

National Strategy Forum Speaker Series

On May 7, 2007, Enders Wimbush, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Future Security Strategies at the Hudson Institute, discussed how the US adapts to diminished US global power “after Iraq.”

“The first thing we need to understand about what happens ‘after Iraq’ is that it has already begun,” Wimbush stated. “Regardless of how this conflict concludes, if in fact it ever does, the United States will be seen as having lost.”

The political and strategic miscalculations of the current Bush administration have led to the perception, in the US and throughout the world, that the US global strategic posture has been weakened and its resources exhausted. As a result, US allies and adversaries alike will view the US as reluctant and perhaps less able to assume a dominant role in responding to new contingencies. Wimbush described the following potential consequences.

US allies, who will perceive that the US is less willing and able to assist them, will:

- Arm themselves, possibly with nuclear weapons. For example, Japan is already advancing towards rearmament.
- Seek new alliances and strategic relationships with rising regional powers, such as China.
- Implement hedging strategies. For example, despite an emerging US-India strategic relationship, India will seek other strategic assurances through multiple hedges; for example, by moving closer to China and by crafting a regional alliance with Indonesia.

US adversaries will perceive that they are less constrained. The US should expect:

- More risk-taking by highly unstable actors.
- More aggressive challenges from state actors, such as Iran, Syria, North Korea, some African states, and others.
- Larger competitors, such as China and Russia, will be emboldened to expand their spheres of influence. “... the opportunistic diplomacy of both [China and Russia] has received a strong stimulus from America being bogged down in Iraq,” Wimbush stated.

The principal US foreign policy objective is not to pursue an elusive victory in Iraq, but to assure allies and adversaries that now and in the future the US will not hesitate to use its power to defend friends and punish enemies.

Wimbush discussed six possible scenarios which could emerge as consequences of the War in Iraq.

1. Endemic Civil War in Iraq: Iraq’s problems will not diminish quickly – “they will continue to mount and spiral long after America has withdrawn her troops.” The following events are likely to shape the future character of Iraq and lead to the destruction of the Iraqi state: *Ade jure* partition of into competing and hostile regions; the intervention of surrounding Mideast states in Iraq (i.e. the declaration of an independent Kurdish state will trigger Turkey’s intervention); and Iraq becoming the staging ground for wars and confrontation between Mideast states, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria. “Iraq will become a large petri dish for pathologies like terrorism, Islamic radicalism, arms

bazaars, crime and drugs. Think Afghanistan after the Soviets were forced out, only on a larger scale,” Wimbush stated. “The question that lingers is this: Can there be an Iraq, after Iraq?”

2. Triumph of the Islamists: Iraq is now al Qaeda’s primary base of operations. Al Qaeda may broaden its foothold in Iraq as American forces leave the country. Iraqi jihadists will likely return to their countries of origin – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, and other states – where they could succeed in overthrowing pro-US regimes and garnering popular support. Regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt could collapse, and Israel’s security would be threatened. The largest Islamic states – Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – would fall under Islamist control; probably only India could survive the Islamist onslaught, but with difficulty. New regimes would implement the “Talibanization” of these countries.

3. Violent Sunni-Shi’te Split: The spread of sectarian violence into surrounding Mideast states would have considerable implications. Consequences could include a Shi’ite revolution in Bahrain against the pro-minority Sunnis and a Shi’a attempt to take over oil facilities in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, which could destabilize and/or break up the country. Shi’ites constitute majorities in four regional states and strategically placed and numerically significant minorities in many more.

4. Gulf Energy Collapse: Any of these first three scenarios could trigger the collapse of Gulf energy production. For example, violence in Saudi Arabia or other states could cause the evacuation of nearly three million Indian and Pakistani nationals who work in critical energy infrastructure jobs. This event could initiate cascading economic crises with consequences for the world’s largest economies – the US receives 30 percent of its imported energy from the Gulf; China, 60 percent; Japan, about 90 percent; and India, 70 percent. As a result, Russia and Iran, large independent energy producers, would gain significant leverage.

5. Nuclear Iran: “No scenario is more threatening than this one, and it is the one most likely to get the biggest boost after Iraq, in my view,” Wimbush stated. “Iran is the net winner in the war.” Iran is emerging as a regional hegemon; has gained clout from its image as the “beacon of revolutionary anti-American forces across the region;” and has the power to manipulate forces for change in the region. Iran understands that a deliverable nuclear weapon would deter the US and Israel asymmetrically and allow it greater ability to use coercion, intimidation and denial in the region. A nuclear Iran would cause rapid regional proliferation – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey and additional states would initiate or accelerate their nuclear programs. The intent to use nuclear weapons will be higher than in the past.

6. Turkey Realigns: The war in Iraq has affected negatively the strategic relationship between the US and Turkey. Ankara fears that the US-led intervention in Iraq will bring about the breakup of that country, resulting in an independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq that borders Turkey’s Kurdish population. Turkish military leaders would intervene in Iraq, regardless of the presence of US troops, to stop Kurdish separatists from declaring their own state. Some 80 percent of Turks view the US as a problem and direct threat to national security. Turkey is re-examining the question of its national identity, which is tilting away exclusively from secularism toward observable Islamic influences. Turkey will seek relations

with the Muslim world, as well as new strategic partners Russia and China. Turkey's rejection by the European Union will accelerate its strategic realignment.

These scenarios suggest that:

1. Many of these forces could have transnational and transformative effects.
2. The US should expect actors to behave unpredictably.
3. Outside powers will be encouraged to move into the Middle East: Iran, Turkey, India, Russia, and China.
4. The US is and will continue to pay a price in other regions for its preoccupation with Iraq. In Asia, actors have begun to hedge their bets, forming strategic and economic relationships with China that they might resist if American power in their region were a certainty in the future.
5. The Iraq experience will spur the reassessment of strategic relationships. Grand coalitions will become "a thing of the past," as security relationships become focused narrowly on specific issues and produce temporary coalitions of "strange bedfellows."
6. The US confronts a strategic paradox – American public opinion will have little appetite for further engagements in the Middle East, while at the same time the US remains the only force capable of addressing the region's cascading problems. Most governments, fearing that the US will leave, will increase efforts to keep the US engaged in the region. After Iraq, the US needs to be prepared to address more, not fewer, problems militarily. This strategic paradox must be resolved quickly.