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Byrd Warns President against Making Long-Term Security Commitments to Iraq without Congressional Consent

WASHINGTON, DC...U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd, D.W.Va., joined five of his Senate colleagues this week in sending a letter to President Bush warning against rushing the United States into long-term security commitments to Iraq without the full participation and consent of Congress. The letter comes on the heels of a preliminary agreement reached last week between the U.S. and Iraqi governments on long-term bilateral cooperation on political, security and economic matters, with a final agreement to be concluded by next summer.

“If this Administration wishes to make binding commitments to the government of Iraq -- commitments that will define the future of the relationship between our two countries, regarding permanent bases and security guarantees -- it must do so with the full advice and consent of the United States Congress, in accordance with our Constitutional mandate,” said Senator Byrd.

The “Declaration of Principles”, which was agreed to last week without Congressional consultation, sets the stage for discussions between the U.S. and Iraqi governments on defining a “long-term relationship” on critical security, political, and economic issues.

The Senators’ letter states clearly that the Congress must be included in the formulation of any such agreement, which could involve the establishment of permanent U.S. military bases and future security commitments: “It is unacceptable for your Administration to unilaterally fashion a long-term relationship with Iraq without the full and comprehensive participation of Congress from the very start of such negotiations.”

Administration officials have acknowledged that this agreement may address future U.S. troop levels and long-term military bases in Iraq, as well as U.S. security assurances to protect the government of Iraq against foreign aggression.

Full text of the letter is included:

Dear Mr. President:

We write you today regarding the “Declaration of Principles” agreed upon last week between the United States and Iraq outlining the broad scope of discussions to be held over the next six months to institutionalize long term U.S.-Iraqi cooperation in the political, economic, and security realms. It is our understanding that these discussions seek to produce a strategic framework agreement, no later than July 31, 2008, to help define “a long-term relationship of cooperation and friendship as two fully sovereign and independent states with common interests”.

The future of American policy towards Iraq, especially in regard to the issues of U.S. troop levels, permanent U.S. military bases, and future security commitments, has generated strong debate among the American people and their elected representatives. Agreements between our two countries relating to these issues must involve the full participation and consent of the Congress as a co-equal branch of the U.S. government. Furthermore, the future U.S. presence in Iraq is a central issue in the current Presidential campaign. We believe a security commitment that obligates the United States to go to war on behalf of the Government of Iraq at this time is not in America’s long-term national security interest and does not reflect the will of the American people. Commitments made during the final year of your Presidency should not unduly or artificially constrain your successor when it comes to Iraq.

In particular, we want to convey our strong concern regarding any commitments made by the United States with respect to American security assurances to Iraq to help deter and defend against foreign aggression or other violations of Iraq’s territorial integrity. Security assurances, once made, cannot be easily rolled back without incurring a great cost to America’s strategic credibility and imperiling the stability of our nation’s other alliances around the world. Accordingly, security assurances must be extended with great care and only in the context of broad bipartisan agreement that such assurances serve our abiding national interest. Such assurances, if legally binding, are generally made in the context of a formal treaty subject to the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate but in any case cannot be made without Congressional authorization.

Our unease is heightened by remarks made on November 26th by General Douglas Lute, the Assistant to the President for Iraq and Afghanistan, that Congressional input is not foreseen. General Lute was quoted as asserting at a White House press briefing, "We don't anticipate now that these negotiations will lead to the status of a formal treaty which would then bring us to formal negotiations or formal inputs from the Congress." It is unacceptable for your Administration to unilaterally fashion a long-term relationship with Iraq without the full and comprehensive participation of Congress from the very start of such negotiations.

We look forward to learning more details as the Administration commences negotiations with the Iraqi government on the contours of long-term political, economic, and security ties between our two nations. We trust you agree that the proposed extension of long-term U.S. security commitments to a nation in a critical region of the world requires the full participation and consent of the Congress as a co-equal branch of our government.

Sincerely,

Robert Byrd, U.S. Senator; Robert P. Casey, Jr., U.S. Senator; Ted Kennedy, U.S. Senator; Carl Levin, U.S. Senator; Hillary Clinton, U.S. Senator; and Jim Webb, U.S. Senator

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