely political means. A free-standing diplomacy is an ancient American illusion. History offers few examples of it. The attempt to separate diplomacy and power results in power lacking direction and diplomacy being deprived of incentives.

Diplomacy is the attempt to persuade another party to pursue a course compatible with a society's strategic interests. Obviously this involves the ability to create a calculus that impels or rewards the desired direction. The outcome, by definition, is rarely the ability to impose one's will but a compromise that gives each party a stake in maintaining it.

Few diplomatic challenges are as complex as that surrounding Iraq. Diplomacy must mediate between Iraqi sects that, though in many respects mortal enemies, are assembled in a common governmental structure. It needs to relate that process to an international concept involving Iraq's neighbors and other countries that have a significant interest in the outcome.

Two levels of diplomatic effort are necessary:

- A contact group should be created, assembling neighboring countries whose interests are directly affected and which rely on American support. This group should include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. Its function should be to advise on ending the internal conflict and to create a united front against outside domination.
- Parallel negotiations should be conducted with Syria and Iran, which now appear as adversaries, to give them an opportunity to participate in a peaceful regional order. Both categories of consultations should lead to an international conference including all countries that have to play a stabilizing role in the outcome, specifically the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council as well as such countries as Indonesia, India and Pakistan.

Too much of the current discussion focuses on the procedural aspect of starting a dialogue with adversaries. In fact, a balance of risks and opportunities needs to be created so that Iran is obliged to choose between a significant but not dominant role or riding the

crest of Shiite fundamentalism. In the latter case, it must pay a serious, not rhetorical, price for choosing the militant option. An outcome in which Iran is approaching nuclear status because of hesitant and timid nonproliferation policies in the Security Council, coupled with a political vacuum in the region, must lead to catastrophic consequences.

Similar principles apply to the prospects for settlement in Palestine. Moderates in Israel and the neighboring Arab countries are evolving compromises unimaginable a decade ago. But if the necessary outcomes are perceived as the result of panic by moderates and an exit from the region by the United States, radicals could raise unfulfillable demands and turn the peace process against the moderates.

In all this, the United States cannot indefinitely bear alone the burden for both the military outcome and the political structure. At some point, Iraq has to be restored to the international community, and other countries must be prepared to share responsibilities for regional peace. Some of America's allies and other countries seek to escape the upheavals around them by disassociating from the United States. But just as it is impossible for America to deal with these trends unilaterally, sooner or later a common effort to rebuild the international order will be imposed on all the potential targets. The time has come for an effort to define the shoals within which diplomacy is obliged to navigate and to anchor any outcome in some broader understanding that accommodates the interests of the affected parties.

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Deal With Tehran, Not Its Crusade

Henry A. Kissinger

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Iran's nuclear program and considerable resources enable it to strive for strategic dominance in its region. With the impetus of a radical Shiite ideology and the symbolism of defiance of the U.N. Security Council's resolution, Iran challenges the established order in the Middle East and perhaps wherever Islamic populations face dominant, non-Islamic majorities.

The appeal for diplomacy to overcome these dangers has so far proved futile. The negotiating forum the world has put in place for the nuclear issue is heading for a deadlock. Divisions among the negotiating partners inhibit a clear sense of direction.

The five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany -- known as the "Six" -- have submitted a package of incentives to get Tehran to end enrichment of

uranium as a key step toward putting an end to the weapons program. They have threatened sanctions if their proposal is rejected. Iran has insisted on its "right" to proceed with enrichment, triggering an allied debate about the nature of the sanctions to which the Six have committed themselves. Even the minimal sanctions proposed by Europe's "E-3" (Britain, France and Germany) have been rejected by Russia.

Reluctant to negotiate directly with a member of the "axis of evil," the United States has not participated in the negotiations. But recently Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has announced a reversal of policy. The United States -- and she herself -- will participate in the nuclear talks, provided Iran suspends its enrichment program while discussions take place.

Tehran, however, has so far shown no interest in negotiating with the United States, either in the multilateral forum or separately. This is because Iran sees no compelling national interest in giving up its claim to nuclear power status, and strong domestic political reasons to persist. Pursuing the nuclear weapons program is a way of appealing to national pride, and it shores up otherwise shaky domestic support. The proposed incentives, even if they were believed, would increase Iran's dependence on the international system that Iran's current leaders reject.

The European negotiators accept the importance of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. But they govern societies increasingly loath to make immediate sacrifices for the sake of the future -- witness the difficulty of passing legislation on domestic reform. Europe's leaders know that their publics wouldn't support military action against Iran and would probably prove very shaky in a prolonged political crisis over sanctions.

America's European allies have decided to opt for minimum sanctions because they hope that the mere fact of united action by the Six will give Iran's leaders pause. The conviction expressed by some European diplomats that Iran will not wish to be a pariah nation indefinitely, and will therefore come to an agreement, is probably wishful thinking. As this becomes apparent, the European allies will probably move reluctantly toward escalation of sanctions, up to a point where Iran undertakes a confrontational response. Then they will have to choose between the immediate crisis and the permanent crisis of letting the Iranian nuclear program run free.

The dilemma is inherent in any gradual escalation. If initial steps are minimal, they are presumably endurable (and are indeed chosen for that reason). The adversary may be tempted to wait for the next increment. Thus gradualism may, in the end, promote escalation and make inevitable the very decision being evaded.

Russia's position is more complex. Probably no country -- not even the United States -- fears an Iranian nuclear capability more than Russia, whose large Islamic population lies just north of the Iranian border. No country is more exposed to the seepage of Iranian nuclear capabilities into terrorist hands or to the jihadist ideological wave that the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, encourages. For that reason,

Russia does not want to unleash Iranian hostility on itself without a prospect of probable success.

In addition, Russian attitudes toward the United States have undergone a significant change. There is a lessened commitment to strategic partnership. Suspicion has grown on both sides. The United States fears that Russia is striving to rebuild its imperial influence in what Russia calls the "near-abroad"; Russia believes that America is seeking to pressure the Kremlin to change its domestic policies and to reduce Russia's international influence.

Because of its conviction that Iran will be a formidable adversary and its low assessment of the American effort in Iraq, the Kremlin doubts that the United States has the staying power for a prolonged confrontation with Iran and chooses to avoid manning barricades on which it might be left alone. In consequence, Moscow has shifted its emphasis toward Europe and, on Iran, shares Europe's hesitation. The difference is that if matters reach a final crunch, Russia is more likely to take a stand, especially when an Iranian nuclear capability begins to look inevitable and even more so when it emerges as imminent.

The nuclear negotiations with Iran are moving toward an inconclusive outcome. The Six eventually will have to choose either effective sanctions or the consequences of an Iranian military nuclear capability and the world of proliferation that implies. Military action by the United States is extremely improbable in the final two years of a presidency facing a hostile Congress -- though it may be taken more seriously in Tehran. Tehran surely cannot ignore the possibility of a unilateral Israeli strike if all negotiation options close.

More likely, the nuclear issue will be absorbed into a more comprehensive negotiation based on geopolitical factors. It is important, however, to be clear as to what this increasingly fashionable term implies. The argument has become widespread that Iran (and Syria) should be drawn into a negotiating process in the hope of bringing about a change of their attitudes, as happened, for example, in the opening to China a generation ago. This, it is said, would facilitate a retreat by the United States to more strategically sustainable positions.

A diplomacy that excludes adversaries is a contradiction in terms. But the argument on behalf of negotiating focuses too often on the opening of talks rather than on their substance. The fact of talks is assumed to represent a psychological breakthrough. However, the relief supplied by a change of atmosphere is bound to be temporary. Diplomacy -- especially with an adversary -- can succeed only if it brings about a balance of interests. Failing that, it runs the risk of turning into an alibi for procrastination or a palliative to ease the process of defeat without, however, eliminating the consequences of defeat.

The opening to China was facilitated by Soviet military pressures on China's northern borders; rapprochement between the United States and China implemented an

existing common interest in preventing Soviet hegemony. Similarly, the shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East made progress because it was built on a preexisting equilibrium that neither side was able to alter unilaterally.

To the extent that talk becomes its own objective, there will emerge forums without progress and incentives for stonewalling. If, at the end of such a diplomacy, stands an Iranian nuclear capability and a political vacuum being filled by Iran, the impact on order in the Middle East will be catastrophic.

Understanding the way Tehran views the world is crucial in assessing the prospects of a dialogue. The school of thought represented by President Ahmadinejad may well perceive Iranian prospects as more promising than they have been in centuries. Iraq has collapsed as a counterweight; within Iraq, Shiite forces are led by men who were trained in Tehran and spent decades there. Democratic institutions in Iraq favor dominance by the majority Shiite groups. In Lebanon, Hezbollah, trained and guided by Iran, is the strongest military force.

In the face of this looming Shiite belt and its appeal to the Shiite population in northeast Saudi Arabia and along the Persian Gulf, attitudes in the Sunni states -- Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia -- and the Gulf states range from unease to incipient panic. This may explain Ahmadinejad's insolent behavior during his visit to New York. His theme seemed to be: "Don't talk to me about your world order, whose rules we did not participate in making and which we disdain. From now on, jihad will define the rules or at least participate in shaping them."

These attitudes will not be changed simply for the opportunity of talking to the United States. The self-confident Iranian leaders may facilitate a local American retreat but, in their present mood, only for the purpose of turning it into a long-term rout. The argument that Iran has an interest in negotiating over Iraq to avoid chaos along its borders is valid only as long as the United States retains a capacity to help control the chaos. There are only two incentives for Iran to negotiate: the emergence of a regional structure that makes imperialist policies unattractive and the concern that, if matters are pushed too far, America might yet strike out.

So long as Iran views itself as a crusade rather than a nation, a common interest will not emerge from negotiations. To evoke a more balanced view should be an important goal for U.S. diplomacy. Iran may come to understand sooner or later that, for the foreseeable future, it is a relatively poor developing country in no position to challenge all the industrialized nations. But such an evolution presupposes the development of a precise and concrete strategic and negotiating program by the United States and its associates.

With the Sunni states of the region terrified by the Shiite wave, negotiation between Iran and the United States could generate a stampede toward preemptive concessions, unless preceded, or at least accompanied, by a significant effort to rally those states to a policy of equilibrium. In such a policy, Iran must find a respected, but

not dominant, place. A restarted Palestinian peace process should play a significant role in that design, which presupposes close cooperation among the United States, Europe and the moderate Arab states. What must not happen is to trade relief from geopolitical pressures for acquiescence in an Iranian military nuclear program. That would mortgage the future, not only for the region but for the entire global order.

Iran needs to be encouraged to act as a nation, not a cause. It has no incentive to appear as a deus ex machina to enable America to escape its embarrassments, unless the United States retains an ability to fill the vacuum or at least be a factor in filling it. America will need to reposition its strategic deployments, but if such actions are viewed as the prelude to an exit from the region, a collapse of existing structures is probable.

A purposeful and creative diplomacy toward Iran is important for building a more promising region -- but only if Iran does not, in the process, come to believe that it is able to shape the future on its own or if the potential building blocks of a new order disintegrate while America sorts out its purposes.

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