

'Soft diplomacy' is the best plan

by Jack_Kemp

I have long proposed the idea of soft diplomacy, i.e., trade, aid, investment and empowerment strategies, as opposed to hard diplomacy, i.e., pre-emptive war, as a way of winning friends and allies in the Islamic and Arab world in search of a successful settlement of the Iraq war.

As a student and strong supporter of the Truman model for war-ravaged Western Europe and Japan, post World War II, as encompassed in the Marshall Plan, I believe it could be a powerful tool of soft diplomacy in this messy insurgency.

A bipartisan 21st century Marshall Plan, updated with an Arabic face and with Islamic input, might very well be the type of soft diplomacy that would allow Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to achieve a successful ministerial meeting next month in Istanbul, Turkey, with Iraq's regional neighbors in attendance.

At this critical moment in the history of the Middle East, with huge global ramifications, we need a surge of diplomacy and statecraft as opposed to just a surge of more troops.

I strongly support Gen. David Petraeus' strategy as the only practical way to buy time and help stabilize the situation on the ground that could lay down the predicate for a political solution to this mess that just about everyone from center left to center right says they want to achieve. This will never convince the leave-now left or the neo-con right to stop trying to micro-manage this incredibly complex strategy for a successful conclusion to the situation.

It's equally true the neo-cons will never agree to talk to Iran and Syria, as called for by the Iraq Study Group, for in the eyes of my neo-con friends talking to adversaries while there are outstanding and difficult differences of opinion is tantamount to surrender. Of course they totally ignore the lessons of history, particularly of President Reagan, who kept open the lines of communication with Moscow, even in the midst of some very troubling events during the Cold War.

It's true we should never negotiate out of weakness and fear, but it's equally true that we should never fear to negotiate from strength.

Right now we have more strength than is acknowledged by all too many. For instance, those two carrier task forces the Bush administration dispatched to the Persian-Arabian Gulf are not-so-subtle reminders of U.S. extended air power.

Further, signals out of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, earlier this month were positive reminders that Iran and Saudi Arabia have a big stake in limiting the centrifugal forces coming out of Iraq. Iran sent President Ahmadinejad to meet with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, giving some concrete evidence that Iran is prepared to do business.

Recently our ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, more than intimated that the Bush administration has changed course, not just in appointing Petraeus to make the surge of troops work, but in being willing to talk to the regional neighboring nations of Iraq in order to achieve a political settlement.

Meanwhile, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is in the difficult position of trying to appease the "cut and walk away" members of the Democratic caucus while preserving the loyalty of the 40 to 50 "blue-dog" Democrats who do not want to micro-manage the U.S. commanders in the field.

Pelosi's idea of adding agricultural subsidies to the \$100 billion defense appropriations ends up looking like a farm bill, as journalist George Will comically observed.

Another sign of hopefulness that could strengthen Rice's hand in future talks is the beginning of a split in the Shiite ranks that might allow moderate Shiites to help create a modus vivendi with the Kurds in the north and Sunnis in the Baghdad triangle.

If the United States, in collaboration with our friends and trading partners in the Middle East, were to propose, with Arabic and Islamic collaboration, a dramatic and far-reaching 21st century Marshall Plan with trade, aid and investment incentives, that would help strengthen the moderate Sunnis and Shiites working with us for a political settlement.

By the way, the Marshall Plan of 1948 was not dominated by foreign aid as some critics on the right contend. Indeed, foreign aid didn't work. It was tried from 1945 to 1948 as administered by the United Nations Relief and Recovery Administration.

It was not until 1948 that Secretary of State George Marshall and Gen. Lucius Clay, with policy advice and actions by Ludwig Earhardt, the brilliant future finance minister of West Germany, that the Marshall Plan began to dramatically restore a strong economic and political recovery.

We need a surge of diplomacy and discussion of empowerment strategies that will treat the Islamic and Arab world as partners in the war on terrorism as opposed to just surging troops, combat and air power.

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