



## Will Asians Endure Iraq? by Simon Tay

The United States-led intervention in Iraq is going through a terrible season. First, conflicts in Iraq have spiked, with more allied casualties than at any time in the last year. Second, a terrorist bomb in Madrid ushered in a new government and a sharp U-turn for Spanish forces in Iraq. Third, and still unfolding, are the revelations of the ill-treatment meted out to Iraqi captives by U.S. forces. Will Asians endure?

How these issues work out depends primarily on what Americans do. They have led the way into Iraq, and Asians and others have followed only after persuasion and pressure. They shape the conduct of affairs in Iraq almost single-handedly. But while U.S. leadership remains the critical factor, there are growing concerns among Asians.

Most who have supported U.S. actions in Iraq have done so in the face of growing popular opinion against America, whether among U.S. allies like South Korea and Japan, or in countries like Indonesia which have not supported U.S. action.

No Asian government has, however, opposed America as strongly or consistently as Germany and France. Popular opinion has not so far dictated foreign policy for Asian governments. Most of them realistically recognise that the U.S. presence has been the single most important factor for stability in the region since the end of World War II.

Even if reluctant, Asian governments have generally sought to engage the U.S. since Sept. 11 and have either supported them or limited the degree of their differences. This, however, creates a democratic deficit between popular opinion and government policy.

Grumbles have been growing among Asians. There is a growing doubt that Americans know what they are doing in Iraq, and know what next to do.

Beyond this, American policies towards the Middle East and the Palestine-Israel issue are attracting more concern and criticism.

More, the horror stories of American conduct, after all the talk of promoting democracy and freedom, display a moral bankruptcy. Things could quite easily tip the other way, and quickly.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld must either clean up or clear out. This is the least that will help those who want to help America.

During this year of elections across Asia, another Madrid is possible. A terrorist act carried out in the heat of elections could help tilt results and policies towards the U.S. and Iraq.

Indeed, this is happening in South Korea. Popular opinion within this U.S. ally has turned sharply and the new party in power is looking for a foreign policy that is more independent of the U.S. In Japan, opposition to its support for the U.S. rose after the kidnapping of three Japanese nationals, although this quieted with their release.

Other Asian countries with citizens in Iraq, whether as soldiers or civilians, will have to run similar risks. Public attention over those held, harmed, or killed will be inevitable, and there are dangers that this may drive policy.

The U.S. under the Clinton administration fell into this error in Somalia when public images of Americans killed led to its hasty withdrawal from that war-torn country. The situation in Iraq must not suffer the same 'on-off' attention.

Longer-term commitment is required. For even if the U.S. paves the way for the United Nations and then an Iraqi interim government, U.S. and international support will continue to be necessary. The UN has, after all, little substance without the will and resources of its member states. In this regard, if indeed a handover is envisaged, the effort must be to garner even more support, in Asia and elsewhere.

With this in mind, a fine-tuning of U.S. policy in Asia is needed. Thus far, the U.S. has focused on political support, even if actual commitments to assist were limited or even non-existent. The U.S. has also dealt with most Asian states on a bilateral basis, focusing on internal conflicts within these states. This must change, with efforts to gather a truly multilateral commitment to help the UN and, when it is formed, an Iraqi government.

For states to commit to this, there must be a broader vision of order in the Middle East and the world as a whole that they can accept. A number of Asian states have experience in helping the UN police and administer states in the complex tasks of peace operations. This experience and the relative neutrality of Asian states can be key elements in Iraq.

Two states in South-east Asia that bear particular attention are Thailand and Malaysia. In Thailand, the troubles in the south need urgent attention, whether by Thailand on its own, or with the assistance of neighbors. This is important not just to Thailand. The challenge will be to show there is no irresolvable religious divide with the largely Muslim south that requires heavy military action. Hopefully, the situation is amenable to better politics and peace-building. If so, the Thais should be encouraged to take a substantial role in a UN operation in Iraq.

One key Asian state would be Malaysia. Its standing among the Islamic states, its experience in the UN system,

including its peace operations, and the progressive Muslim example set by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, would be important contributions to attempts to seek longer-term solutions in Iraq. Improvements in relations between Kuala Lumpur and Washington, sour in recent years, should be sought.

It will not be enough for Asian governments who are already in Iraq to only reluctantly endure just because America tells them to do so. The realism of needing to be on the right side of the U.S. administration can do only so much.

If the present difficulties there and against terrorism elsewhere are to be resolved, it is vital for more Asians to be convinced to take part in a deeper engagement.

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