



Eye on Iraq

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STANDARD VERSION

The Marines' Three-Block War in Iraq

Global Beat Syndicate (KRT) WASHINGTON —We are not engaged in peacekeeping in Iraq. America is engaged in a mix of lower-combat, lower-risk peacekeeping and higher-combat, higher-risk peace enforcement.

This distinction is important because such a mix will see more U.S. troops killed than would occur from keeping the peace alone. As such, the tendency among the media and policy makers to call virtually all military actions in Iraq "peacekeeping" must be corrected if Americans are to form realistic expectations about the casualty rate there.

The U.S. Marines have a name for a combination of operations like those going on in Iraq: a "three-block war." That term was first coined by Gen. Charles Krulak, Marine Corps Commandant from 1995-1999, to describe scenarios where troops are engaged in a spectrum of operations, from humanitarian missions, through peacekeeping and peace enforcement-type actions, to full-blown combat -- possibly within the space of three city blocks. To successfully wage such a war requires transitioning between its three elements as smoothly and seamlessly as possible, highlighting the relationship between peace keeping and peace enforcement.

Peacekeeping revolves around three inter-related principles: consent to the deployment of peacekeepers by all the parties involved in a conflict; impartiality on the part of the peacekeepers; and, the non-use of force -- except in self-defense. The presence of peacekeepers is symbolic rather than coercive, and the success of their missions is highly dependent upon the permission of the belligerents they interpose themselves between. Peace enforcers make no such assumptions; they rely instead on force of arms in a hostile environment.

The need to navigate the gap between peacekeeping and peace enforcement, and the difficulties this involves, became apparent during the tide of gray zone operations that erupted in the wake of the Cold War. Named so as to exclude them from the black and white parameters in which the peacekeeping-peace enforcement divide had previously been viewed, these missions ran the full gamut of the three-block war, as do coalition operations in Iraq. Since the early days of the war there, American and British troops have delivered humanitarian aid, conducted policing-type missions, and engaged in varying

degrees of combat.

Iraq is best understood in this context: peacekeeping and peace enforcement are two points on a spectrum, with gray-zone operations lying between the two. This concept was once embraced by the U.S. military, which called such operations "aggravated peacekeeping." But a year after that concept was outlined by Gen. Barry McCaffrey at a National Defense University symposium in Washington in November 1993, the concept of aggravated peacekeeping disappeared almost without trace, a victim of the retreat from such operations after the death of 18 U.S. servicemen in Mogadishu, Somalia. The "spectrum approach" to peace operations previously adopted by the American military was also discarded, with peacekeeping and peace enforcement once more viewed as conceptually distinct. This separation into two distinct concepts became enshrined in U.S. joint doctrine. It thus fell to the Marines, with their three-block war concept to keep an eye on the reality that, to quote Commandant Krulak again, "The future is not the 'son of Desert Storm,' but the stepchild of Somalia and Chechnya."

Nor is the future the natural offspring of any of the dozens of UN and other peacekeeping operations that have been undertaken in the last five decades. But this fact is being blurred due to the recurring use of the term "peacekeeping" to refer to ongoing operations in Iraq, which suggests that journalists, and many policy makers, are kidding themselves -- and by extension, the American public -- as to what exactly is going on there. In so doing, they risk underestimating the cost in blood and treasure that achieving anything resembling victory in Iraq will demand.

Before peace can be "kept" in Iraq it must first be created. For us to prevail there requires peacekeeping, but it also requires peace enforcement. This means more casualties than is implicit in the term "peacekeeping." President Bush was technically correct when, on May 1, he declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. But declaring a war "over" does not make it so, any more than declaring military efforts are "peacekeeping operations" means that peace enforcement is at an end.

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