

Policy Watch: Impact of Britain's drawdown

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MARK N. KATZ

Tony Blair's announcement that Britain will reduce its troop presence in Iraq from 7,100 to 5,500 by the end of summer, and possibly to 5,000 by the end of 2007 has come as a shock to the Bush administration. After all, until now, Blair has been President George W. Bush's supporter amongst foreign leaders in the Iraq war effort.

The fact that Blair will decrease British presence in Iraq right when Bush is seeking to increase the American one by 21,500 troops has major implications.

Both the White House and Downing Street claim that the British drawdown is being undertaken because the security situation in Basra -- where the British are primarily deployed -- has improved. This, however, appears to be little more than an attempt to put a positive spin on an unpleasant political reality.

If the British government continued to support the war effort as strongly as before, it would redeploy British troops to elsewhere in Iraq where the security situation is worse. It is well known, though, that British public opinion now strongly opposes the war effort, and that the Labor Party is forcing Blair to step down this year for fear that his continuing in office would negatively affect its prospects in the next parliamentary elections.

The drawdown of British troops in Iraq announced by Blair is likely to lead to the following consequences:

First, Blair's initial replacement as prime minister from within the Labor Party -- whether it is Gordon Brown or one of his more leftist challengers -- is going to be less supportive of the Iraq war effort than Blair, and will probably work for the complete withdrawal of British forces from Iraq.

Second, the drawdown of British troops is likely to lead to the drawdown, or outright withdrawal, of troops from most of the remaining coalition partners. Denmark has already announced it will withdraw all of its troops and Lithuania has declared it is seriously considering doing so. If the British are on their way out, governments and publics elsewhere will ask, what will their countries gain by remaining in the coalition?

Third, the departure of more countries from the coalition in Iraq will serve to further undermine the already declining level of American public support for the Iraq war effort.

Fourth, the reduction in America's coalition partners in Iraq bodes ill for any U.S. effort to build a coalition willing to undertake military action against Iran over the nuclear issue. Despite repeated denials by top level American policymakers, many believe the Bush Administration is preparing to undertake military action against Iran.

Whether the U.S. will or will not undertake such a step is unclear. What is clear, though, is that neither Britain nor almost any other country -- except, possibly Israel -- will join with the U.S. in this. Indeed, the likely worldwide disapproval for U.S. military action against Iran will only accelerate the disintegration of the American-led coalition in Iraq.

For Americans who want U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraq, Blair's announcement will only serve to confirm their viewpoint. As has been seen, however, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have brushed off the significance of the British drawdown and claimed, at least in public, that it will not have any serious consequences.

But as outlined here, the consequences of the British drawdown are likely to be quite serious indeed.

Those who continue to support President Bush's policies in Iraq are very much alive to the negative consequences that could result if the U.S. withdraws. They need to be aware, though, that there are also negative consequences for America and its position in the world if it remains in Iraq alone and unsupported by other countries.

Dismissing this problem as unimportant will not solve it.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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