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After Iraq, a New U.S. Military Model

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON -- It's been called the most dramatic shift in U.S. military power since World War II. But it's not the widely anticipated drawdown of American combat forces in Iraq.

While debate rages over the future of America's military role in Iraq, another massive U.S. military reorganization — largely overlooked but perhaps even more significant over the long term — is already under way from Northeast Asia to West Africa. And it offers valuable lessons as President George W. Bush considers his next steps in Iraq.

Under the 10-year plan, announced by Bush two years ago, the Pentagon is giving up more than one-third of its overseas military bases and buildings and bringing home 70,000 troops and 100,000 of their family members from major bases in Germany and South Korea.

To help transform the military into a faster, more flexible force, troops will instead rotate through smaller, strategically located "forward operating sites," such as air bases in Bulgaria, Romania and Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, the Pentagon is creating a network of austere "cooperative security locations" — remote runways and warehouses stockpiled with equipment, in places like Senegal, Ghana and Uganda. According to General James Jones, who recently retired as head of U.S. European Command — which now covers most of Africa — these "lily pads" will allow American forces to leapfrog quickly to future crisis zones.

Meanwhile, Washington grapples with how to reduce American casualties in Iraq while preserving U.S. influence on the ground. To dampen anti-American sentiment among Iraqis, the Iraq Study Group recommended that Bush disavow permanent military bases in Iraq while remaining open to "a temporary base or bases."

Fortunately, the U.S. commander in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, needn't look far for a blueprint. His command, which includes the strategic Horn of Africa, is home to what Abizaid has called a model for future military operations.

From their base in the former French colony of Djibouti, a small U.S. task force comprised mostly of special forces has been the American vanguard against terrorism in a region that saw the bombings of U.S. embassies in 1998, the U.S. destroyer Cole in 2000, and a Kenyan hotel full of Israeli tourists in 2002.

In late 2002, an unmanned Predator drone, reportedly operated by the CIA from Djibouti, launched a missile that killed an al Qaeda operative in Yemen. If U.S. forces were ordered into action, overtly or covertly, against the Islamic militias who now dominate neighboring Somalia and are threatening holy war against Ethiopia, they would most likely deploy from Djibouti.

More often, however, the task force's mission has been humanitarian, building clinics and schools and digging wells from rural Yemen to Ethiopia's Muslim-majority Ogaden region, long contested by Christian Ethiopia and Muslim Somalia.

The task force is waging a genuine battle for African hearts and minds. U.S. forces provided tents and tons of supplies for refugees in eastern Ethiopia displaced by the historic floods ravaging East Africa. Not to be outdone, the Islamic militias across the border in Somalia have organized their own fundraising and relief efforts for flood victims.

"This investment," General Abizaid says of the task force, "is one of the best our country has ever made." In Iraq, the United States has spent \$400 billion maintaining a 140,000-strong occupation force that has inflamed the Arab and Muslim worlds. In contrast, 1,500 troops based in Djibouti, working with an annual budget of \$15 million, deploy on discrete missions that generate headlines and good will.

Low-key, high-return operations like the Djibouti task force are no panacea for the myriad military challenges facing the United States. Large outposts in Kuwait, Bahrain and Afghanistan will remain vital to U.S. military operations for years to come. And even small bases are subject to the whims of foreign governments: last year, for example, Uzbekistan expelled U.S. forces after Washington protested that nation's human rights abuses.

Still, given current realities — an overstretched U.S. military, Iraq slipping into civil war, Muslim outrage at "American imperialism," and an American public increasingly tired of the largest sustained military operation since the Vietnam War — scattering American troops among smaller, more remote and less visible bases offers an attractive way forward as military planners wage their "long war" against Islamic terrorism.

For the United States, in Iraq and beyond, a leaner military presence abroad may be the key to greater security.

The author is founder and chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington, DC. This is a personal comment.