How Maliki and Iran Outsmarted the U.S. on Troop Withdrawal

Then U.S. President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad December 2008.

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WASHINGTON, Dec 16, 2011 (IPS) – Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's suggestion that the end of the U.S. troop presence in Iraq is part of a U.S. military success story ignores the fact that the George W. Bush administration and the U.S. military had planned to maintain a semi-permanent military presence in Iraq.

The real story behind the U.S. withdrawal is how a clever strategy of deception and diplomacy adopted by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in cooperation with Iran outmanoeuvered Bush and the U.S. military leadership and got the United States to sign the U.S.-Iraq withdrawal agreement.

A central element of the Maliki-Iran strategy was the common interest that Maliki, Iran and anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr shared in ending the U.S. occupation, despite their differences over other issues.

Maliki needed Sadr's support, which was initially based on Maliki's commitment to obtain a time schedule for U.S. troops' withdrawal from Iraq.

In early June 2006, a draft national reconciliation plan that circulated among Iraqi political groups included agreement on "a time schedule to pull out the troops from Iraq" along with the build-up of Iraqi military forces. But after a quick trip to Baghdad, Bush rejected the idea of a withdrawal timetable.

Maliki's national security adviser Mowaffak Al-Rubaei revealed in a Washington Post op-ed that Maliki wanted foreign troops reduced by more than 30,000 to under 100,000 by the end of 2006 and withdrawal of "most of the remaining troops" by end of the 2007.

When the full text of the reconciliation plan was published Jun. 25, 2006, however, the commitment to a withdrawal timetable was missing.

In June 2007, senior Bush administration officials began leaking to reporters plans for maintaining what The New York Times described as "a near-permanent presence" in Iraq, which would involve control of four major bases.

Maliki immediately sent Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari to Washington to dangle the bait of an agreement on troops before then Vice President Dick Cheney.

As recounted in Linda Robinson's "Tell Me How This Ends", Zebari urged Cheney to begin negotiating the U.S. military presence in order to reduce the odds of an abrupt withdrawal that would play into the hands of the Iranians.

In a meeting with then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in September 2007, National Security Adviser Rubaie said Maliki wanted a "Status of Forces Agreement" (SOFA) that would allow U.S. forces to remain but would "eliminate the irritants that are apparent violations of Iraqi sovereignty", according Bob Woodward's "The War Within".

Maliki's national security adviser was also seeking to protect the Mahdi Army from U.S. military plans to target it for major attacks. Meeting Bush's coordinator for the Iraq War, Douglas Lute, Rubaie said it was better for Iraqi security forces to take on Sadr's militias than for U.S. Special Forces to do so.

He explained to the Baker-Hamilton Commission that Sadr's use of military force was not a problem for Maliki, because Sadr was still part of the government.

Publicly, the Maliki government continued to assure the Bush administration it could count on a long-term military presence. Asked by NBC's Richard Engel on Jan. 24, 2008 if the agreement would provide long-term U.S. bases in Iraq, Zebari said, "This is an agreement of enduring military support. The soldiers are going to have to stay someplace. They can't stay in the air."

Confident that it was going to get a South Korea-style SOFA, the Bush administration gave the Iraqi government a draft on Mar. 7, 2008 that provided for no limit on the number of U.S. troops or the duration of their presence. Nor did it give Iraq any control over U.S. military operations.

But Maliki had a surprise in store for Washington.

A series of dramatic moves by Maliki and Iran over the next few months showed that there had been an explicit understanding between the two governments to prevent the U.S. military from launching major operations against the Mahdi Army and to reach an agreement with Sadr on ending the Mahdi Army's role in return for assurances that Maliki would demand the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.

In mid-March 2007, Maliki ignored pressure from a personal visit by Cheney to cooperate in taking down the Mahdi Army and instead abruptly vetoed U.S. military plans for a major operation against the Mahdi Army in Basra. Maliki ordered an Iraqi army assault on the dug-in Sadrist forces.

Predictably, the operation ran into trouble, and within days, Iraqi officials had asked General Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard, to intervene and negotiate a ceasefire with Sadr, who agreed, although his troops were far from defeated.

A few weeks later, Maliki again prevented the United States from launching its biggest campaign yet against the Mahdi Army in Sadr City. And again, Suleimani was brought in to work out a deal with Sadr allowing government troops to patrol in the former Mahdi Army stronghold.

There was subtext to Suleimani's interventions. Just as Suleimani was negotiating the Basra ceasefire with Sadr, a website associated with former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezai said Iran opposed actions by "hard-line clans" that "only weaken the government and people of Iraq and give a pretext to its occupiers".

In the days that followed that agreement, Iranian state news media portrayed the Iraqi crackdown in Basra as being against illegal and "criminal" forces.

The timing of each political diplomatic move by Maliki appears to have been determined in discussions between Maliki and top Iranian officials.

Just two days after returning from a visit to Tehran in June 2008, Maliki complained publicly about U.S. demands for indefinite access to military bases, control of Iraqi airspace and immunity from prosecution for U.S. troops and private contractors.

In July, he revealed that his government was demanding the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops on a timetable.

The Bush administration was in a state of shock. From July to October, it pretended that it could simply refuse to accept the withdrawal demand, while trying vainly to pressure Maliki to back down.

In the end, however, Bush administration officials realised that Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, who was then far ahead of Republican John McCain in polls, would accept the same or an even faster timetable for withdrawal. In October, Bush decided to sign the draft agreement pledging withdrawal of all U.S. troops by the end of 2011.

The ambitious plans of the U.S. military to use Iraq to dominate the Middle East militarily and politically had been foiled by the very regime the United States had installed, and the officials behind the U.S. scheme, had been clueless about what was happening until it was too late.

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