Iraq Redeployment: Complex, Challenging, Realistic

By Neil Abercrombie

One hundred eighty-one House Republicans joined 169 Democrats last week to pass legislation requiring the Bush Administration to report to Congress on its planning for redeployment from Iraq. The companion measure was quickly introduced in the Senate by Democrat Ken Salazar and Republican Lamar Alexander, with a list of cosponsors from Democrats Clinton, Pryor and Webb to Republicans Collins, Voinovich and Dole. Obviously, there is broad agreement that thoughtful planning is needed for redeployment. Yet most people are unclear about the feasibility of redeploying more than 160,000 troops, support personnel and equipment out of a hostile country.

Some argue that strategic redeployment is too slow. Others want to "Stay the Course," and claim that such plans are pointless. But we can't simply wish our armed forces home, and we can't leave them there indefinitely. Redeployment is a complex military operation demanding serious thought and planning, especially if we have forces under fire or caught between factions in a civil war.

Our legislation requires that redeployment planning address:

- Protecting the U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq;
- Protecting U.S. civilians, contractors, third party and Iraqi nationals who have assisted the U.S.;
- Maintaining and enhancing the ability of the U.S. to eliminate and disrupt al-Qaeda and others terrorists; and
- Preserving military equipment necessary to defend the national security interests of the U.S.

It also specifies that missions for the troops remaining in Iraq should be limited to:

- Protecting vital U.S. national security interests;
- Conducting counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations;
- Protecting U.S. civilians and U.S. diplomatic and military facilities; and
- Supporting and equipping Iraqi forces to take responsibility for their own security.

One of the first issues is deciding which military units will be redeployed, in what order, from which geographic areas and over what time period. This includes the possibility of consolidating bases and relocating some units within Iraq during redeployment, deciding which forces might have to stay in Iraq and Kuwait and for how long?

We'll need detailed cost figures. Some experts estimate as much as $10 billion will be needed to get our forces and most of their equipment home from Iraq. By comparison, we're spending about $10 billion every month to stay there.

How will the Pentagon transport, protect and house all its civilian personnel? Will the State Department assume responsibility for the return of their contract security personnel?

How much and what equipment will be redeployed from Iraq and Kuwait, and over what period? The U.S. has four major airbases and 75 forward operating bases in Iraq. Do we just head for the border and leave everything behind, try to bring every nut and bolt home or concentrate on bringing back the most important, technologically-advanced or perhaps the most expensive equipment? What equipment should be assigned to the Iraqi ministries of Defense and Interior?

What personnel and equipment will come back directly from Iraq and what will have to be staged through Kuwait? What equipment will be prepared and transported to regional prepositioning sites to replenish the stores that have been virtually emptied? How will equipment waiting for shipment home be protected and maintained? How will all this equipment be handled, stored, maintained, repaired and redistributed when it gets back to the U.S.? We're talking about nearly 2,000 Abrams tanks, Stryker and Bradley fighting vehicles; 43,000 other vehicles, including more than 20,000 Humvees; more than 700 aircraft; and between 140,000 and 200,000 metric tons of equipment and supplies. Do we have the facilities? Will they be ready?

What impact will such decisions about equipment have on the readiness state of our reserves and National Guard? They've already been reduced to about 40% of their necessary equipment by repeated deployments.

What about our troops? How will we rebuild units, re-equip and train them, and try to bring our military back to acceptable readiness levels? Repeated and prolonged deployments, nearly constant combat under threat of roadside bombs and suicide bombers, and incredibly harsh climate have taken an appalling toll on our troops and their equipment. Iraq has been a terrible and costly drain on resources—materiel and human. Resetting the force will be expensive and take years to achieve.

As our troops are withdrawing, how do we maintain full medical services and the critical "golden hour" capability?

What will the government's role be in dealing with millions of Iraqi refugees? Should they come here? Should they be relocated in nearby countries? What obligation do we have?

What agreements are needed with other countries in the region for airspace rights and logistical support during our redeployment? Can the U.S. look to them to help maintain regional stability?

Redeployment is complicated but very feasible. In fact, in early 2004, the Army moved 130,000 troops out of Iraq and 105,000 into Iraq at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom II; a total of 235,000 troops, along with 211,000 pieces of equipment, were redeployed over six months.

Some logistics experts estimate that it will take 10 to 12 months to move the vast bulk of our armed forces out of Iraq, safely and responsibly, and with most of the equipment in which we've invested billions of dollars. However, depending on decisions on all these questions, the time could be considerably shorter.

Precisely for the reason, our legislation does not specify a date to begin or end the redeployment. That's why we need to set the premises for redeployment planning now. That's why the Department of Defense needs to report on its plans to Congress now.

Neil Abercrombie, Democrat of Hawaii, chairs the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Air and Land Force.