

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for
Nomination of Richard Boucher
February 16, 2006

Today the Foreign Relations Committee meets to discuss the nomination of Richard Boucher to be Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. Mr. Boucher is a distinguished career diplomat who has served most recently as Spokesman for the Department of State. He also served as the Senior U.S. Official for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation from 1999 to 2002, as well as Ambassador to the Republic of Cyprus from 1993 to 1996. He brings a wealth of experience to this new position, and we are delighted to have the opportunity for a dialogue on South and Central Asia.

The State Department's February 9 announcement that offices devoted to the Central Asian states would be merged with the South Asia Bureau reflects Secretary Rice's attempt to use State Department resources more effectively. This Committee looks forward to working closely with the State Department to ensure that the new Bureau is achieving the goals of building our strategic and economic relationships, supporting nascent democracies, and combating instability and extremist movements.

Among the most important activities of the Bureau will be coordinating international security and economic assistance to Afghanistan. We have witnessed a steady political transition in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The Afghans held successful Parliamentary and Provincial elections last fall. The international community displayed strong support for Afghanistan at the London Donor's Conference, and the recent Afghanistan Compact is a credible plan for strengthening the security, economy, and governance of the nation.

Despite this progress, severe threats to Afghanistan's future remain, especially from terrorism, religious extremism, and the narcotics trade. Overcoming these challenges will require a sustained international commitment.

Perhaps the most exciting and promising transition occurring in the region is India's diplomatic and economic ascension. The U.S. Congress welcomes India's progress as we seek to work more closely on the global stage to address mutual concerns, such as countering terror, promoting democracy, preventing HIV/AIDS, and improving energy security.

To emphasize the importance of energy cooperation, last November I introduced S. 1950, the "U.S.-India Energy Security Cooperation Act of 2005." This bill promotes collaboration between our countries in securing global energy supplies and increasing the availability of clean energy. The Congress also continues to closely monitor developments related to the important negotiations on civil nuclear cooperation with India.

In addition to a landmark visit to India later this month, President Bush will go to Pakistan, a key partner in the war on terror. Islamabad has made significant economic strides, but continues to face challenges, including a lack of strong democratic institutions and continuing threats to the country's stability from extremist and sectarian violence.

Pakistan also is still recovering from the catastrophic earthquake on October 8, 2005, that left nearly 70,000 dead and millions homeless. The U.S. government has committed \$510 million in assistance to help see Pakistan through this crisis.

Other South Asian nations, namely Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, also will require close U.S. attention. While Nepal and Sri Lanka both face violent insurgencies, Bangladesh's traditional commitment to democracy, religious pluralism, and women's empowerment is now being challenged by extremists who want to establish Islamic rule in that country.

In Central Asia, Congress looks forward to working with the Administration to encourage democratic development and respect for human rights, while continuing our valuable partnerships in the global war on terror. Since the break-up of the former Soviet Union, transition to stable, democratic political systems has been slow. Over the past year, we have seen backsliding in democracy and human rights, particularly in Uzbekistan, where government forces conducted a violent crackdown on civil society and public demonstrations. An exception to this negative trend, however, has been the Kyrgyz Republic, where democratic elections brought a new president.

Corruption continues to be a problem in Central Asia. Criminal groups in the region have been conduits for smuggled narcotics from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere to markets in Russia and Europe. I am also concerned about the direction of Russia's economic and security activities in Central Asia, and look forward to hearing how the Administration plans to deal with energy security in this critical region. Most of the natural gas exported from Central Asia is sent through pipelines controlled by Russia.

Given the importance of South and Central Asia, it is vital that we act expeditiously in evaluating the nominee. We look forward to hearing his insights and to learning how he would work on behalf of the President and the Secretary of State in leading the South and Central Asia Bureau.

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