

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard Lugar
Opening Statement
Hearing on Iraq Options
January 23, 2007

I thank Senator Biden for holding this hearing. Today, we will have the opportunity to broaden our focus beyond the President's plan as we explore an array of strategies in Iraq. The variance between the plans offered at this hearing underscores the complexity of the situation in Iraq and the need to provide close oversight of the Administration's policies.

Although the President is committed to his approach and has initiated steps to implement it, planning by the Administration must continue. We must plan for contingencies, including the failure of the Iraqi government to reach compromises and the persistence of violence despite U.S. and Iraqi government efforts.

Last week, our Committee had the opportunity to engage military experts on the President's plan, as well as military conditions in Iraq. Our panel of four distinguished retired generals voiced deep concerns about how we translate our military position in Iraq into political gains. It remains unclear how expanded, continued, or reduced U.S. military presence can be used to stimulate Iraqi political reconciliation.

Wide, though not unanimous, agreement exists that our military presence in Iraq represents leverage – either because it can be expanded or because it can be withdrawn. But there is little agreement on how to translate this leverage into effective action by the Iraqi government. Some commentators talk of “creating space” for the Iraqi government to establish itself, but it is far from clear that the government can or will take advantage of such space.

In a previous hearing, Secretary Richard Haass highlighted the fundamental disconnect that we must overcome for any plan to work when he observed: “The U.S. goal is to work with Iraqis to establish a functioning democracy in which the interests and rights of minorities are protected. The goal of the Iraqi government appears to be to establish a country in which the rights and interests of the Shia majority are protected above all else.”

In such a situation, even if additional troops have a discernable impact on the violence in Iraq, this progress in the street may be immaterial to achieving political reconciliation. If this is true, all we would gain with a surge is a temporary and partial reduction of violence in Baghdad. That would have some salutary benefits for some Iraqis, but it would not help us achieve our strategic objectives.

If we undertake the tremendous investment that sending more American soldiers to Iraq represents, it should be in support of a clear strategy for achieving a negotiated reconciliation. We should not depend on theories or hopes that something good may happen if we dampen violence in Baghdad.

Thus, as the Administration increases troops, it becomes even more imperative to develop a backup plan and aggressively seek a framework for a political solution. It is not enough to set benchmarks to measure the progress of the Iraqi government. If the Iraqi government has different timetables and objectives than us, such benchmarks will not be met in a way that transforms the politics of the nation.

Backup plans must be synchronized with a wider strategic vision for the Middle East. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the rise of the Shia majority in Iraq have opened possibilities for broader conflict along sectarian lines. Sunni Arab regimes in the region are deeply concerned about the influence of Iran and its growing aggressiveness. An Iran that is bolstered by an alliance with a Shiite government in Iraq or a separate Shiite state in southern Iraq would pose serious challenges for Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab governments. The underlying issue for American foreign policy is how we defend our interests in the Middle East given the new realities that our four years in Iraq have imposed. We need frank policy discussions in this country about our vital interests in the region. The difficulties we have had in Iraq make a strong presence in the Middle East more imperative, not less.

Again, I welcome our distinguished guests and look forward to a thoughtful hearing.

###