

The Global Impact of the Iraqi Insurgency

By

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

Director, Korea Peninsula Program

International Action

Washington, D.C.

April 8, 2004

The insurgency in Iraq is having a global impact. A relatively small number of angry Iraqis armed with rifles and rocket propelled grenades are challenging the awesome military might of the United States. The US inability over the past year to restore law and order in Iraq is restricting the Bush Administration's ability to assert its influence around the world. The situation in Iraq could even adversely affect relations between the United States and its two major allies Japan and South Korea. North Korea surely is watching the situation closely and calculating how it might exploit this situation.

The recent upsurge in armed Iraqi resistance to the US led coalition makes it obvious that growing numbers of Iraqi people either openly support the insurgents or at least do not align themselves with the coalition. After President Bush one year ago declared an end to "major military operations" in Iraq, the US military shifted its effort to locating and arresting members of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the process, many innocent Iraqi's unwittingly experienced terror of having foreign troops invade their homes, suffered the humiliation of searches and interrogation, and, in too many cases, were even hurried off to prison without explanation. Simultaneously, anti-American Iraqis and radical Arab supporters turned to "terrorists" tactics to drive a wedge between the Iraqi people and the foreign coalition.

The anti-American Arab coalition clearly is winning out over the US-led coalition. The more that the US-led coalition claims it is making progress toward Iraq's democratization, the more the insurgents intensify their efforts to undermined and resist the coalition. The more the US coalition tries to suppress the insurgents, the greater the sense of insecurity among Iraqis and the disruption to their lives. The Iraqi people are being compelled to choose between the US coalition or the insurgents. The coalition increasingly is being viewed as unwanted foreign occupiers who cause more harm than good.

The scope and intensity of the challenge to the US-led coalition would not have been possible without widespread popular Iraqi support. The gathering of tons of munitions and arming of thousands of men appears to have gone on virtually unnoticed by the US coalition. Obviously, many Iraqis knew what was going on, but either aligned themselves with the insurgents or decided not to inform the Iraqi police or the US coalition. Ultimately, the military might of the United States may eventually subdue the Iraqi insurgency. But the price now is destined to be much higher than the Bush Administration's initial estimates.

The cost in human lives already exceeds original expectations. The Iraqi people have paid the greatest price followed by Americans. But soldiers and civilians from Great

Britain, Italy, Spain, and several other countries have died. So too have a small number of civilians from South Korea and Japan. To this we must add the more than two hundred Spaniards killed by the terrorist bombings in Madrid. As the human cost climbs, the governments of nations belonging to the US-led coalition are certain to face mounting public concern about the cost. Spain has already announced that it will withdraw its troops from Iraq.

The Iraqi insurgency is directly affecting politics in many democracies around the world. Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has faced sustained criticism since he teamed up with Bush on Iraq. Similarly, South Korea's beleaguered President Roh Moo-hyun, concerned about the outcome of his nation's April National Assembly election, has asked the United States to post South Korea's 3,000 coalition troops in a "safe area" in Iraq. Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi, also sensitive to public opinion and the forthcoming July Upper House election, sent only a token force to Iraq. If Iraq's insurgents target the South Korean and Japanese troops, President Roh and Prime Minister Koizumi will face a very difficult political dilemma. They could face a public outcry if they keep their troops in Iraq. But if they choose to withdraw them, relations with Washington are certain to become strained.

In the United States, public concern about Iraq now seems destined to become the decisive issue in the US Presidential election this November. President Bush is caught in a political vice. The longer Bush insists upon "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 greater will be the domestic US public criticism of the president. But if Bush were to reverse course, he would risk public ridicule at home and abroad. Bush appears to have no option other than to intensify the US commitment in Iraq.

The more military resources the United States commits to Iraq, the less capability it has to deal with situations elsewhere in the world. Bush's hope to avoid this situation by building an international coalition proved only partially successful. Now the Iraqi insurgency, backed by a relative handful of Arab terrorists, is challenging the coalition's cohesiveness. Bush turned to the United Nations, but its leadership wisely demurred, saying it would return to Iraq only after the United States had restored order. Obviously that has not happened. Bush's options have narrowed to one: reinforce US forces in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang ponders its options regarding how to deal with the United States. While Bush claims he has a military option for dealing with North Korea, in reality he has undermined it by scattering US forces around the world to fight his "war on terrorism." For Pyongyang, Bush's eroding military option is equivalent to receiving security assurances. This could embolden Pyongyang to be more assertive in the forthcoming Six Party Talks process. North Korea also can be expected to demand more concessions in exchange for giving up less.