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Lugar: We must evaluate best options for our national security

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Dick Lugar made the following statement at today's hearing on Afghanistan with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

I join the Chairman in welcoming Secretary Clinton, Secretary Gates, and Admiral Mullen. We appreciate very much that you have come to the Foreign Relations Committee today. The presence of all three of you underscores that success in Afghanistan depends on both military and civilian programs. We must sustain this civil-military approach, given the inter-locking elements of the newly announced strategy.

As we consider our course in Afghanistan, we should evaluate options according to how well they contribute to U.S. national security. The ultimate purpose of committing tens of thousands of new troops and tens of billions of additional dollars to the war effort in Afghanistan must be to enhance U.S. security and our vital national interests in the region.

This may seem to be an obvious point. But during long wars, specific tactical objectives can become ends in themselves, disconnected from the broader strategic context or an accounting of finite resources. Pursuing al-Qaeda or the Taliban and improving governance and economic opportunity in Afghanistan are important. But when our country commits the level of forces contemplated by the President to a sustained war, the objective must be absolutely fundamental to U.S. security. This is especially true at a time when our armed forces have been strained by many years of high deployment rates, our capacity for new government debt is limited, and our nation has not fully emerged from a severe recession.

The President made the case on Tuesday that what happens in Afghanistan can directly impact the safety of Americans. I believe that most Americans accept this point based on the reality that the 9/11 attacks were conceived in Afghanistan and that the Taliban forces who protected al Qaeda are likely to become more resurgent if we leave. But much more discussion is warranted on whether the Afghanistan mission is so central to our core national security that it necessitates huge spending increases and the deployment of a large portion of our finite combat capability. We have to ask whether the costs of this deployment are justified in our overall national security context and whether we are mistakenly concentrating our forces to fight a terrorist enemy in a specific location even as the global terrorist threat is becoming increasingly diffuse.

Terrorist cells that are associated with or sympathetic to al-Qaeda exist in numerous countries in Africa and the Middle East. Terrorist attacks were perpetrated in Europe by home grown cells. Killing Taliban fighters and training Afghan soldiers and policemen are unlikely to substantially diminish these broader terrorist threats.

Moreover, the results of even the most skillful civil-military campaign in Afghanistan are likely to be imperfect in the long run. I do not doubt that the application of additional U.S. and allied forces will result in a military setback for the Taliban. During this time, it is hoped that progress can be made in building Afghan security forces. But over the long run, we should recognize that problems stemming from tribalism, corrupt governance, and lack of economic opportunity in the country are almost certain to persist, complicating efforts to ensure that the central government can effectively govern the country and resist the Taliban when allied troops are withdrawn. Even if the President's plan achieves the very best stabilization scenario, allowing for U.S. withdrawals on the schedule he contemplates, we may be responsible for most of the Afghanistan defense and police budgets indefinitely.

Perhaps most importantly, it is not clear how an expanded military effort in Afghanistan addresses the problem of Taliban and al-Qaeda safe havens across the border in Pakistan. If these safe havens persist, any strategy in Afghanistan will be substantially incomplete. Specifically, will Pakistan work with us to eliminate the leadership of Osama bin Laden and other major al Qaeda officials?

As hearings in our Committee have underscored, the potential global impact of instability in a nuclear armed Pakistan dwarfs anything that is likely to happen in Afghanistan. The future direction of governance in Pakistan will have consequences for non-proliferation efforts, global economic stability, our relationships with India and China, and security in both the Middle East and South Asia regions, among other major issues. The President did not dwell on Pakistan in his speech on Tuesday evening, perhaps because sensitivities in that country to American influences and intentions are extremely delicate. But the President and his team must justify their plan not only on the basis of how it will affect Afghanistan, but also on how it will impact our efforts to promote a much stronger alliance with Pakistan that embraces vital common objectives.

Having made these observations, I want to recognize that the President has been confronted with extremely difficult choices in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He and his team have worked through the problem carefully and deliberately to reach their conclusions. There are no options available that are guaranteed to succeed. Every conceivable course, from complete withdrawal, to maintaining the status quo, to the plan outlined by the President, to an unrestrained and unlimited counter-insurgency campaign has its own set of risks and costs for the United States. The President deserves credit for accepting ownership of this difficult problem as we go forward and for his clear advocacy expressed in his speech on Tuesday night.

Congress and the American people now must evaluate whether this course has a reasonable chance to succeed, if success can be defined, and whether the objectives outlined are worth the expenditure of American and Afghan lives and treasure.

In this situation, the advocacy of the President and his national security team must be as broad-minded and thorough as his policy review appeared to be. Within months, the President is likely to ask Congress for additional funds related to Afghanistan. In the meantime, the Administration must be prepared to answer many difficult questions about its strategy as the American people study the potential consequences of the President's decision.

I thank our distinguished witnesses for their leadership. I look forward to hearing their testimony.

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