



COMMENTARY

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington D.C.

The Baker-Hamilton Study Group Report: The Elephant Gives Birth to a Mouse

By Anthony Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

December 6, 2006

It is going to take time to make a full appraisal of all the annexes and content of the full report, but the principle recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton Commission are very unlikely to produce success. The report does recognize that the situation in Iraq is deteriorating and that the current strategy is unworkable – but then so does virtually everyone else.

The key problem is that events may be spiraling out of control, and the key to success is not outside action but Iraqi action. As a result, the most important single sentence in the Study Group's executive summary is its introductory caveat, "if the Iraqi government moves forward with national reconciliation."

The problem with this caveat is that almost any reasonable mix of recommendations would work *if* Iraqi society as a whole moved forward with reconciliation. The problem is that the report does not make workable suggestions for creating or incentivizing such action.

Simply calling for a weak and divided Iraqi government to act in the face of all of the forces tearing Iraq apart is almost feckless: It is a "triumph of hope over experience." Efforts to exhort Iraqis into reconciliation are scarcely new; this has been a core political effort of the Bush Administration since before the elections, and one dates back to at least the summer of 2005.

The only new twist is to call for the U.S. to use threats and disincentives to pressure the Iraqi government to act decisively. Saying that, the "United States must make it clear to the Iraqi government that the United States could carry out its plans, including planned redeployments, even if the Iraqi government did not implement their planned changes" borders on being irresponsible. It comes far too close to having the U.S. threaten to take its ball and go home if the Iraqi children do not play the game our way.

Such a policy ignores that lack of a clear Sunni leader and power structure, the diverse ambitions of the Kurds, and above all the divisions among the Shi'ites. Maliki is not weak because he personally is weak, he is weak because he is a compromise leader with two powerful parties – Sadr and SCIRI – that are seeking Shi'ite power and pursuing their own ambitions.

More importantly, it ignores the fact that the Iraqi government is weak as much because of U.S. action as Iraq's inherent problems. The U.S. destroyed the secular core of the country by disbanding the Ba'ath. The U.S. created a constitutional process long before Iraq was ready, and created an intensely divisive document with more than 50 key areas of "clarification" including federation, control of oil resources and money, control of security, the role of religion, the nature of the legal system, etc. The U.S. created an electoral system that almost forced Iraqis to vote to be Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Kurds and divided the nation on sectarian and ethnic lines. The U.S. effectively sent a bull in to liberate a china shop, and the Study Group now called upon the U.S. to threaten to remove the bull if the shop doesn't fix the china.

Calling on outside powers to help the U.S. and on the U.S. to "immediately launch a new diplomatic offensive to building an international consensus for stability in Iraq and the region" may be worth trying. Relying on "Iraq's neighbors and key states inside and outside the region to form a support group to reinforce security and reconciliation within Iraq"

does, however, come close to a pious hope. The neighbors that are going to try have tried. A conference inside or outside Iraq is still a good idea, but hinging a strategy on its probable success is simply foolish.

There is even less reason to rely on Iran and Syria to decisively change their behavior and their present perceptions of their national interest. Why should they? Presumably, they feel their present strategy and actions are correct, and why should they react to American weakness in ways that help the U.S. Dialogue with both states by all means, but great expectations are not a meaningful policy.

The executive summary does not come to grips with incentive options. It is possible that some kind of U.S. or international consortium that offered a major aid package tied to conciliation could have an impact. There are many areas where aid is needed at the local level, and it might be particularly useful in the insurgent areas in the West and mixed cities. A major aid program to revitalize and expand Iraq's oil exports, tied to fair sharing of the wealth might help. It is even possible that a relocation plan might ease some sectarian and ethnic adjustments.

The main report does touch briefly upon these issues and even recommends a moderate U.S. aid expenditure of \$5 billion a year. The executive summary, however, is all tacit threats and no incentives and there is nothing approaching an aid plan or a workable approach to using aid to quickly bring stability or provide incentives for conciliation. Worse, it makes the threat that, "If the Iraqi government does not make substantial progress toward the achievement of the milestones of national reconciliation, security, and governance, the U.S. should reduce its political, military, or economic support for the Iraqi government."

The Study Group is threatening to weaken a weak government; good for its opponents, but bad for the U.S. and Iraq.

The report also does not provide a credible security policy option. Undefined U.S. troop cuts are desirable by 2008, or possibly earlier or later. The U.S. is to rush in more qualified trainers and embeds that it doesn't have, and assign more existing combat forces unqualified for the mission. The plan for dealing with the militias is to form a new U.S. bureaucracy without addressing the need for immediate, day-to-day security in a nation without effective courts and police in most threatened areas.

There is no meaningful plan for creating a mix of effective Iraqi military forces, police forces, governance, and criminal justice system at any point in the near future, much less by 2008. A truly effective effort may be possible with political conciliation and the proper resources and planning. But, (a) the full report does not provide a credible explanation of how this can happen, and (b) the development of effective Iraqi forces is definitely not possible without conciliation.

The main report ignores the problems in today's training and force development programs to the point where many of its recommendations are little more than exhortative nonsense. It also is pointless to make a long series of detailed sub-recommendations for change in the Iraqi security forces in the main report without detailed justification and without a meaningful detailed assessment of the capabilities of the existing force and training effort.

Finally, there is no "Plan B." The report does not address what happens if events spiral out of control, or how the U.S. should react to possible future contingencies. The tacit assumption is that they play it our way or we leave faster. There is no clear plan for what to do if large-scale civil war occurs; how to deal with regional actors if they become involved in the conflict or take positions the U.S. opposes. The message seems to be that domestic U.S. policy concerns demand more attention than the nature and pace of events in Iraq or America's longer-term security interests in Iraq, the region, and the world.

This does not mean that there are not many good ideas and a great deal of useful and thoughtful material embedded in the main body of the report. But, this is not a good or workable plan for the future.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in these publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.