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Iraq as South Korea: An Interventionist Delusion

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The lobbying effort to induce President Obama to keep U.S. troops in Iraq after the December 2011 withdrawal deadline is becoming a crescendo. Many of the voices belong to the usual suspects, including Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol—some of the very people who got this country into the Iraq mess in the first place.

Interestingly, the well-founded fear that Iraqi security forces exhibit serious deficiencies tends to be a secondary argument for most advocates of “staying the course.” Instead, they stress classic nation-building objectives combined with the alleged benefits of having an enduring U.S. military presence in the region for broader goals. Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations contends that the need to keep American forces in Iraq beyond 2011^[3] is less about teaching Iraqi security personnel “how to use weapons and more [about] providing reassurance to threatened internal communities that they won’t be exploited by their erstwhile internal rivals.”

That sounds a lot like an indefinite, dangerous babysitting mission in a country that lacks sufficient internal cohesion to be a viable state without imperial “supervision.”

But Biddle’s goal is relatively restrained compared to the ambitious agenda of Paul Wolfowitz. Writing on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*^[4], Wolfowitz argues that the model for the U.S. mission in Iraq should be the troop presence in South Korea—now in its 60th year. It is hardly the first time that a prominent hawk has invoked South Korea as a model for Iraq. John McCain did so^[5] during his failed presidential bid, the Bush administration made the analogy in 2007,^[6] and several^[7] notable^[8] neoconservatives did so as far back as 2004.

It is a bad argument on several levels. First, South Korea is nothing like Iraq. After the Korean war, the overwhelming majority of Koreans were grateful to the United States for saving them from the horrors of a communist conquest, and they very much wanted U.S. troops to stay on to protect them from a powerful North Korea backed by an even more powerful Maoist China. A large number of Iraqis intensely dislike the U.S. military presence. Indeed, the only group that consistently expresses strong pro-U.S. views is the Kurds. Both Sunni and Shiite Arabs have, at

best, ambivalent views.

That underscores a second crucial difference. South Korea has always been a cohesive society. Iraq is anything but united. Indeed, the bitter ethnic and sectarian divisions constitute the country's main problems.

Finally, U.S. leaders decided to continue defending South Korea because they saw the country as an important front in the larger Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union and its allies. A communist conquest of South Korea, they believed, would be a serious strategic defeat for the United States in East Asia. [9] There is no comparable global strategic struggle to justify a similar decades-long military mission in Iraq.

President Obama should ignore the siren calls to keep U.S. troops—any significant number of troops—in Iraq after December 2011. We should never have gone into that country in the first place, and the sooner we complete our exit, the better.

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