



COMMENTARY

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Blair's "Mission Accomplished" Moment

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Prime Minister Tony Blair recently announced that up to 1,600 of the 7,100 British troops in Iraq would start to withdraw this spring – a move that has triggered a number of questions on this side of the Atlantic about Blair's timing, motives, and the UK-U.S. relationship in general:

Should Blair's decision come as a surprise? No.

Blair's decision makes sense for a number of reasons, especially at home. With his approval ratings so low and public opposition to the war in Iraq so high, Blair has been under tremendous pressure to withdraw UK troops or show some shift in policy. Like Bush, Blair, as he approaches his final months in office, is also in search of a legacy. By stating that the UK is able to stand down because the Iraqis are standing up, Blair is trying to bring a sense of accomplishment to what many Brits view as a failed mission.

Does the UK withdrawal signal a failure? Yes and no.

Calling the British efforts in the south a total failure would be wrong. Yes, British troops are leaving behind a fragile political and security environment, one that is largely controlled by Shiite Islamists who have little interest in promoting national unity. That said, the British troops around Basra have lacked both the resources and the mandate to rid the region of the militias and rival forces that have threatened stability and order in recent years. What they did do with their limited resources was try to create a basic level of security in Basra proper and the conditions under which Iraqi police forces could operate.

Does this decision mark the end of an era? Yes.

Blair remains convinced that joining the United States in the war in Iraq was a good idea, and he repeated his commitment this week to the overarching mission. If he has regrets, he is not sharing them. Nevertheless, the U.S.-UK relationship is evolving and not just because Bush and Blair have a limited number of days left in office.

The Iraq experience is going to haunt the UK-U.S. relationship for years to come, particularly as it has left the UK public deeply suspicious of U.S. policies and commitment to human rights. The next British Prime Minister will have a hard time ignoring that reality. If Bush and Blair's successors have any interest in returning to a shared agenda, one that stretches beyond the shadows of Iraq, they will have to expand the dialogue to other areas of common interest such as climate change, energy security, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Is there a silver lining? Yes.

While the UK is decreasing its troop presence in Iraq, Blair announced today that his country will increase its troop levels in Afghanistan by about 800. The timing of this decision could not be better. NATO troops are beginning to prepare for the Taliban's annual "spring offensive," which many predict to be one of the worst yet. Given that NATO's summit in Riga last fall failed to produce any new troop commitments, the British troop increase (albeit modest) is a welcome sign of change. With a little luck, it might even inspire others to follow suit.

Thankfully, the transatlantic partners have found a way to move beyond their differences over Iraq (although that war will continue to haunt the relationship from time to time). What Putin and Larijani did in Munich, though, was serve as a reminder of the long list of global challenges facing European and American policymakers in the coming months. Grappling with Iran's nuclear ambitions, the rolling back of democratic reforms in Russia, Darfur, Afghanistan, the Arab-Israeli conflict, radical extremism, energy security, and climate change will require much more than goodwill, however. What the two partners need today is a new strategic dialogue that will enable Europe and the United States to craft common strategies and match their ambitions with real capabilities.

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