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'If the US is to develop a winning strategy for Iraq'

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The Bush administration continues to commit serious follies in Iraq. Washington has been doomed to perpetuate one disaster after another once it demobilised the army and dismissed the civil service in the wake of the 2003 war. These moves have deprived Iraq of domestic security and experienced administrators at a time the country needs them the most.

The latest folly was urging Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki to tackle the Mehdi Army militia of Iraqi radical cleric Moqtada Sadr. The US and Maliki clearly thought the Sadrists could be routed and defeated ahead of or during last weekend's Arab summit in Damascus. This would have made both the US and Maliki look good and boost their standing in the region and elsewhere.

Since George W. Bush praised the Iraqi army offensive launched in the militia-plagued southern city of Basra, it can be assumed that he told Vice President Dick Cheney, the member of the administration most committed to the war on Iraq, to convince Maliki to conduct an offensive against the Mehdi Army.

Maliki, who had hesitated to tackle the Sadrists, may have been over-confident because US generals have recently been heaping praise on the Iraqi army. Indeed Maliki was so upbeat that he took personal command of the operation and deployed 28,000 troops in Basra and the south. But 6,000-odd Sadrists fought the Iraqi army to a standstill in Basra, Kut, Amara and Nasiriyah and kept US and Iraqi forces at bay in Baghdad. Maliki had to call for air and other support. Even then the Sadrists held their ground until ordered by Sadr to cease fire. This shamed Maliki, the Iraqi army, the US command and the White House.

On the military front, Maliki's failure demonstrated that the new Iraqi army is still not ready for major campaigns. Indeed, it is not certain that the army will ever be prepared to launch a proper offensive operation. After all, the post-war US-supported Iraqi army is not a national force motivated by patriotism. Its commanders and members are drawn largely from the ranks of the Badr Corps militia of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) loyal to Sadr's chief political rival, Abdel Aziz Al Hakim. Consequently, the confrontation was essentially between hostile militias rather than between outlaws and the forces of law and order.

Furthermore, the Badrists, who fought on Iran's side during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, have always been essentially an Iranian tool rather than an Iraqi force, and Iran has been playing a double game in the power struggle between Sadrists and Badrists. It tested the strength of the two sides and is likely to bet on the winner from now on.

On the political front, Maliki lost credibility and face because he had to sue for peace. He was compelled to dispatch a parliamentary delegation from his own Dawa faction to the Iranian holy city of Qom, where Sadr is on study retreat. There the delegation was obliged to negotiate with Sadr and with the leader of the Quds Brigades of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Qasim Sulaymani. Sadr agreed to call on his followers to cease fire although they seem to have been permitted to shoot in self defence. He also told his followers to end attacks on rival party offices in the south and to cooperate in the apprehension of criminals.

In exchange, the Maliki government had to promise to cease random raids on Sadrist sites, halt arrests of Mehdi Army officers and fighters, apply the general amnesty law by releasing Sadrist prisoners not convicted of criminal offences, facilitate the return to their homes of displaced persons and carry out reconstruction projects in all governorates.

The Sadrist agenda is certain to boost their standing with many ordinary Iraqis, particularly if the government is forced to implement its side of the deal. It is not clear, however, whether US forces will abide by the agreement to end raids and attacks on Sadrists and free Sadrist prisoners. If the US does not meet these particular demands, the ceasefire may be of short duration.

Maliki was defeated both militarily and politically. He had to apply to Sadr to end clashes and to meet Sadr's terms. His allies, Hakim and SIIC, were defeated roundly by Sadr's Mehdi Army in spite of the fact that the Badr Corps has benefitted from both Iranian and US training. The Sadrists were the clear victors. They won pitched battles and live to fight another day.

The US was the major loser because its clients, Maliki and Hakim, were defeated. The big winner was Tehran, in spite of the Badr Corps' defeat.

Iran is hosting Sadr and helped negotiate a deal to end the fighting. While Iran supports Maliki and the Badrists, it has also been hedging its bets by cultivating the Sadrists and arming the training "special groups" of irregulars who carry out attacks on US forces.

One of the reasons the Iranians may have decided to follow a two-track strategy, dealing with Shiites allied to the US - Maliki and Hakim - and with its Sadrist antagonists is the likelihood of a Sadrist victory in the south in the October elections. The Sadrists remain the only popular Shiite party on the Iraqi scene. Dawa and SIIC simply do not have the ability to attract the voters.

The US-Maliki-Hakim defeat comes ahead of the report to the US Congress, set to be delivered shortly by General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq. He can no longer boast that stability and security in Iraq has been greatly improved since the "surge" pacification campaign began on February 15, 2007. He will also have to explain why the decision was taken to try to "clean up" the Mehdi Army before the Iraqi army was ready for such an operation.

Bush will clearly be in no position to make a large draw-down of troops ahead of the November presidential and congressional elections. This could harm the prospects of Republican candidate John McCain who backed the war before it was launched and holds that US troops will have to remain in Iraq for as long as they are needed, in spite of widespread opposition to their deployment in the US.

The US-Maliki defeat in the “Battle of Basra” may, finally, convince US voters that they need to have a complete change of personnel in the White House and Congress if the US is to develop a winning strategy for Iraq.