

The Iraqi Insurgency's Impact on Korea

By

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

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The impact of the Iraqi insurgency is being felt around the world. A relatively few Iraqis armed with rifles and rocket propelled grenades are challenging the awesome military might of the United States. This has excited doubts about the potency of US military power. It is also hampering the Bush Administration's ability to assert its influence elsewhere in the world, including Northeast Asia. Eventually, the Iraqi insurgency could adversely affect relations between the United States and South Korea. It could also slow progress toward resolution of the North Korea nuclear crisis. Pyongyang surely is calculating how it can benefit from the situation in Iraq.

The upsurge of Iraqi resistance has exposed several US weaknesses. The insurgency's scope and magnitude surprised the Bush Administration. One year ago, US intelligence failed to determine whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Now, US intelligence has failed to assess the strength of the Iraqi opposition. These failures will erode US allies' confidence in Washington's capabilities. For Pyongyang, this could suggest that the United States knows far less about North Korea's nuclear capability than the Bush Administration has claimed, particularly regarding the highly enriched uranium program (HEU).

The insurgency is not likely to subside soon. Its potency and durability indicate that the anti-American Arab coalition is winning the battle for the Iraqi people's support. The arming of thousands of men and gathering of large stocks of munitions could not have been done without the assistance of many Iraqis. Nor could this have been hidden from the US-led coalition without Iraqis' reluctance to inform the Iraqi police and their foreign supervisors.

US military power most likely will subdue the Iraqi insurgency, but for a much higher price than the Bush Administration first claimed. The human cost already exceeds original expectations. The Iraqi and American people have paid the highest price. But soldiers and civilians from Great Britain, Italy, Spain, South Korea, Japan and several other countries have also died and been kidnapped. To this toll we must add the two hundred plus Spaniards who died in the Madrid terrorist bombings. As the human cost climbs, so too will public criticism of governments belonging to the US-led coalition. This will weaken the US-led coalition's cohesiveness. Spain has already announced that it will withdraw from Iraq and other nations are thinking about pulling out.

The Iraqi insurgency is affecting politics in many democracies. Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has faced sustained criticism since he teamed up with Bush on Iraq. South Korea's beleaguered President Roh Moo-hyun, concerned about the outcome of the April National Assembly election, has asked the United States to post South Korea's 3,000

troops to a “safe area” in Iraq. The Iraqi insurgency has increased the danger to all South Koreans in Iraq. Concern about their safety is certain to affect the outcome of South Korea’s forthcoming election. If Iraq’s insurgents target South Korea’s troops, Roh will face a difficult political dilemma. If the troops remain in Iraq, the already politically feeble Roh could face a public outcry to withdraw them. But if he does withdraw them, this will strain relations with Washington. Pyongyang is certain to exploit these intensified tensions.

President Bush is also caught in a political vice. Iraq seems destined to become the decisive issue in the US Presidential election this November. The longer Bush insists on “staying the course in Iraq,” the more his Democratic opponents will compare him to President Johnson and Iraq to Vietnam. The larger the number of US casualties in Iraq, the louder will be Americans’ criticism of the president. But if Bush were to reverse course, he would risk ridicule at home and abroad.

Bush appears to have no option but to intensify the US commitment in Iraq. He had hoped to avoid doing this by building an international coalition, but this proved only partially successful. Bush turned to the United Nations for help, but its leadership demurred, saying it would return to Iraq only after the United States had restored order. Obviously that has not happened. The larger and longer the US commitment in Iraq, the less will be the US ability to deal with situations elsewhere, particularly Korea.

None of this is difficult for Pyongyang’s leaders to figure out. They know that Bush has scattered US forces around the world in his “war on terrorism.” Also apparent is Bush’s inability to disengage from Iraq. In other words, Bush has undercut his “military option” for dealing with North Korea. For Pyongyang, this is better than receiving Bush’s security assurances not to attack North Korea. Pyongyang probably believes that the Bush Administration needs a foreign policy victory before the November election to deflect attention away from Iraq. These developments could embolden Pyongyang to be more assertive in the Six Party Talks process. In short, North Korea can be expected to demand more concessions from the United States and its allies while offering to give up less than it has previously offered.