
‘I Have Urged President Bush To Negotiate A Free Trade Agreement With Georgia’ – Sen. Richard Lugar

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"NATO failed to provide Ukraine and Georgia with the Membership Action Plan that would put them on a path to join the alliance. This was a critical error that has broad implications for European security," Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar said in an exclusive interview with The Georgian Times.

Republican Senator Richard Lugar, who has been to Georgia a couple of times, is considered a strong supporter of Georgia and its government. During his recent visit to Georgia, Sen. Lugar openly said he does not favor the presence of Russian-led peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Sen. Lugar has actively been pushing for membership of both Ukraine and Georgia in NATO.

Richard Lugar: While Russia doesn't have a veto over NATO decisions, the Alliance must remain vigilant that Moscow does not develop a de facto veto. Their strong positions as a critical energy supplier cannot be permitted to affect NATO decisions.

G.T.: How will the relations between Russia and the US develop in the next 2-3 years? What should Georgia expect for this period?

R.L.: After 200 years, the goals of U.S.-Russian relations remain the same. We want our relationship to contribute to basic security and prosperity for Russians and Americans. Our policies toward one another have frequently been characterized by ambiguous and difficult choices, but I am sure we can make progress in the areas of collaboration essential to our common interests. I remain optimistic that we will summon the courage and perseverance required to move our nations toward mutual successes. I consider myself a good friend of Georgia. I will continue to urge the U.S. to maintain a strong relationship with Tbilisi to ensure Georgia remains independent and committed to democratic and free market principles.

G.T.: Has confidence amongst US political leaders changed after the November 7th events when the state of Emergency was declared? What are US expectations about Georgia's parliamentary elections slated for May 21? How would you assess the January 5 presidential elections?

R.L.: The U.S. must provide strong leadership to our friends in Tbilisi. I am pleased that the OSCE determined that the January elections were free and fair. I am hopeful that the elections in May will signal further improvement and be another important step forward in Georgia's continuing transformation to a democratic country which is truly free and fair.

G.T.: The Armenia post election standoff has not earned much attention from the West. Does it mean that Armenia is still under Russia's influence so nobody intends to get involved there?

R.L.: I was saddened to learn of the difficulties in Armenia surrounding their recent elections. I am hopeful that Armenia will make progress in developing a free and fair elections system and choose to develop stronger

relations with Europe and the United States. I am pleased that the United States remains committed to finding fair and peaceful resolutions to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

G.T.: Georgia is considered a pillar for the USA. However, so far American investments are not flowing into our country. What processes would facilitate American investments in Georgia?

R.L: I have urged President Bush and his Administration to negotiate a free trade agreement with Georgia. I believe this would be an important step in developing a stronger bilateral investment and commercial relationship.

G.T.: Although the US is the sole Super Power in the world, it is struggling to deal with the challenges in Middle East. How will the US overcome the crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan?

R.L.: (Sen. Lugar referred to his opening statement for the Hearing on Iraq with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker Senate Committee on Foreign Relations made April 8, 2008 to answer this question - GT). "We engaged numerous experts on the situation in Iraq and on strategies for moving forward. Our discussions yielded several premises that might guide our discussion today.

"First, the surge has succeeded in improving the conditions on the ground in many areas of Iraq and creating 'breathing space' for exploring political accommodation. Economic activity has improved and a few initial political benchmarks have been achieved.

"The United States took advantage of Sunni disillusionment with al-Qaeda tactics, the Sadr faction's desire for a cease fire, and other factors to construct multiple cease-fire agreements with tribal and sectarian leaders. Tens of thousands of Iraqi Sunnis who previously had sheltered al-Qaeda and targeted Americans are currently contributing to security operations, drawn by their interest in self-preservation and U.S. payments.

"Second, security improvements derived purely from American military operations have reached or almost reached a plateau. Military operations may realize some marginal security gains in some areas, but these gains are unlikely to be transformational for the country beyond what has already occurred. Progress moving forward depends largely on political events in Iraq.

"Third, despite the improvements in security, the central government has not demonstrated that it can construct a "top-down" political accommodation for Iraq. The Iraqi government is afflicted by corruption and shows signs of sectarian bias. It still has not secured the confidence of most Iraqis or demonstrated much competence in performing basic government functions, including managing Iraq's oil wealth, overseeing reconstruction programs, delivering government assistance to the provinces, or creating jobs.

"Fourth, though portions of the Iraqi population are tired of the violence and would embrace some type of permanent cease fire or political accommodation, sectarian and tribal groups remain heavily armed and are focused on expanding or solidifying their positions.

"The lack of technical competence within the Iraqi government, external interference by the Iranians and others, the corruption and criminality at all levels of Iraqi society, the departure from Iraq of many of its most talented citizens, the lingering terrorist capability of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, seemingly intractable disputes over territories and oil assets, and

power struggles between and within sectarian and tribal groups all impede a sustainable national reconciliation.

"Iraq will be an unstable country for the foreseeable future, and if some type of political settlement can be reached, it will be inherently fragile.

"Fifth, operations in Iraq have severely strained the U.S. military, and these strains will impose limits on the size and length of future deployments to Iraq, irrespective of political decisions or the outcome of the election in our country. "Last week, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Richard Cody, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, testified: 'Today, our Army is out of balance. The current demand for forces in Iraq and Afghanistan exceeds our sustainable supply of soldiers, of units and equipment, and limits our ability to provide ready forces for other contingencies.

Our readiness, quite frankly, is being consumed as fast as we can build it. Lengthy and repeated deployments with insufficient recovery time at home station have placed incredible stress on our soldiers and on their families, testing the resolve of the all-volunteer force like never before.'

"Later in the hearing, General Cody said, 'I've never seen our lack of strategic depth be at where it is today.' The limitations imposed by these stresses were echoed in our own hearings. General Barry McCaffrey asserted that troop levels in Iraq have to be reduced, stating that the Army is experiencing 'significant recruiting and retention problems and that 10 percent of recruits should not be in uniform.'

Major General Robert Scales testified: 'In a strange twist of irony for the first time since the summer of 1863 the number of ground soldiers available is determining American policy rather than policy determining how many troops we need....The only point of contention is how precipitous will be the withdrawal and whether the schedule of withdrawal should be a matter of administration policy.'

"If one accepts the validity of all or most of these five premises, the terms of our inquiry today are much different than they were last September. At that time, the President was appealing to Congress to allow the surge to continue to create breathing space for a political accommodation. "Today the questions are whether and how improvements in security can be converted into political gains that can stabilize Iraq despite the impending drawdown of U.S. troops.

"Simply appealing for more time to make progress is insufficient. The debate over how much progress we have made and whether we can make more is less illuminating than determining whether the Administration has a definable political strategy that recognizes the time limitations we face and seeks a realistic outcome designed to protect American vital interests. Our witnesses last week offered a wide variety of political strategies for how we might achieve an outcome that would preserve regional stability, prevent the worst scenarios for bloodshed, and protect basic U.S. national security interests.

These included focusing more attention on building the Iraqi army, embracing the concept of federalism, expanding the current bottom-up cease fire matrix into a broader national accommodation, negotiating with the Iraqis in the context of an announced U.S. withdrawal, and creating a regional framework to bolster Iraqi security.

But none of our witnesses last week claimed that the task in Iraq was simple or that the outcome would likely fulfill the ideal of a pluralist democratic

nation closely aligned with the United States. All suggested that spoiling activities and the fissures in Iraqi society could undermine even the most well-designed efforts by the United States.

Unless the United States is able to convert progress made thus far into a sustainable political accommodation that supports our long-term national security objectives in Iraq, this progress will have limited meaning. We cannot assume that sustaining some level of progress is enough to achieve success, especially when we know that current American troop levels in Iraq have to be reduced and spoiling forces will be at work in Iraq.

We need a strategy that anticipates a political end game and employs every plausible means to achieve it." A: What is your forecast regarding Iran's nuclear program? How will the US respond to Iran's threat? The task for American diplomats must be to sustain international will and solidify an international consensus in favor of a plan that presents the Iranian regime with a stark choice between the benefits of accepting a verifiable cessation of their nuclear program and the detriments of proceeding along their current course.

The United States has in place extensive unilateral economic sanctions against Iran. Some have suggested that the Congress should pass legislation targeting additional unilateral sanctions against foreign companies that invest in Iran. I understand the impulse to take this step. But given the evident priority that the Iranians assign to their nuclear program, I see little chance that such unilateral sanctions would have any effect on Iranian calculations.

Such sanctions would, however, be a challenge to the very nations that we are trying to coalesce behind a more potent multilateral approach to Iran. We should not take steps that undermine our prospects for garnering international support for multilateral sanctions, which offer better prospects for achieving our objectives than unilateral measures.

Iran poses challenges to U.S. interests in the region beyond its nuclear program. Iranian policies in Iraq, Lebanon, and in the Israeli-Palestinian arena threaten our interest in a stable Middle East. Iran's expansionist foreign policy and the bombastic rhetoric of its president have also fed concerns among its neighbors that it seeks to dominate the region and interfere in their internal affairs. As with the nuclear issue, an effective U.S. strategy for Iran should leverage the concerns of other governments in pursuit of a united front toward objectionable Iranian policies.

While enlisting the support of regional governments is critical, we should avoid any calls to exploit Shi'ite-Sunni tensions. The spread of sectarian conflict from Iraq to other parts of the Middle East is decidedly not in the interest of the United States or the people of the region. As the United States pursues sanctions at the United Nations, it is important that we continue to explore potential diplomatic openings with Iran -- either through our own efforts or those of our allies.

Even if such efforts ultimately are not fruitful, they may reduce risks of miscalculation, improve our ability to interpret what is going on in Iran, and strengthen our efforts to enlist the support of key nations. Secretary Rice's personal effort in pursuit of peace between Israel and the Palestinians also is a welcome development that could help diminish the appeal of extremists in the region, backed by Iran, who call for confrontation with Israel. History has demonstrated that progress on this difficult issue rarely is achieved without sustained and active U.S. diplomacy.

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