

The Exit Lever

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Senator John McCain often attacks the two Democratic presidential front-runners for their soft stance on Iraq. "Senator Clinton and Senator Obama will withdraw our force from Iraq based on an arbitrary timetable designed for the sake of political expediency," he recently said, "which recklessly ignores the profound human calamity and dire threats to our security that would ensue.

His critiques are clearly overstated. While the Clinton and Obama positions at this point are tied to a timetable for withdrawal of combat forces, both senators have spelled out in some detail what they would do militarily and diplomatically in Iraq, for refugees, and in the region as they withdraw. Actually, they have done more to spell out their strategy than has Senator McCain, who has declared that we must win in Iraq, but at least at this point has yet to explain what victory would mean or would be required to achieve it other than staying our present course. Still, McCain has a point: The eventual Democratic nominee will have to do a better job laying out a strategy for Iraq in light of a surge that has achieved at least some results. Sticking to a rigid timeline -- no matter how popular a line that might be in the U.S. -- may deny us a crucial political tool for affecting the future of Iraq and the broader region.

There is no denying that the surge has had an effect. It has fostered at least relative stability and has created greater space for political reconciliation, with initial steps having now been taken on legislation both for easing de-Ba'athification laws and for holding provincial elections. Whether these will actually be implemented, and in what ways, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the surge has led to real improvements in local security. The Awakening Councils of more than 80,000 Sunni Iraqis, who are responsible for much of this new relative stability by teaming with U.S. forces to combat Al Qaeda, will only continue to play their role so long as they continue to be paid and feel empowered in their local areas -- which given the current circumstances is likely to be true only so long as U.S. forces remain on the ground. U.S. presence also has the benefit of keeping these armed Sunni forces separated from Shia militias or Iraqi security forces that are largely Shia dominated.

So with our current policy, the only possibility of achieving a relatively stable Iraq, roughly representative of its people and not a threat to its neighbors, is for us to stay in Iraq for at least the next decade with very sizable U.S. forces and a continuing massive investment. In such circumstances, all the groups in Iraq may become accustomed to co-existence and our physical separation of the groups might provide the basis for a transition.

But there is no guarantee that this will ever happen -- or even that our military chiefs will be prepared to sustain the kind of military presence that will be needed for the current policy, particularly given the strains on our armed forces. Even more importantly, the problem with the current course is that the U.S. is simply not doing enough politically to alter the underlying sources of conflict between Shia and Sunnis. The military surge has never been matched by a political surge. Political accommodation between the different ethnic-sectarian groups remains more an abstract goal than a reality at either the local, provincial or national levels. If General Petraeus were so confident about the lasting affect of the surge, he would not be calling for an operational pause in July when we return to the pre-surge level of forces.

The Democratic candidates can differentiate themselves from McCain by having a concrete political plan that will capitalize on the gains from the surge and provide the means that ultimately allow withdrawal to take place. Senator McCain may criticize Senators Clinton and Obama on their approach to withdrawal, but his focus seems now riveted only on a military course that may not be sustainable and ultimately cannot provide a solution. Unless there are political understandings that are forged between warring groups at all levels, the prospects for a resurgence of sectarian fighting will be quite high as soon as the U.S. withdraws much below the pre-surge numbers.

Both Senators Clinton and Obama appear to be arguing for a much more intensive effort to forge these political understandings that would make it possible to withdraw forces and not have everything collapse. But if withdrawal is truly to be used as a lever to help broker such understandings, the approach to withdrawal needs to be more flexible and not driven by a rigid timetable. In this way, withdrawal could be a mechanism to offer incentives and disincentives. With those groups who are prepared to cooperate with each other, the U.S. would make clear that it will withdraw when they want it to, where they want it to, and how they want it to -- and its withdrawal will involve providing them military and economic assistance in the process. For those not prepared to cooperate with each other, withdrawal will not take place according to their wants and they will be denied military and economic assistance. Withdrawal can thus be a vehicle for rewards and punishments and not treated as an end in and of itself.

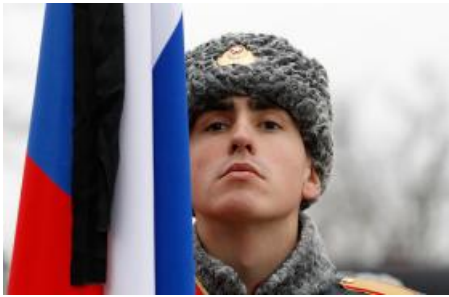
Even if the objective for Iraq were to be limited to containment -- where the focus is more on preventing conflict in Iraq from spilling over to the region -- withdrawal might still be used as a lever to help broker understandings between Iraq's neighbors. None of them, including the Iranians, really want to see a vacuum in Iraq become a source of endless and expensive conflict between themselves, the Saudis, Jordanians, and Turkey. Either way, withdrawal will need to be approached with some flexibility if it is to be used as a political lever.

Neither holding the line on withdrawal nor staying the present course are sustainable without much more explanation to the country about its implications for our presence and investment. Come the fall campaign, both Senator McCain and the eventual Democratic nominee will need to explain what the surge has and has not done, what is and is not possible in Iraq, and at what investment. But even with such explanation, the current posture cannot work unless we employ political means to match the military means we are now using.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World \(templateC04.php?CID=270\)](#). ❖

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