

Center for American Progress



Strategic Redeployment

*A Progressive Plan for Iraq and the
Struggle Against Violent Extremists*

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Strategic Redeployment:

A Progressive Plan for Iraq and the Struggle Against Violent Extremists

By Lawrence Korb and Brian Katulis*

Americans have lost confidence in President George W. Bush's ability to keep our country safe and are looking for an alternative. Reality has exposed the emptiness of President Bush's rhetoric on Iraq and what his administration alternately calls the "global war on terror" and the "global struggle against violent extremists."

Consider the facts: global terrorist attacks classified as "significant" by the State Department have tripled under President Bush's watch. Despite losing more than 2,000 American lives, spending more than \$200 billion, and stretching our ground forces to the breaking point, Iraq has become a new haven for global terrorists and moved closer to the brink of all-out sectarian civil war. Meanwhile, radical extremist groups have adapted their strategies, conducting devastating attacks against our major allies while continuing to plot against the United States.

The world has changed and become more dangerous, but the Bush policy remains the same. Crouched in the trenches in Iraq, the Bush administration has lost sight of the broader battlefield in a global war against multiple networks of violent extremists. At the core of Bush's failed strategy is Iraq, which has become a drain on our resources and an obstacle to addressing the most dangerous threat to the security of the United States: Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks.

As a result of the Bush administration's multiple failures, the American people are looking for and deserve a new course in Iraq. A growing share of the American public – two-thirds as of early October 2005 – disapprove of President Bush's handling of Iraq. A clear majority of Americans – nearly six in ten in October – support reducing the number of troops in Iraq. Opposition to the current course cuts across party lines – four in ten Republicans support decreasing the number of troops or withdrawing completely from Iraq, according to a poll by CBS News.

Despite the growing opposition to President Bush's "stay the course" strategy, few concrete alternatives have emerged in government or among the foreign policy elites. The Bush administration's numerous mistakes – sending in too few troops and not providing proper guidance or equipment as well as its frequent changes in the strategy for Iraq's political transition and reconstruction – have left us with no good options. The status quo is untenable, eroding American power and weakening our ability to keep America secure. But simply shifting gears into reverse and implementing a hasty withdrawal from Iraq is not the answer.

In the absence of fresh ideas, the American public has had to settle for a simplistic debate centered on a false choice – should US forces "stay the course" in Iraq or "cut and run"? These extreme positions avoid the fundamental question the country should debate: Is our government using all of its powers effectively to defeat our country's enemies? The answer to that question is a resounding no. The key is focusing on Iraq in the broader context of the global security threats the United States faces.

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The United States needs to pursue a plan of Strategic Redeployment. Strategic Redeployment is a threat-based strategy to target our efforts against global terrorist networks and bring greater stability to Iraq and its neighborhood. This approach will minimize the damage to the United States in the short term, mitigate the drawbacks of our eventual withdrawal from Iraq, and secure our interests in the long term. Strategic Redeployment differs from other plans for what to do in Iraq by recognizing that Iraq is now connected to a broader battle against global terrorist networks – even though it was not before the Bush administration’s invasion. Strategic Redeployment also means re-engaging our allies and building a platform for multilateral cooperation that counters the terrorist threats we face, rather than relying on ad-hoc “coalitions of the willing.”

Strategic Redeployment has four main components: military realignment that restores a realistic deployment policy for our active and reserve forces and moves troops to other hot spots in the struggle against global terrorist networks or brings them home; a global communications campaign to counter misinformation and hateful ideologies; new regional diplomatic initiatives; and smarter support for Iraq’s renewal and reconstruction.

America’s Narrow Iraq Debate: *Arguing Over a False Choice*

To change course we need to change the debate. Our country’s debate on Iraq has been woefully inadequate – ill-informed, driven by President Bush’s empty rhetoric, disconnected from an increasingly complex reality in Iraq and beyond, and out-of-touch with an American public that is looking for a new way. There are three reasons the debate is deficient: a lack of information on Iraq; a lack of presidential leadership; and a lack of a strong opposition.

Lack of information. The main reason for the narrow debate is the vacuum of accurate information on Iraq. Much of this is related to the nature of the battle that the United States is fighting – rather than combating organized divisions of uniformed soldiers, the United States has entered a murkier kind of battle. No one has sufficiently answered the question posed nearly three years ago by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld: “Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?”

The information that the American public receives from military commanders in the field is inadequate, too often focused on shoring up public support by presenting the most optimistic news. The military has even begun using Vietnam-era enemy body counts as a benchmark to demonstrate progress. Without verifiable and independent sources of information, our country’s debate on Iraq and the struggle against terrorists has atrophied.

Lack of leadership by President Bush. As the war has grown worse, the Bush administration has been increasingly disconnected from reality. With the security situation deteriorating, the president has continued to peddle the same poll-tested slogans like “freedom is on the march” and we are “fighting the terrorists over there so we do not have to fight them here.” Most glaring of all, the administration has rewarded failure by giving medals, accolades, and promotions to the architects of its Iraq disaster.

By refusing to increase the size of the Army, stretching out deployments, and not putting a sufficient number of troops in Iraq in the first place, it has overextended our ground forces and made it impossible to invoke an option that many have advanced – adding significant numbers of military troops to stabilize the situation before we pull out. It has also framed the Iraq debate in grand terms with emotional resonance like “freedom” and “terrorism,” effectively painting opponents of the course of the war as weak and unpatriotic. If President Bush is fighting terrorism and advancing freedom, who can be against that?

But the problem is that the Bush administration has not taken appropriate action to defeat threats presented by multiple global terrorist networks nor properly protected troops in the field. The president has abrogated his most fundamental duties to protect the American people.

Lack of a strong opposition. Opponents of President Bush's policies in Iraq and beyond have allowed themselves to be boxed into a corner. Some who initially supported the war in Iraq do not want to admit that they were wrong. Others fear being branded as weak. In instances when alternatives to the Bush administration's policy on Iraq have emerged, the recommendations have usually amounted to little more than slight modifications to the current course – speed up the training of Iraqi troops, obtain more international partners, or get more oil and reconstruction money flowing in Iraq.

Questioning the Assumptions

The Bush administration rests its strategy on a series of assumptions, which have generally been unchallenged by opponents and the media. We have learned during the course of the past year that these assumptions are not just slightly off; they are 180 degrees incorrect and have produced policies that have pushed our country in the wrong direction. Each day, new events undermine President Bush's core assumptions:

Assumption 1: *America must fight our enemies abroad so we do not have to face them here at home.* There is no doubt that the United States and its allies must identify, attack, and contain the terrorist networks that pose the greatest threats (i.e., fight the enemy abroad). But it is the second part of the assumption that is wrong. The terrorist attacks in London and Madrid demonstrated that attacking the enemy abroad is insufficient. We are not forced to take an either/or approach.

Assumption 2: *The United States must focus on Iraq because it is the central front in the war on terror.* Half true. A large number of foreign terrorists – with estimates ranging from several hundred to 3,000 – are currently in Iraq. But the facts are clear: the Bush administration created a new terrorist haven where none existed before.

In reality, the odds are every bit as good that keeping our troops in Iraq is actually attracting and motivating America's terrorist enemies around the globe. The extended US presence in Iraq has fostered new alliances between secular nationalists and Islamist extremists who are traditionally opposed to each other but who have found common cause in their opposition to the American occupation of a Muslim-majority country. It has also served as a propaganda tool to recruit more extremists to attack the United States and its allies.

Assumption 3: *The U.S. military presence is making Iraq safer.* The way the Bush administration has prosecuted the war in Iraq has done little to make Iraq more secure or weaken the insurgency there. Our present troop configuration has not stopped the steady increase of attacks by violent extremists in Iraq. Making our troops serve as traffic police – and this from a president who said he would not do nation building – does little more than put our soldiers in the line of fire.

In addition, as top US commanders in Iraq have acknowledged, military action alone will not defeat the insurgency. Speaking earlier this year, General George Casey concluded the insurgency is “not something we're going to defeat militarily.”

Furthermore, most Iraqis do not want us there and they do not feel our presence makes them safer. One half says they support insurgent attacks on coalition forces and a majority says they feel less safe when foreign troops patrol their neighborhoods, according to polling of Iraqi citizens sponsored by the US government earlier this year.

Assumption 4: *The U.S. troop presence is helping Iraq's political transition.* Our open-ended commitment of a large number of troops has created a dysfunctional political transition and may be preventing Iraqi political leaders from making the difficult compromises necessary to complete the transition.

Not setting a timetable for redeployment of US troops is a recipe for failure and sends the wrong message to the leadership in the Iraqi Government – that they can use the United States as a crutch. As long as the Iraqi leaders feel that we will remain in large numbers, they will have no incentives to make the compromises in the political transition process necessary to create a stable society. Our troops are increasingly becoming involved in protecting Shiites from other Shiites and Shiites from Sunnis. The United States may be supporting two sides – Kurds and Shiites – in what may be an emerging full-blown three-sided sectarian civil war.

Finally, to date, the only time Iraq has achieved progress on the political transition was when a timetable with deadlines was set. Setting limits to our involvement there will send an important message: take charge or lose power.

Assumption 5: *The current size of the U.S. troop presence in Iraq is necessary to complete the training of Iraqi forces.* Training can – and must – continue after the United States begins drawing down its forces. But there is a fundamental problem at the heart of President Bush's vision of our eventual withdrawal of troops – “As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.” Iraqi forces will never truly stand up on their own as long as we are there in such great numbers. The current debate on Iraqi troop training focuses on building combat skills but ignores an equally important factor – motivation. Our large military presence creates a disincentive for the Iraqi military and police to step up and take ownership of their security.

Implementing Strategic Redeployment

The only measure of where and when to use our military forces is: does it make us safer? More than two and a half years into the continuous deployment of more than 130,000 troops to Iraq, the clear answer is that having such a large number of troops on the ground in Iraq is diminishing our security and that of the Iraqi people. For the last several months, the country has been debating the wrong issues, instead of looking to answer the real question before us: when and how do we begin redeploying our troops to make the American people safer?

The best answer among bad options is to begin redeployment in January 2006, right after Iraq's next national elections. The Bush administration has left us with no better choice.

It has become clear that if we still have 140,000 ground troops in Iraq a year from now, we will destroy the all-volunteer Army.¹ Keeping such a large contingent of troops there will require the Pentagon to send many units back to Iraq for a third time and to activate Reserve and Guard forces a second or third time. To paraphrase Vietnam-era Army General Maxwell Taylor, while we sent the Army to Iraq to save Iraq, we now have to redeploy the Army to save the Army.

As redeployments begin, the remaining forces in Iraq would focus on our core missions: completing the training of Iraqi forces; improving border security; providing logistical and air support to Iraqi security forces engaged in battles against terrorists and insurgents; serving as advisors to Iraqi units; and tracking down terrorists and insurgent leaders with smaller, more nimble Special Forces units operating jointly with Iraqi units. Strategic Redeployment will enable the United States to operate with a leaner force that is more effective in rooting out the insurgents and terrorist networks.

¹ For more information, see Lawrence Korb, *The Korb Report: A Realistic Defense for America*, Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities, September 2005, available at http://www.sensiblepriorities.org/pdf/korb_report_Finalb.pdf

Strategic Redeployment will also strengthen the Army and minimize the drawbacks of our eventual withdrawal from Iraq. It will also enable us to respond to other emerging threats in the broader battle against violent extremists. Redeployment from Iraq will enable us to prevent other countries from becoming terrorist havens and enable us to address other threats our country faces.

Military realignment. Approximately 140,000 US forces are operating in Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom – this overall figure increased slightly in the run-up to Iraq’s October constitutional referendum and will likely increase again as the December national elections approach. Of those troops, about 90,000 active duty forces, 33,000 National Guard, and another 13,000 Reserves forces are deployed in Iraq. In addition to the US troop presence, approximately 24,000 non-US forces from 26 countries support the ongoing operations in Iraq.

At the start of next year, the United States should begin a slow and irreversible drawdown of military forces to make us safer by preserving our all-volunteer Army and refocusing all elements of American power on the real threats our country faces.

The redeployment of US forces should take place in two phases. Phase one would take place in 2006, with the drawdown of 80,000 troops by the end of the year, leaving 60,000 US troops in Iraq by December 31, 2006. Phase two would take place in 2007, with most of the US forces departing by the end of 2007.

United States troops would immediately and completely redeploy from urban areas, with Iraqi police, troops, and militias, like the Kurdish pesh merga, taking responsibility for security in these areas. This redeployment from urban areas – which has already begun in places like Najaf and Tikrit – will decrease the number of insurgents motivated by the US occupation. It will also free up the remaining US forces in Iraq to dedicate their efforts in 2007 to high-priority tasks related to our core mission.

Phase two of the drawdown would begin in January 2007. By the end of 2007, the only US military forces in Iraq would be a small Marine contingent to protect the US embassy, a small group of military advisors to the Iraqi Government, and counterterrorist units that works closely with Iraqi security forces. This presence, along with the forces in Kuwait and at sea in the Persian Gulf area will be sufficient to conduct strikes coordinated with Iraqi forces against any terrorist camps and enclaves that may emerge and deal with any major external threats to Iraq.

The 80,000 troops coming out of Iraq in 2006 should be redistributed as follows:

- All Guard and Reserve troops would be demobilized and would immediately return to the United States. This would allow the Guard and Reserve to return to their policies of troops not spending more than one year out of five on active duty and let the Guard focus on shoring up gaps in homeland security.
- Up to two active brigades – approximately 20,000 troops – would be sent to bolster US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan and support counterterrorist operations in Africa and Asia. In Afghanistan, more troops are urgently needed to beat back the resurging Taliban forces and to maintain security throughout the country. If NATO is unwilling to send more troops, the United States must pick up the load. In the Horn of Africa, countries like Somalia and Sudan remain a breeding ground for terrorists.
- The remaining 14,000 troops would be positioned nearby in Kuwait and as part of a Marine expeditionary force located offshore in the Persian Gulf to strike at any terrorist camps and enclaves and guard against any major acts that risk further destabilizing the region.

- This would also enable the Army and Marines to return to the time-tested policy of allowing a soldier or Marine to spend at least two months at home for every month deployed abroad.



A global communications campaign to counter misinformation and hateful ideology. The second pillar of Strategic Redeployment is a more concerted global communications effort to counter the misinformation, conspiracy theories, and hateful ideology of our terrorist enemies. Without a communications campaign that speaks more clearly about our actions and intentions, our enemies will be in a strong position to present our eventual military drawdown from Iraq as a defeat.

The United States has fallen behind in the battle of perceptions in Iraq and beyond, relying on Cold War methods of trying to communicate to broader publics in a global media landscape that has become much more complex and varied. The United States should expose the emptiness of our extremist opponents' vision and more clearly communicate our country's intentions. Short-lived listening tours of the Middle East like the one conducted by Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes earlier this fall do nothing to help the United States in this important battle of perceptions.

Today, decentralized transnational terrorist networks have demonstrated advanced capacities to use the Internet and other new media to disseminate targeted messages and plan attacks. For example, terrorists in Iraq used the media to allege that US forces used poison gas in their assault on insurgents in Tal Afar. Earlier this year, Sheikh Jawad al-Kalesi, a leading Shiite cleric in Baghdad, asserted that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed long ago, but that the United States was continuing the "ploy" of using al-Zarqawi as an excuse to continue the occupation and a pretext to stay in Iraq. The United States does not do enough to counter these distortions of the facts.

The United States should work to actively counter the myths and conspiracy theories promoted by insurgents and extremists in Iraq and the broader Middle East. The United States should consistently and forcefully promote the message that it supports and respects Iraq's unity and independence and that it will withdraw its troops within a short period of time. The core message should be that the United States seeks stability and prosperity for all Iraqis, but that Iraqis must take ultimate responsibility for their political transition.

An absolutely essential component of clarifying US intentions to enhance our security is an unambiguous announcement by President Bush that the United States will not build permanent military bases in Iraq, counteracting arguments made in recruitment pitches by militants and Iraqi insurgents. Telling the Iraqi public and the world that we do not intend to remain in Iraq forever will also reaffirm our commitment to supporting a truly democratic Iraq that is sovereign, independent, and unified.

New regional diplomatic initiatives. Strategic Redeployment means placing more focus on other elements of American power – including its diplomatic power. President Bush must personally lead a diplomatic initiative in the region to create a cooperative security and intelligence network aimed at securing Iraq's borders and eradicating terrorist networks.

The redeployment of US forces from Iraq requires that Iraq's neighbors play a more active role in supporting stability and efforts to fight terrorist extremists. Therefore, President Bush should convene a meeting of the heads of states in the region to discuss measures aimed at securing borders, taking down terrorist networks, and enhancing cooperation between military and intelligence services in the region. Working with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and other countries in the Gulf, the United States should use its diplomacy to bring together the countries that share a common interest in a stable Iraq. As experience in Iraq has demonstrated, democracy without stability, law and order, and functioning institutions is impossible.

If a grand multilateral effort proves to be impossible given the complicated politics in the region, the Bush administration should work more closely at a bilateral level with all of Iraq's neighbors to support efforts to bring greater stability to Iraq. In many cases, the United States has unilaterally taken itself out of the diplomatic game, particularly with Iran, which must be a part of the equation.

Just as it engages North Korea in the context of regional six-party talks, the United States must engage Iran on a regional diplomatic initiative aimed at bringing greater stability to this oil-rich region of the world. In engaging the Iranian Government directly, the United States could also directly address the many issues that divide the two countries – Iran's nuclear ambitions, its support for terrorism, its poor human rights record, and its rejection of Israel's right to exist, among other issues.

Smarter support for Iraq's renewal and reconstruction. The United States should continue supporting Iraq's reconstruction and transition to democratic governance, but adopt a different approach. The United States should not try to impose its own vision of democracy on Iraq – on this important policy question, our tactics have become our strategy. The United States must commit to promote democracy in a way that does not leave the next Iraqi regime illegitimate in its people's eyes; this requires less meddling in Iraqi elections and the constitutional process. The United States should stop funding hand-picked Iraqi political parties.

The January 2005 elections in Iraq showed the value of the United Nations in providing technical assistance and support to Iraq's election commission. The United States should support continued United Nations engagement in Iraq's democratic political transition.

Another key component of supporting the transition is making sure our money matches our rhetorical commitment to democracy. Smarter support for Iraq's democratic transition also requires more funding for non-governmental and international organizations working to develop Iraq's governance and democracy. Out of the more than \$200 billion that the United States has spent in Iraq, the Bush administration dedicated only \$1 billion for democracy assistance.

Many of the non-governmental organizations that provide much-needed training and assistance to Iraqi political leaders and civil society organizations are not certain if they will be in a position to continue their important support for Iraqis through next year. Iraqi women's groups in particular require continued and sustained support as they work to make their voice heard in Iraq's emerging political system.

This continued support for Iraqi non-governmental organizations, including human rights organizations and civil liberties groups, is particularly vital as discussions on Iraq's national constitution will continue, according to a deal brokered on the eve of the October 2005 constitutional elections. As Iraqis continue to work on revising the draft constitution and begin considering implementing legislation, the United States, in cooperation with American and international non-governmental organizations, should support an organized national dialogue on the constitution. One grave mistake made in the Iraqi transitional government's deliberations on the draft constitution in the summer of 2005 was setting artificial deadlines that did not allow the broader Iraqi society to have a meaningful voice in the process.

As Iraqis continue to discuss the national constitution, important work remains at the regional and local levels of government. The United States should continue projects to develop and strengthen local government in Iraq. It should work through the United Nations in efforts to provide training and assistance to provincial, municipal, and district councils. Though local government is not a substitute for central government, local government institutions, properly equipped, can more expeditiously respond to the basic needs and deliver basic services needed to improve the lives of Iraqis.

The United States should also support a new approach to reconstruction assistance. Corruption and the lack of security have hobbled reconstruction. Electricity production was lower in May 2005 than before the March 2003 invasion, and nearly one half of all Iraqis do not have regular access to clean water. More than 90 percent of US funding for Iraqi reconstruction has been committed to specific projects, but the rising security costs and corruption in reconstruction have drained resources and left much of the work in these reconstruction projects unfinished.

The United States needs to target reconstruction efforts at local communities through projects that create a peace dividend for the Iraqi people. A greater priority should be given to including Iraqis in the design and implementation of US-funded reconstruction projects. To the extent possible, projects should be contracted out to Iraqis instead of US firms or international organizations. When they are contracted out to international organizations, they should be required to employ Iraqis as much as possible. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on small scale grants. Finally, there needs to be much greater oversight of and transparency surrounding the reconstruction projects

The United States should organize another conference of donors to follow up on the pledges made by other countries in the international conference on Iraq held in Brussels in June 2005, since most of the money pledged has not been sent.

Conclusion

The dangers of staying the course in Iraq require a new approach. Strategic Redeployment represents a threat-based approach that integrates our country's military, economic, and diplomatic powers to make the American people safer.

Strategic Redeployment rejects calls for an immediate and complete withdrawal, which we conclude would only serve to further destabilize the region and embolden our terrorist enemies. But Strategic Redeployment also rejects the current approach—right out of Bin Laden's playbook for us—a vague, open-ended commitment that focuses our military power in a battle that cannot be won militarily.

Strategic Redeployment of our military forces in Iraq does not mean cut and run – it means focusing all elements of our power on the real priorities in the fight against terrorists and increasing the chances for global stability once we begin our near-term troop withdrawal from Iraq.

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