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In Strategy Shift, Gates Envisions Iraq Troop Cuts

Pullback Is Deemed Key To Forging a Consensus On Long-Haul Plans

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WASHINGTON -- Defense Secretary Robert Gates and some allies in the Bush administration are seeking to build bipartisan political support for a long-term U.S. presence in Iraq by moving toward withdrawing significant numbers of troops from Iraq by the end of President Bush's term.

The complicating factor is how long the administration will stick with its "surge" strategy of keeping high levels of troops in Iraq to try to tamp down violence there. On this issue, the administration -- and even the military -- is deeply divided.



Robert Gates

The longer the surge lasts, the harder it will be to achieve the longed-for political consensus. Without such agreement, Bush administration officials fear, the U.S. could be forced into a hasty

withdrawal that could have dire consequences both for the region and for U.S. stature in the world.

What Mr. Gates and some other high-ranking administration officials have in mind is a modern-day version of President Harry Truman's "Cold War consensus," a bipartisan agreement on the need to contain the Soviet Union. They hope lawmakers from both parties will ultimately agree to make a scaled-back U.S. mission in Iraq a central component of U.S. foreign policy even after Mr. Bush leaves office.

The emerging plan would shift the U.S. mission in Iraq to a more-modest attempt to contain its civil war, rather than the current effort to end the conflict. A smaller force of American troops, operating out of large bases far from Iraq's major cities, would focus on battling al Qaeda, securing Iraq's borders and training the country's struggling security forces.

The approach represents a stark shift for many senior administration officials, who have gone from arguing to maintain existing troop levels in Iraq -- if not increasing them, as with the surge -- to embracing a large-scale withdrawal as part of a shrinking of the overall U.S. mission there.

The change in thinking underscores administration officials' increasing concern that rapidly diminishing support for the war among

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Americans and in Congress could spark a precipitous withdrawal. Administration officials fear such an outcome could endanger U.S. national security by leaving a failed state in the hands of Shiite and Sunni Islamic extremists.

"My formative experience in Washington was an unwritten bipartisan consensus through nine successive presidencies on how to deal with the Soviet Union through a policy of containment," Mr. Gates told reporters recently. "There were huge disagreements over tactics...[but] on that fundamental strategy there was broad bipartisan agreement."

While administration officials increasingly agree on the need to wind down the U.S. presence in Iraq by the end of Mr. Bush's term, they remain divided over how long the surge should last. As the current centerpiece of the administration's Iraq policy, the strategy has sent about 30,000 additional troops to Iraq to bring Baghdad and its environs under control. Some 125,000 other troops remain deployed in the country as well.

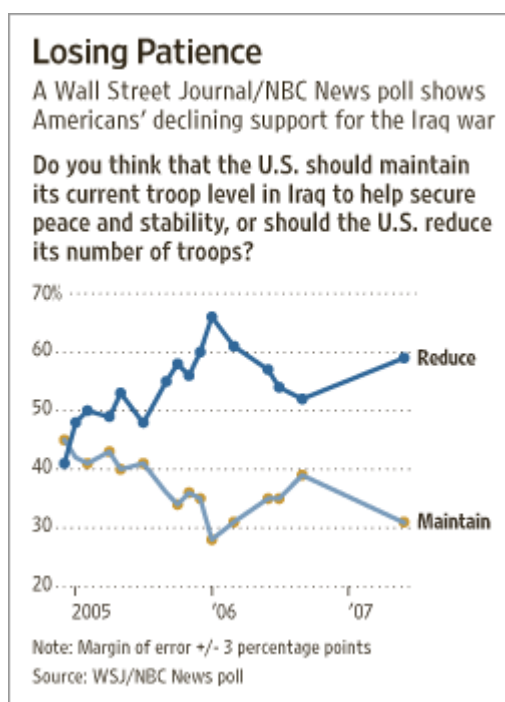
Senior U.S. military commanders in Iraq and Mr. Gates say it is too soon to judge how the surge has fared. The commanders also argue that the effort needs more time to work. Vice President Dick Cheney's views on the success of the surge remain opaque; the only thing he has said publicly is that there are signs of progress in Iraq and it is too soon to give up on this strategy.

But continuing the present approach too long risks a backlash from Congress, where support for the war hit a new nadir last week. A pair of Republican senators -- including one of the party's most-respected foreign-policy voices -- called for the White House to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq as part of a shift in the overall U.S. strategy there.

Sens. Richard Lugar of Indiana and George Voinovich of Ohio joined the growing ranks of lawmakers demanding that the administration change the focus of the U.S. mission from ending Iraq's civil war to trying to contain the conflict by battling al Qaeda and securing the country's borders.

"It is critical that our nation start a new course in Iraq immediately to work toward bringing stability to the nation," Mr. Voinovich said in an interview. "Regardless of the past or current missions, this new course should begin now, and not be delayed one more day."

In an interview with CBS's "Face the Nation" on Sunday, Mr. Lugar urged Mr. Bush to work with a "bipartisan group of people in the Congress" on a new strategy and said he would be willing to take part in such an effort.



A critical Iraq funding vote scheduled for this month could see other skittish Republicans join with Democrats to force the White House's hand.

In an administration consumed by Iraq, Mr. Gates holds the most pivotal -- and conflicted -- position. The low-key defense secretary has spent months trying to find a long-term strategy that could defuse some of the fury over the war.

Mr. Gates has been reluctant to take a public stand on the surge or to say how long he believes the U.S. should maintain the 155,000 troops now deployed to Iraq.

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But he and other senior administration officials recognize that the uptick of troops is sapping political support for the war at home, according to people familiar with internal White House deliberations. These people said Mr. Gates and the other administration officials are also concerned that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other key Iraqi leaders may be unable or unwilling to strike the political compromises needed to persuade their nation's warring sectarian groups to stop fighting.

At the same time, however, the defense secretary is anxious about the repercussions of abandoning the surge and of the U.S. appearing to be heading for the exits, these people said. Mr. Gates's biggest fear is that Iraq's sectarian factions would react to signs of an impending U.S. withdrawal by turning to countries such as Iran or Syria for protection, they said. That could cause Iraq to degenerate into greater chaos.

Senior American military commanders in Iraq want to maintain the current strategy, which they insist offers the best chance of diminishing Iraq's daily violence and buying time for Iraq's political leaders to strike key compromises. U.S. forces have been engaged in heavy combat as they mount aggressive offensive operations across Iraq, and troop numbers are expected to remain at current levels until next spring at the earliest.

Indeed, the military's recently initiated offensive into al Qaeda strongholds to the north and south of Baghdad is predicated not just on driving the Islamic militants from those areas, but also on keeping the enemy from returning by maintaining a substantial U.S. presence there until struggling Iraqi forces are able to hold their own.

"The really decisive activity [in these areas] will be police work, registration of the population and counterintelligence to comb out insurgent sleeper cells and political cells that have gone quiet as we have moved in," said David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency adviser to Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, in an email.

With Iraq's security forces unreliable and largely incapable of preventing insurgents from returning to regions that have been cleared by U.S. forces,

most of that work is expected to fall to U.S. troops over the next several months, if not longer, senior U.S. commanders said.

But with American casualties rising and the Iraqi government unable, or unwilling, to strike needed political deals, it is far from clear that U.S. lawmakers would be willing to give the administration's current strategy much more time.

Democratic and moderate Republican lawmakers want the administration to shift to a smaller footprint in Iraq and a more modest mission there. They warn that the surge, which polls show to be deeply unpopular among Americans, could ultimately lead Congress to abandon all support for the broader U.S. mission.

Continuing the surge strategy to the end of the Bush administration "contains extreme risks for U.S. national security," Mr. Lugar said in a Senate speech last week. "It would greatly increase the chances for a poorly planned withdrawal from Iraq."

If the Bush administration and Mr. Gates don't shift to a new strategy in the fall, they may well be compelled to change course by next spring, anyway.

The U.S. has about 21 Army brigades, each numbering between 5,000 and 7,000 soldiers, in Iraq. By the spring, manpower and materiel strains mean the Army might only be able to maintain 15 of those brigades, a senior Army official in the Pentagon said.

The official said the Army could only maintain the larger presence if the administration chose to recall National Guard units for second tours or extend the tours of other troops -- who already have had their stints extended to 15 months from 12 -- to 18 months.

Either move would likely draw a huge backlash from lawmakers, particularly with the 2008 presidential elections drawing closer.

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