The US-led invasion and the ongoing insurgency in Iraq have created new challenges for the US strategic position in East Asia. Despite widespread support for a continuing US presence in the region, the Iraq War has damaged US credibility and prestige in East Asia. This damage is likely to increase with the duration and intensity of the US troop commitment in Iraq, the number of Iraqi civilian casualties and the extent to which violence spills outside Iraq’s borders. However, a reduction or abrupt withdrawal of US troops might also have negative effects both in Iraq and in East Asia. Resolving this paradox will be a major policy challenge for Washington.

Discussions with Asian officials and analysts, a survey of Asian newspapers, and a review of public opinion polls all suggest that events in Iraq have had a negative impact on America’s strategic position in East Asia. The Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq without United Nations authorisation raised serious concerns in China and Japan, both of which place considerable stock in the legitimacy UN authorisation bestows on international action. The failure of coalition forces to discover active Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes or significant WMD stockpiles cast doubt on the US rationale for the invasion and damaged the credibility of US intelligence agencies. US military forces performed impressively in defeating the Iraqi army during the invasion, but their subsequent inability to maintain order, and the escalating violence in Iraq, highlighted the ability of insurgents to use asymmetrical means such as improvised explosive devices to impose casualties on US forces and to frustrate US efforts to achieve its political objectives. Failure by US civilian leaders to plan adequately for post-invasion stability has led many Asian elites to question

Phillip C. Saunders is Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies, National Defense University. This article was prepared for a Council on Foreign Relations/IISS Symposium on Iraq’s Impact on the Future of US Foreign and Defence Policy, with generous support from Rita E. Hauser.
their judgement and competence. These concerns were aggravated by revelations of prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and the growing numbers of Iraqi civilian casualties and refugees.

Recent public opinion polls generally reveal a decline in positive opinions and a rise in negative opinions of the United States, especially in Muslim countries in Southeast Asia. For example, a survey conducted in June and July 2006 found that while positive views of the United States outnumbered negative views in all seven Asian countries surveyed, the proportion with positive views of the United States had slipped from a 1995 survey. In addition, the proportion with negative views of the United States increased from 16 to 40% in Indonesia and from 11 to 41% in Malaysia. Other surveys report similar declines in favourable attitudes toward the United States. A recent survey by the Chicago Council for Global Affairs found that majorities of those surveyed in South Korea, India and China placed little or no trust in the United States to act responsibly in the world. A BBC survey found that majorities in China, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines all believe the Iraq War has increased the threat of terrorism. These results are consistent with the Chicago survey’s findings about opinion in South Korea, India and China, which also found that majorities in all three countries felt that the experience of the Iraq War should make nations more cautious about using military force to deal with rogue states (56% in China, 51% in India, 73% in South Korea).

However, sceptical views of the US global role are balanced by more positive impressions of US power and of the US role in solving problems in Asia. The Chicago poll indicates that the United States is still viewed as the most influential country in Asia and that majorities in China, India and South Korea view the United States as playing a ‘very positive’ or ‘somewhat positive’ role in resolving key problems in Asia. The poll findings suggest that the Iraq War has had a modest negative effect on the US position in Asia, but that the impact has been stronger in Muslim countries.

These results are broadly consistent with my discussions with Asian officials and security experts over the last three years. Most are sceptical that the US invasion of Iraq was an appropriate response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Their concerns have deepened with the failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the lack of evidence of collaboration between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and the increasing violence in Iraq as the insurgency has taken hold. Even some who regard terrorism as a serious threat express doubts about the US-led ‘global war on terror’, viewing the US approach as relying too heavily on military force to resolve what is ultimately a political problem. Chinese analysts, in particular, highlight the need to address what they see as ‘root causes’
of terrorism such as inequality and the Israeli–Palestine conflict. Private criticisms of US policy by Asian officials and analysts have intensified as security conditions in Iraq have deteriorated. Some Asian liberals were initially sympathetic to the US goal of using the liberation of Iraq as a means of promoting democracy in the Middle East, viewing the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and US pressure for democratic elections in Egypt and Syria as positive developments. However, enthusiasm for what some now call ‘forced democratisation’ has dwindled as Iraqi democracy looks less successful, authoritarian leaders have returned to power in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and radical Islamic leaders have won elections in Palestine and Iran.

Iraq and the ‘war on terror’ have had some direct effects on the US agenda in Asia. The United States has pressed its friends and allies in the region to contribute money and manpower to support reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. Japan and South Korea were both reluctant to deploy troops to Iraq, but ultimately decided that the benefits of strengthening their alliances with the United States outweighed the costs and risks of the deployment. Japanese, Australian and South Korean leaders were forced to use political capital to assure their publics that the unpopular troop deployments were necessary. Asian analysts complain that the US agenda in Asia (and especially in Southeast Asia) has become overly focused on terrorism. This criticism has some merit, as the United States has aggressively pressed its counter-terrorism agenda both in bilateral relationships and in Asian regional organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Yet these changes in the US agenda are mainly the product of the 11 September attacks, which altered US security priorities and elevated the importance of counter-terrorism in US policy around the world. Terrorism would have topped the post-11 September US agenda in Asia even if the Iraq War had never happened.

Nevertheless, US friends and allies in Asia regularly complain that US leaders are distracted by Iraq and the ‘war on terror’, and are not devoting sufficient attention to the region. They argue that this has created opportunities for Beijing to expand its regional influence, sometimes at Washington’s expense. Their prescription is for the United States to broaden its regional agenda, support efforts at regional integration, and become more actively involved in regional economic and security affairs.

Mitigating factors
The negative consequences of US involvement in Iraq have been mitigated by widespread support among Asian elites for a continuing US role in maintaining a stable security environment in Asia and the fact that US military commit-
ments in Iraq have had only a limited impact on the US military position in Asia. Although repeated deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have strained the US Army and Marines, the US military position in Asia rests primarily upon air and sea power. The ongoing transformation of the US military, realignment of US military bases and redeployment of forces, and efforts to transform alliances with Japan and South Korea have arguably increased the US ability to project air and naval power in Asia in recent years.

The US ability to play its traditional role in stabilising the Asia-Pacific rests upon the twin pillars of regional support for the US security role and US military capabilities. Asian leaders and elites support a robust US security presence in Asia based primarily on self-interest: they want the United States to play an active role in Asia to help stabilise the region and to ensure their national security in an uncertain strategic environment. Changes in the regional security environment over the last decade have reinforced support for the US presence. China’s rising power and expanding regional influence are a major cause. China’s assertive behaviour toward Taiwan and aggressive pursuit of territorial claims in the South China Sea in the mid-1990s stoked regional anxiety about a ‘China threat’. Chinese leaders realised their actions were stimulating adverse regional reactions, and moderated their policies by embracing multilateralism and adopting a policy of military restraint (while simultaneously beginning annual double-digit increases in the defense budget). Beijing’s efforts to reassure its neighbours of its benign intentions have helped persuade many Asian elites that China’s rise presents more of an opportunity than a threat. Nevertheless, concerns about how a strong China will behave in the future and the existence of regional flashpoints in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula lead most Asian leaders to want the United States to remain engaged in the region.

This has produced continued support for the US military presence in Asia. The Clinton and Bush administrations both made significant efforts to revitalise military alliances to make them more politically sustainable and more relevant to post-Cold War security challenges. These efforts have been most successful in the case of the US–Japan alliance. Increasing concerns about China and North Korea have strengthened Japanese domestic support for the alliance. The US–Japan alliance has broadened its focus to include global and regional security challenges beyond the defence of Japan, joint development of ballistic missile defences and efforts to improve military cooperation for future contingencies. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces have also taken on new roles and missions inside and outside
the alliance, including the deployment of forces to aid in Iraqi reconstruction and the provision of logistics support for US operations in Afghanistan.

North Korea plays a more ambiguous role in the US alliance with South Korea, partly because Seoul and Washington have different views about the nature of the North Korean threat and the best way to deal with Pyongyang. The United States is most concerned about North Korea’s potential to proliferate nuclear weapons or material and has focused on pressuring the North; South Korea worries most about the economic consequences of a North Korean collapse and favours a strategy of engaging Pyongyang to change its behaviour. However, South Korean officials still want a continued US military presence on the peninsula to deter possible North Korean military actions. Although South Korean leaders and analysts are reluctant to identify China as a potential future threat in public, many privately feel that a security alliance with the United States will be important after unification to help Korea to maintain its sovereignty. The United States has also upgraded its alliances with Australia, Thailand and the Philippines and expanded security cooperation with key Asian countries such as Indonesia and Singapore.

Asian countries also seek assistance from the United States to deal with non-traditional security issues such as counter-terrorism and humanitarian relief operations. The operations of terrorist groups in Southeast Asia pose a threat both to the United States and to local governments. A series of terrorist bombings in Indonesia and ongoing insurgencies in the Philippines and southern Thailand highlight the serious nature of the threat. Although most counter-terrorism cooperation takes place quietly, the United States has deployed military advisors to the Philippines to assist in operations against insurgent groups with ties to terrorist organisations. Threats posed by piracy and possible terrorist attacks against port facilities have been another area of international cooperation. The rapid US humanitarian response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 and the Pakistan earthquake in October 2005 illustrated the unrivaled US military capability to quickly move troops and supplies within Asia.

The US military presence in Asia rests heavily on air and sea power, including both forces based in the region and those able to rapidly deploy in the event of military contingencies. As the US military role in Iraq has evolved from defeat of Saddam Hussein’s conventional armed forces to counter-insurgency, the mix of forces needed for military missions in Iraq has shifted away from the air and naval assets needed for Asian contingencies. Counter-insurgency places a premium on ground troops and capabilities such as tactical intelligence, public affairs, military police, special operations, foreign area expertise, and civil engineering, which are found primarily in the army and marines. US
Air and naval forces are playing an important role in supplying and supporting ground forces, but this requires a relatively modest commitment of aircraft and ships. Few strike aircraft and naval combatants have been shifted from the Asia-Pacific theatre. Conversely, the demand for ground troops in Iraq (and to a lesser degree Afghanistan) has caused the United States to move forces from other theatres, deploy national guard and reserve forces, and even use some air force and navy troops in non-traditional roles to reduce the burden on army and marine units.

The impact of Iraq deployments on US ground forces based in Asia and units assigned to deploy to Asia in the event of a major regional conflict would be felt most strongly if the US military had to conduct extended combat operations in a conflict over Taiwan or Korea. US commitments in Iraq may have given China and North Korea more latitude for political initiatives due to a perceived US reluctance to be drawn into a second major conflict. However, there is no evidence that China or North Korea see an opportunity to launch a conventional attack to achieve territorial goals while US ground forces are tied down in Iraq. US strategy emphasises rapid response to an attack in Asia via air and naval power rather than with large numbers of ground troops. The significant US advantage in air and naval capabilities makes China or North Korea unlikely to initiate a crisis that might escalate to war. Moreover, the US ability to tolerate military casualties in Iraq that now total more than 3,000 dead and 20,000 wounded has likely undercut the view of some Chinese analysts that US casualty aversion would make intervention in a Taiwan conflict impossible.

Recent and planned efforts in US military transformation and force realignment include shifting an additional aircraft carrier to the Pacific fleet, moving attack submarines to bases in Guam, and upgrading Anderson Air Force Base in Guam to support B-1 and B-2 bomber operations. Realignment of US forces based in Japan and South Korea is intended to improve the political sustainability of US alliances by removing perennial sore points such as the Marine air station in Futenma (near populated areas of Okinawa) and the US base at Yongsan (in the middle of downtown Seoul). Some US forces in Japan will shift to bases in Guam; others will be co-located at bases with Japanese forces. More broadly, transformation is intended to improve the US ability to flow forces from one theatre to another in response to unexpected contingencies. At present, this involves moving forces out of Asia, but it should also improve the US ability to respond to a future military contingency in Asia. The United States has also used exercises to demonstrate its ability to rapidly deploy combat assets; the June 2006 Valiant Shield exercise demonstrated the US ability to surge three aircraft carriers to the western Pacific.
Washington’s commitments in Iraq may have a longer-term impact on US global military capabilities, which would indirectly affect the US ability to fulfill its security commitments in Asia. Iraq deployments have placed the greatest strains on the army and the marines. Many ground units have completed multiple tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. The resulting stress on troops and families is having some negative effects on recruitment and retention, although the services have continued to hit their recruitment quotas. Army Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker has called for an expansion of the size of the army, warning that the Iraq War will break the army unless the active duty force is expanded or the National Guard and reserves are remobilised. Over the long run, increased losses of experienced mid-level officers and non-commissioned officers could have a negative impact on US military capabilities. However, repeated tours in Iraq and Afghanistan are also providing extensive combat experience throughout the force, which may help offset the loss of some experienced personnel. The extended Iraq deployment is taking a toll on equipment as well as troops. Equipment used in Iraq faces intensified maintenance requirements due to prolonged use in desert conditions; a higher-than-expected operational tempo also means that equipment will need to be replaced sooner than expected. The cost of equipment replacement and a potential expansion in the size of the army will place additional demands on future US military budgets and may limit the resources that can be devoted to building future US air and naval capabilities.

**The consequences of withdrawal from Iraq**

The long-term impact of US withdrawal from Iraq will depend on the circumstances, how conditions in Iraq develop after the US military leaves, and how lessons drawn from Iraq affect US domestic politics and foreign policy. Analysis of these possibilities is necessarily speculative. If political and security conditions in Iraq stabilise to the point where Iraqi government forces could take over primary responsibility for security, Washington could withdraw most or all of its military forces and leave behind a relatively stable Iraq. Cohesion among government leaders, loyalty of military and police units to the national government, and some degree of support from the broad Iraqi public are necessary conditions for effective Iraqi security forces. If these conditions cannot be achieved, training of more military and police units may only intensify fighting between and among different Iraqi groups. US prestige and credibility in Asia would suffer more damage if the United States leaves under conditions where Iraqi government control is tenuous, but the United States would be generally seen as having made good-faith efforts to discharge its responsibilities under
difficult conditions. Even in the best-case scenarios, the United States will likely have increased difficulty in securing political or military support from Asian countries for any future intervention or peacekeeping operations.

If conditions in Iraq deteriorate to the point where US troops can no longer play a positive role in stabilising the security environment, there would likely be increasing calls for immediate US troop withdrawal in both Iraq and the United States. This might occur if a full-fledged civil war broke out or if the Iraqi population became so hostile to the presence of US troops that the US military could no longer perform counter-insurgency operations. Withdrawal under these conditions would be viewed as a clear failure by most Asian governments and elites, but the damage would be somewhat contained because Iraqi political actors would be at least partly blamed, and the United States would be viewed as having made a good-faith (if ultimately futile) effort. Asian reactions would also be muted because of the perceived low probability that the United States might conduct a similar operation in Asia in the future.

A unilateral decision by US leaders to scale down the military commitment to Iraq in the context of a broader adjustment of the US global strategy for fighting the ‘war on terror’ would require the United States to admit that it could no longer achieve its political objectives in Iraq. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda would claim victory and might be able to step up their fund-raising, recruitment and operational activities in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Asian governments that face significant domestic terrorism threats (such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and even Australia) would be especially concerned. However, many Asian analysts see Iraq as a distraction both from global counter-terrorism efforts and more important strategic developments in Asia. A US strategic adjustment that reduced commitments in Iraq and allowed more attention and resources to be devoted to Asia might therefore be welcomed by many Asian countries.

The effects of a major military setback in Iraq on the model of the Viet Cong’s 1968 Tet offensive would depend mainly on how it changed regional perceptions of US military capabilities and political will. A collapse in US domestic political support or a congressional funding cut-off that forced a reluctant administration to withdraw troops from Iraq would probably inflict the most damage to the US position in Asia, especially if it was viewed as part of a broader retrenchment of US foreign policy. US friends and allies would worry that forced withdrawal from Iraq indicated an isolationist trend in foreign policy that called US security commitments in Asia into question. In such circumstances Japan and South Korea might pursue more independent security strategies, while smaller coun-
tries would consider the potential need to reach a strategic accommodation with China.

Finally, political conditions could force withdrawal regardless of the conditions on the ground if Iraqi officials formally request withdrawal of US forces or if the United Nations Security Council refuses to renew the mandate for coalition operations when it expires at the end of 2007. This would absolve Washington of some responsibility for what happens in Iraq, but also limit US ability to prevent future developments that might threaten its interests. It would probably limit the damage to the US position in Asia, especially if Washington provided significant economic assistance to Iraq to substitute for its military presence.

*               *               *

Obviously, scenarios where the United States leaves behind capable Iraqi security forces and a relatively stable security environment are greatly preferable to those where the United States is forced to withdraw abruptly and leave behind a violent failed state. But if that is not possible – and we should recognise that it may not be – the United States must be prepared to take actions to mitigate or forestall the consequences.

Many of the costs the United States is paying in Asia are opportunity costs: other goals that cannot be pursued due to the commitment of resources to Iraq. The longer the war lasts, and the more resources committed, the higher the opportunity costs will be. A major military crisis in Asia would highlight the negative impact of Iraq commitments on US policy options. Another factor is the number of civilian casualties in Iraq and the extent to which violence spills across the border to affect other countries in the Middle East. The principal US justification for invading Iraq now rests upon the benefits of removing Saddam Hussein from power and developing a democratic Iraq. Deaths of Iraqi civilians and the spread of violence beyond Iraq’s borders undercut the perceived value of these achievements. A survey of the Asian press and discussions with Asian security analysts suggests that many Asian elites have concluded the costs of the Iraq invasion already outweigh the benefits. More civilian casualties and higher levels of violence will lead to even more negative views of the US invasion. The Iraq insurgency’s role as a rallying point and training ground for Islamic extremists may also eventually intensify terrorist threats in Southeast Asia. If this occurs, Asian officials would likely blame US actions for exacerbating threats to domestic and regional stability.

At a global level, the United States could make a virtue of necessity by adjusting its counter-terrorism strategy to emphasise an approach that relies
more heavily on political means, while simultaneously increasing resources focused on tracking international terrorist links. This is already implicit in the Pentagon’s ‘Long War’ strategy, which was unveiled in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review. However, more visible and civilian-led activities are needed, ranging from development assistance to conflict mediation aimed at denying radicals the ability to exploit ethno-sectarian conflicts for recruiting purposes. Within the Middle East, the United States could enlist regional states in efforts to contain the regional security impact of an Iraqi government that cannot maintain internal security or exercise control over its territory. Operationally, the United States could also establish ‘stay-behind’ intelligence assets in Iraq and its immediate neighbourhood that could provide continuing information on the capabilities and movements of Islamist terrorist groups. Within Asia, the United States could take a number of actions to reinforce its alliance commitments and maintain its credibility in the wake of an Iraq withdrawal. Efforts to transform US alliances with Japan and South Korea provide a positive foundation for additional steps to demonstrate continued US regional commitment, such as additional military deployments, joint exercises and continued military modernisation efforts. Cooperation on non-traditional security issues such as disaster relief, piracy and infectious disease would provide another potential means to demonstrate the US presence in Asia. These measures could all help mitigate the impact of an unsatisfactory outcome in Iraq.

Acknowledgements

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the US government. The author thanks Steven Duke for research assistance, and Bernard Cole, Bonnie Glaser, James Schear, Colonel Michael Bell and Lieutenant-Colonel Jaime Laughrey for helpful comments.

Notes

1 This article is based on three sets of sources. The first is discussions with Asian government officials and security experts over the last three years, including annual dialogues with Japanese, South Korean and Chinese experts and research trips to ten Asian countries. The second is a review of commentary from major Asian newspapers on the fifth anniversary of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, which provided a good overview of Asian concerns about US involvement in Iraq. The third is a review of recent public opinion polls, including 2006 studies by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

2 ‘U.S. image in Asia Deteriorating’, Yomiuri Shimbun, 10 September 2006;
The United States and East Asia after Iraq


5 85% in China, 84% in South Korea, 73% in Australia, 72% in Indonesia and 61% in the Philippines said that the Iraq War had increased the threat of terrorism. 44% of those surveyed in India felt the war had increased the threat of terrorism, while 18% felt the war had reduced terrorist threats. BBC World Service/GlobeScan Poll, ‘World Public Says Iraq War Has Increased Global Terrorist Threat’, p. 5.

6 Chicago Council on Global Affairs, The United States and the Rise of China and India, pp. 52, 57.

7 Ibid., pp. 50–53. Proportions viewing the United States as playing a ‘very positive’ or ‘somewhat positive’ role in resolving Asian problems were 59% in China, 66% in India and 58% in South Korea.

8 The 600 Japanese troops deployed in Samara were assigned to reconstruction duties; South Korea’s 3,500 troops made it the third largest contributor to the coalition.


10 China’s position is ambivalent: it officially opposes all military alliances, but supports the presence of US troops in Asia so long as they contribute to regional stability and are not aimed against China.

11 China’s initiatives have been in the political and economic spheres. US commitments in Iraq may have increased North Korea’s confidence that it could conduct a nuclear test without inciting US military retaliation. However, US willingness to invade Iraq likely reinforced North Korean fears of US military capabilities; North Korean official statements justifying its nuclear test emphasise the need to deter a possible US military attack.


16 Because combat is the crucible for evaluating officer performance, Iraq will also have a significant effect on the composition of the senior officer corps.