

The Case for Conditional Engagement in Iraq

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Five years into the war in Iraq with no end in sight, a new strategy is needed. The current strategy of unconditional support to Iraq’s central government has not produced nearly enough political progress. President Bush and those wishing to succeed him should embrace a new political strategy in Iraq that makes our military presence conditional on political accommodation.

Under the leadership of General David Petraeus, U.S. forces in Iraq have designed and implemented the best military strategy possible under the circumstances. But security progress appears to have leveled off, and violence has started to tick back up. Further gains can only come through the political process. General Petraeus recently told reporters that “no one feels that there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation.” Similar candor will likely be on display when Petraeus testifies before Congress in the coming days. Rather than re-litigate the debate over how we got here, Congress must look forward and help shape the public debate over the basic strategic choices from which this and the next President must choose.

President Bush and his successor have only three basic choices on strategy for Iraq: unconditional engagement, conditional engagement, or unconditional disengagement. Only a policy of conditional engagement can help translate recent security gains into something more sustainable.

The Bush administration and its supporters continue to call for a strategy

of unconditional engagement in Iraq. In Baghdad last month, Vice-President Cheney stated: “The Iraqi people should know that they will have the unwavering support of President Bush and the United States in consolidating their democracy.” This unconditional embrace is predicated on the questionable assumption that Iraq’s leaders want to accommodate—they just need time and a semblance of security in order to do so. This strategy will continue to be ineffective because it does not pressure Iraqi leaders to take the political risks needed for real reconciliation. A policy of unconditional engagement in Iraq is all carrots, and no sticks.

Too many critics of the war favor a policy of unconditional disengagement from Iraq. Some who take this position believe that nothing America does in Iraq can be of positive and lasting consequence. Others believe political reconciliation is possible—but only if we leave and thereby force the Iraqis to resolve their own differences. This strategy ignores the very real contribution American forces are making to preventing a resurgence of civil war in Iraq. It also shares the flaw of the administration’s approach in offering few incentives for Iraq’s leaders to accommodate. If nothing Iraqi leaders do will affect the pace of an American withdrawal or alter the degree of support for the government, why would they take the risks needed to accommodate? In short, a policy of unconditional disengagement is all sticks, and no carrots.

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producing lasting progress in Iraq. Under this strategy, U.S. negotiators would make clear that Iraq and America share a common interest in achieving sustainable stability in Iraq, and that the United States is willing to help support the Iraqi government over the long-term, but only so long as Iraqis move toward political accommodation.

Most of Iraq’s key players—including the Maliki government, the largest Shiite party SIIC, and many Sunni sheiks—desire continued American support. Others, namely Sadrists and some nationalist Sunni insurgents, resent the presence of the U.S. military and want a time horizon for departure, but do not necessarily want us to leave right away.

In such a context, the best way to push groups toward compromises on the critical issues of oil, federalism, provincial elections, and the integration of Sunni security volunteers into the Iraqi army and police is to establish a broad framework for withdrawal—but also demonstrate a willingness to leave residual forces in the country to support the Iraqi government if accommodation is reached. Implementing this approach requires a credible threat to abandon allies if they don’t move toward accommodation, while providing a credible promise to continue supporting them if they do move in this direction. Such support would include supporting Iraqi security forces as well as helping to pursue remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Military commitments to Iraq must be considered in the context of other pressing needs, including operations in

Afghanistan, reconstituting a strategic reserve, and reducing the overall strain on the force. America would also pursue robust economic and diplomatic initiatives designed to help Iraq rebuild and restore its infrastructure and connect to the global economy. But this support would not come for free—it would require Iraqi politicians to take steps that prove they deserve it.

Conditional engagement offers a means to encourage accommodation under the assumption that the Iraqi government actually wants to accommodate, and a means to pressure them if this assumption is false. If Iraqi leaders make good use of the opportunity the reduction in violence has helped provide, America will continue to support them. In order for this strategy to stand a chance of success, however, President Bush or his successor must be willing to withdraw some or all of America’s troops, diplomats, and economic support if faced with continued Iraqi intransigence.

It is time for the United States to pursue a political strategy that does not squander the opportunity our troops have helped provide. Because it is the only strategy that employs both carrots and sticks, conditional engagement offers the best means of fostering political compromise and achieving some semblance of lasting stability in Iraq.

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