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A Long Goodbye

LSE Ideas

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What Gorbachev's effort to get out of Afghanistan can tell us about how a President Obama might face the challenge of withdrawing from Iraq.

Barack Obama's progressive supporters have been upset by his recent statements on Iraq. Yet his recent "move to the center" on the war should not be particularly surprising. After all, no matter how opposed he may have been to the war in 2003, in 2008 he would be taking over as commander in chief of the world's most powerful nation and military with commitments all over the world. His advisors have pointed out, no doubt, that how he handles the situation will determine how he is seen by his detractors at home and how the US is seen abroad for years to come.

A useful historical parallel is the Soviet experience in trying to get out of Afghanistan. Mikhail Gorbachev, a reform minded leader who came to power in March 1985, faced a similar dilemma to the one Obama will face if elected. He was opposed to the war but was afraid of the consequences a withdrawal of Soviet troops might have on Moscow's relationships with its numerous allies and clients. On the day he became General Secretary he jotted down a note saying that the Soviet Union needed to find a way out of Afghanistan, but do it in stages.

A US withdrawal from Iraq would most likely lead to an increase in violence, at least in the short term. It could mean increased influence for Iran. It could mean that US allies in the region and beyond, no matter their views on the war, begin to doubt Washington's commitment and look elsewhere for support. All of the above could become ammunition for conservatives at home, much like the collapse of South Vietnam became a rallying point for conservatives in the late 1970s.

All of this could happen even if the US stays in Iraq for 10 years. The long term consequences for the US, as well as the region, might be more severe. But politics is a short term business. President Obama would have to think about the 2012 election, when the consequences of a withdrawal could be used against him.

That is why I was not surprised to hear that Obama was "modifying" his stance on troop withdrawal. After an uproar from his progressive supporters, he explained himself at a speech in Georgia on July 8: "We have to be as careful getting out as we were careless getting in... You've got to be sure our troops are safe, you have to be sure the country doesn't collapse."

Gorbachev made similar statements on numerous occasions between 1985 and 1989, when the withdrawal, in closed, official meetings. Here he is at Politburo meeting in February 1987:

We could leave [Afghanistan] quickly...and blame everything on the previous leadership, which planned everything. But we can't do that. They're worried in India, they're worried in Africa. They think that this will be a blow to the authority of the Soviet Union in the national-liberation movement. Imperialism, they say, if it wins in Afghanistan, will go on the offensive.

Indeed, Moscow's numerous allies were worried about the implications of a withdrawal and the collapse of a fellow communist state and made their concerns known to Soviet officials. Gorbachev felt Moscow could not take these concerns lightly.

Gorbachev spent several years trying to find ways to make possible a Soviet withdrawal that did not bring about the collapse of the communist regime in Kabul and the attendant blow to Soviet prestige. This included economic aid as well as a policy of national reconciliation to bring opposition elements into the Kabul government. Most of these, however, resembled efforts undertaken between 1980 and 1985. Only when it had become clear that these efforts were failing that Moscow really started to move towards a withdrawal, which finally began in May 1988. In the meantime, the Soviet 40th army continued to lose over 1000 dead per year and many more wounded.

Contrary to the expectations of US intelligence officials and many in Moscow, the Kabul regime survived without Soviet troops as long as Moscow kept sending economic aid and materiel. Soviet prestige did not collapse as a result of the withdrawal – on the contrary, it allowed Moscow to improve relations not only with the United States but also with China and some nations in the Middle East.

Which brings us back to Obama. A delay in the withdrawal may be justified, but only if he has a serious plan of what will happen during that period. His desire to talk to Iran is a good start- that country is a regional power and will no doubt carry weight in Iraq long after foreign troops are gone. Yet if he has a concrete plan to make sure the Iraqi army is more reliable than it is now or that the government is more stable he has not shown it.

My fear is that President Obama may, like Gorbachev, spend precious time reinventing the wheel or waiting for already failing programs to work. The delay may placate some of his conservative critics, but it will also be costly in terms of lives lost and treasure spent. And it may erode his political capital as well, making his task of improving Washington's relationship with the rest of the world much more difficult.

Of course, the United States is not the Soviet Union, Obama is not Gorbachev, Iraq is not Afghansitan. Yet the concerns that leaders of powerful empires face in trying to extricate their armies from such wars are similar. Obama's supporters who would like to see him bring the troops home will most likely be disappointed, just as those who hoped Gorbachev would bring the troops home right after coming to power were to see the war drag on for almost four more years.

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