The following piece was originally published in the January 29 edition of the Washington Post and is in the public domain. There are no republication restrictions.

(begin byliner)

Baghdad Is Key
By Stephen J. Hadley

The Baker-Hamilton report explained that failure in Iraq could have severe consequences for our national interests in a critical region and for our national security here at home. In my many conversations with members of Congress and foreign policy experts, few have disagreed.

The strategic review commissioned by President Bush analyzed the options for setting Iraq on a trajectory for success. Alternatives now being discussed in Congress were considered but rejected after the strategic risks and stakes were calculated.

The review considered the option of pulling U.S. forces out of Baghdad and concentrating on al-Qaeda in Iraq and training Iraqi security forces, as some in Congress recommend.

Most people agree that we must focus on fighting al-Qaeda. The president's strategy steps up this fight -- particularly in Anbar province, where al-Qaeda seeks a sanctuary. The administration also agrees that we must accelerate the training of Iraqi security forces. The president's strategy does this -- with benchmarks to track progress and bolster the size and effectiveness of those forces. Training and supporting Iraqi troops will remain our military's essential and primary mission.

But the president's review also concluded that the strategy with the best chance of success must have a plan for securing Baghdad. Without such a plan, the Iraqi government and its security institutions could fracture under the pressure of widespread sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing and mass killings. Chaos would then spread

throughout the country -- and throughout the region. The al-Qaeda movement would be strengthened by the flight of Sunnis from Baghdad and an accelerated cycle of sectarian bloodletting. Iran would be emboldened and could be expected to provide more lethal aid for extremist groups. The Kurdish north would be isolated, inviting separation and regional interference. Terrorists could gain pockets of sanctuary throughout Iraq from which to threaten our allies in the region and our security here at home.

The new plan for Baghdad specifically corrects the problems that plagued previous efforts. First, it is an Iraqi-initiated plan for taking control of their capital. Second, there will be adequate forces (Iraqi and American) to hold neighborhoods cleared of terrorists and extremists. Third, there is a new operational concept -- one devised not just to pursue terrorists and extremists but to secure the population. Fourth, new rules of engagement will ensure that Iraqi and U.S. forces can pursue lawbreakers regardless of their community or sect. Fifth, security operations will be followed by economic assistance and reconstruction aid -- including billions of dollars in Iraqi funds -- offering jobs and the prospect of better lives.

As Gen. David Petraeus, the new commander of our forces in Iraq, explained in hearings before Congress last week, reinforcing U.S. troops is necessary for this new plan to succeed. Any plan that limits our ability to reinforce our troops in the field is a plan for failure -- and could hand Baghdad to terrorists and extremists before legitimate Iraqi forces are ready to take over the fight. That is an outcome the president simply could not accept.

The Baker-Hamilton report supports this conclusion. It said: "We could, however, support a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad ... if the U.S. commander in Iraq determines that such steps would be effective." Our military commanders, and the president, have determined just that.

The focus on reinforcing our troops must not overshadow the comprehensive nature of the changes in the president's strategy. Contrary to what some have suggested, reinforcing our military presence is not the strategy -- it is a means to an end and part of a package of key strategic shifts that will fundamentally restructure our approach to achieving our objectives in Iraq.

Building on experience elsewhere in the country, the new strategy doubles the number of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in Iraq. These civilian-led units will target development aid where it is needed and help the Iraqi government extend its reach to all corners of the country.

Because close civilian-military cooperation is key to success, 10 new civilian PRTs will be embedded with U.S. combat brigades.

The new strategy incorporates other essential elements of the Baker-Hamilton report, such as doubling the number of troops embedded with Iraqi forces, using benchmarks to help us and the Iraqis chart progress, and launching a renewed diplomatic effort to increase support for the Iraqi government and advance political reconciliation.

Ultimately, a strategy for success must present a realistic plan for bringing security to the people of Baghdad. This is a precondition to advancing other goals. President Bush's strategy offers such a plan -- and it is the only strategy that does.

(The writer is national security adviser to the president.)

(end byliner)

(Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: http://usinfo.state.gov)