

Base Politics

By Daniel Luban | July 31, 2007

A bill that would ban permanent U.S. military bases in Iraq overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives last Wednesday.

But many analysts in both the pro- and anti-war camps regard the bill as a primarily symbolic measure that will have little impact on the U.S. government's practical ability to maintain military installations in Iraq.

The bill comes in the context of growing speculation about a "Korea-style" resolution to the war that would leave U.S. troops in Iraq for years or even decades to come.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) introduced the bill, which passed by a decisive 399-24 margin. In addition to barring the use of congressional funding for permanent bases, it also barred the use of funding "to exercise United States economic control of the oil resources of Iraq."

Despite the fact that most congressional Republicans voted for the bill, Republican legislators quickly dismissed it as meaningless. Rep. Steve King (R-IA) called the measure "a cheap political stunt that does not affect the Pentagon's ability to [set up] bases anywhere in the world."

Opponents of the war, as well as supporters, have seconded King's criticism. One flaw with the bill, many say, is that the United States does not consider any of its military bases anywhere in the world to be "permanent." The United States would therefore be able to get around the legislation and establish bases in

Iraq, even for the long term, while maintaining that the installations are only temporary.

The bill "prohibits only those bases which are acknowledged to be for the purpose of permanently stationing troops in Iraq," said Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies. "Therefore any base constructed for temporarily stationing troops, or rotating troops, or anything less than an officially permanent deployment, would still be accepted."

Supporters of the bill argue that it is still a step forward, even if it does not definitively resolve the issue of long-term bases.

"We recognize that the legislation won't by itself stop permanent bases in Iraq," said Jim Cason of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, an organization that supported the bill. "We rather see it as another step in the process of challenging the Bush administration's proposals to establish a long-term presence in Iraq."

Congressional Democrats argued that the legislation is useful, even on a purely symbolic level, as a way to reassure Iraqis of U.S. good intentions. Representative Lee, who introduced the bill, stated that "the perception that the United States plans a permanent military presence in Iraq strengthens the insurgency and fuels the violence against our troops."

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The bill also played into the Democrats' stated goal of forcing Republicans to vote on record about the war on a regular basis.

The issue of permanent bases in Iraq has been a contentious issue since the initial U.S. invasion in 2003. In April 2003, military officials told the New York Times that the United States planned to maintain at least four major bases in Iraq after the end of the war.

These claims were denied within days by then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who called reports that the United States planned a long-term military presence after the war "flat false." Since then, administration officials have always publicly denied any intent to establish permanent bases.

Recent months, however, have seen growing talk of a Korea-style scenario that would keep some U.S. troops in Iraq for an extended period of time, perhaps even decades. In a May 2007 press briefing, White House spokesman Tony Snow spoke of the possibility of an "over-the-horizon support role ... as we have in South Korea, where for many years there have been

American forces stationed there as a way of maintaining stability."

U.S. troops have now been stationed in South Korea for over 50 years.

The bill on permanent bases came as Congress prepared for further debate on troop withdrawals. Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), the chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and a leading war opponent, stated last Wednesday that he would attempt to attach a new plan for troop withdrawals to the annual military spending bill.

Murtha indicated that he expected the primary debate over withdrawal to occur in September, when Gen. David Petraeus and Amb. Ryan Crocker will report on conditions in Iraq.

"When you get to September, this is history, this is when we are going to have a real confrontation with the president," Murtha said. "I see signals that things are going to get worked out."

Daniel Luban writes for the Inter Press Service.

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