

Future Iraq policy

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

President Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have quietly agreed to begin negotiating a framework for the two nations' long-term relationship. This agreement, according to Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, Bush's chief White House adviser on Iraq, will include a long-term U.S. troop presence, U.S. security guarantees and other economic and political support. Lute says the agreement should be worked out by July 2008, just months before the November presidential election and the inauguration of a new president.

Forgive us for thinking there are huge problems both with this agreement and with the timeline for its completion.

Clearly, the United States and Iraq will have a long-term relationship of some sort. And even with the American public expressing somewhat stronger approval for U.S. military actions there, Bush's handling of the war has not exactly earned the nation's confidence to set long-term Iraq policy. The 2006 election, in which Republicans lost control of both houses of Congress, was - as much as anything - a referendum on the president's Iraq policy. And with Gen. Lute making it clear that this long-term agreement will be negotiated exclusively between the Bush administration and the al-Maliki government, with perhaps the approval of the Iraqi parliament, Congress and the American people will have little say in what the relationship will be between Iraq and the United States long after Bush has left the White House. Since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, a United Nations mandate has governed the relationship between the U.S.-led multinational forces and Iraq. The mandate has been renewed each year since then. Other U.N.-ordered restrictions on Iraq have been in force since Saddam's armies invaded Kuwait in 1990.

To re-establish its sovereignty, Iraq understandably wants to end the 2003 mandate in the near future and abolish other restrictions. In their place would come the new agreement between Iraq and the United States.

Among other things, that agreement would establish the basis for U.S. force levels in Iraq (likely about 50,000 military personnel, down from the current 160,000), determine permanent U.S. bases there and grant American investors preferential treatment, particularly in Iraq's energy sector.

Ordinarily, agreements with other countries (or treaties as they frequently are called) require two-thirds Senate approval or approval of majorities in both the Senate and House. But Gen. Lute says this agreement will not be a treaty. It will be nonbinding. Then why bother? And why seek Iraq parliamentary approval? We have been critical of the Bush administration's exclusion of Congress - unfortunately many times with Congress' acquiescence - in decisions that morally, if not constitutionally, should be shared. Signing statements come to mind.

With a presidential election campaign in full gear, the president would do well to win Congress' support for any extended Iraq policy or, better yet, allow a new president - Republican or Democrat - to establish his or

her own Iraq policy dictated by the outcome of a national election.

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