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“Exploring Three Strategies for Afghanistan”

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

419 Dirsen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

September 16, 2009, 2:30 – 5:00 PM,

The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held a hearing Wednesday exploring possible strategies in Afghanistan. The three witnesses representing alternative strategies were **Dr. John Nagl**, president of the Center for a New American Security, **Dr. Stephen Biddle**, Senior Fellow for Defense Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, and **Rory Stewart**, director of the Carr Center on Human Rights Policy at Harvard University.

Committee Chairman **Sen. John Kerry** (D-Mass.) opened the hearing by defining his own principles for an Afghan strategy: that Afghans must take ownership of their struggle, that an open-ended obligation is unacceptable, that the U.S. must recognize Afghanistan’s decentralized nature, that a single solution may not work for all regions of Afghanistan and that Afghanistan’s context in a tumultuous region must be considered. **He stressed that the goal of the U.S. mission should not be to impose U.S.-style democracy or even a centralized government.** Ranking Minority Member **Sen. Richard Lugar** (R-Ind.) followed by lamenting a lack of adequately capable civilian support staff to help stabilize the political situation in Afghanistan, a task for which he argued the military is not prepared.

Dr. Nagl, who helped author the U.S. Army’s counterinsurgency field manuals, argued in favor of the traditional counterinsurgency approach of “clear, hold and build.” Approaches that include only a small number of soldiers on the ground have not had a good track record in Afghanistan. He favored a larger investment on behalf of the U.S. and the international community in developing Afghan security forces. **Afghan forces must be able to hold territory on their own before the security situation can improve enough to allow state-building to succeed.**

Saying that the decision to continue on in Afghanistan is a close call, Dr. Biddle argued that Afghanistan represents important but indirect U.S. interests. Though the U.S. would like to see the rule of law and human rights prosper in Afghanistan, it usually pursues those goals through other means. **Afghanistan is unique, however, because its status may have a destabilizing effect on Pakistan.**

Stewart, who wrote a bestselling book about his walk across Afghanistan between 2000 and 2002, argued in favor of a minimal goal in Afghanistan. **The “clear, hold, build” strategy, he said, relied on a false parallel with Iraq, where local politics allowed state-building to advance. In Afghanistan, those political currents do not exist.** A large troop presence, he claimed, is unsustainable and will result in even more destabilization by fueling anti-American sentiment, though it is unlikely this effect will be decisive in Pakistan. A limited goal of counter-terrorism and relative stability can be achieved with a small troop presence.

In questioning, Sen. Kerry explored the possibility and ramifications of a more limited counter-terrorism mission. Sen. Lugar asked Stewart whether it may be possible to work with some tribal and local leaders to provide stability. Stewart agreed that this option is distasteful, but may be necessary. Lugar admitted that would be “disappointing,” but noted that with finite resources, “unorthodox thinking may be required.”

Sen. Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.) worried that the current strategy carries significant risks as well and that the military does not have the capacity to address political problems. He asked Stewart if a smaller U.S. presence would allow the Taliban to assume control, but Stewart said he doubted the Taliban could exercise that much power, having been discredited while in government.

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) asked to what degree nation-building should be part of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. **Nagl and Biddle both said that some nation-building was important if the U.S. was to defeat the Taliban, while Stewart dismissed the idea that nation-building was a national security interest.** **Sen. Benjamin Cardin** (D-Md.) discussed whether economic aid could help undermine the Taliban, but Nagl disagreed, insisting that economic projects without security improvements would not accomplish much.

Much of the rest of the discussion centered on troop levels, but Sen. Edward Kaufman (D-Del.) brought the focus back to governance by asking if Bosnia represented a model where the “clear, hold, build” strategy succeeded, to which Stewart replied that Afghanistan does not have the history of centralized government that Bosnia had and would be much more difficult. **Imagining a worst-case scenario, Sen. Kaufman asked whether the Taliban could take control of nuclear-armed Pakistan in the absence of U.S. troops.** Stewart agreed this prospect was terrible, but argued Afghanistan is not that important to developments in Pakistan.