

Iraq War fallout will impact U.S. policy in Cuba

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Here's an interesting theory: U.S. policy toward Cuba will be significantly impacted by fallout from the Iraq War.

This is how it goes: Much like the Vietnam syndrome after the unpopular U.S. war in Southeast Asia moved Washington to take a less aggressive stand in foreign affairs in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Iraq War -- and the anti-Americanism that it brought about -- will have a similar impact on U.S. foreign policy.

The United States will become a humbler, more ready-to-talk, multilateralist superpower.

The changes will start almost immediately. In coming months, we will see the beginning of a gradual U.S. pullout from Iraq. (Granted, they will call it something else, but it's going to be a withdrawal anyway.) Simultaneously, the 2008 election campaign will be increasingly dominated by mutual accusations over who was responsible for the Iraq War fiasco, and what should be learned from it.

Then, a newly elected U.S. president will most likely go out of his -- or her -- way to launch a "new realism" in U.S. foreign policy. Its main feature will be avoiding the mistakes that led to the Iraq War, and beginning to restore America's reputation abroad.

The I-word is already contaminating almost any foreign policy discussion, in and out of government.

Last week, at a Council on Foreign Relations discussion in Miami on the U.S. war in Iraq, several participants said the biggest U.S. blunder in Iraq after the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein was dismantling the Iraqi army and destroying Hussein's powerful Baath Party -- the key institutions that kept the country together.

"We ripped out the institutional backbone of that country," said Mark Rosenberg, a political scientist who is currently chancellor of Florida's State University System. "We will not make that mistake in Cuba."

While there is no serious possibility of a U.S. military intervention in Cuba, the lessons of the Iraq War will drive U.S. foreign policy makers to avoid a meltdown of the Cuban army and the Communist Party, the only existing institutions in Cuba, other speakers said.

In recent years, the prevailing view within the U.S. government has been that the main U.S. priority in Cuba is preventing a chaotic situation that would result in a new mass emigration of hundreds of thousands of refugees to Florida's coasts after Fidel Castro's death. The lessons learned from the breakup of Iraq's key institutions may reinforce this line of thinking.

In practical terms, the "Iraq Syndrome" may cause Washington to move gradually away from its decades-old policy of trade sanctions to force a "regime change" in Cuba to a less ambitious policy of seeking "regime reform."

Some longtime Cuba watchers don't rule out an even bigger change, toward "regime acceptance."

"Iraq is driving U.S. politics toward the center," says Manuel Rocha, a former career U.S. ambassador who, among other Latin American countries, served at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. "The American electorate is moving toward the center, and the next president is going to be a moderate centrist, whether he is a Republican or a Democrat."

Unlike President Bush, a moderate centrist U.S. president will not threaten to veto congressional bills calling for relaxation of U.S. travel or trade sanctions on Cuba, Rocha told me in an interview.

"The United States will go to a more moderate multilateralist foreign policy," says Rocha. "And to avoid the instability that would bring about a massive exodus of Cubans, Washington may be forced eventually to go from a policy of regime change to one of regime acceptance."

My conclusion: U.S. policy toward Cuba has always been a mostly U.S. domestic policy issue, and -- with Florida once again being a swing state in next year's presidential election -- I don't see that changing in the short term.

And if it does, Washington is not likely to reward repression with an overnight normalization of ties.

Rather, the next U.S. president will probably seek to gradually replace unilateral sanctions with effective multilateral pressures on the Cuban dictatorship to allow basic freedoms.

But I agree with the general premise that Iraq will set the tone of future U.S. foreign policy, and that Cuba won't be an exception.

To forecast future U.S. Cuba policy, we will have to look at Iraq.