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Bipartisan tack touts Study Group proposals

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A pair of moderate Illinois congressmen, Republican Mark Kirk and Democrat Dan Lipinski, will join forces Monday to discuss the "path forward" in Iraq with a focus on the long-shelved recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.

Kirk was one of 14 Republican congressmen who told President Bush in May that they worried the war was going poorly and could hurt the GOP in next year's elections. So far he has opposed Democrats' attempts to link war funding to timelines for troop withdrawal.

This week, Kirk quietly signed on to a bipartisan bill that would give the Study Group's recommendations the force of law, including political benchmarks for the Iraqi government and a goal, but no requirement, of U.S. troop withdrawals beginning next year. Lipinski is one of the bill's four original sponsors.

The joint appearance Monday before the Chicago Council on Global Affairs might be just two political neighbors talking, or it could foreshadow how Congress could resolve its supercharged Iraq war debate next week.

With several reports on the war being delivered this week and next, Democrats and Republicans alike are casting about for their own path forward on war funding.

Lipinski voted for a withdrawal timeline earlier this year but didn't like it because he knew Bush would veto the bill. He said he and Kirk -- along with 25 other Democratic and 35 Republican co-sponsors -- have agreed that "the Iraq Study Group bill is the way to go" to begin to change the course of the war.

"Over the last six months the president has been able to maintain the status quo [in Iraq] largely because Democrats haven't been able to get Republicans on board" to change the U.S. role in Iraq, Lipinski said. "This is all part of coming together."

Kirk could not be reached for comment Friday.

The Study Group recommendations contained in the bill include non-waivable benchmarks for the Iraqi government to continue receiving American support, shifting U.S. forces from combat to a role as trainers for Iraqi forces and setting a non-binding redeployment goal for the end of March 2008.

That is not enough to satisfy the two Democrats vying to challenge Kirk next year, who both have attacked his position on the war.

"He needs to have the courage to stand up to the [Bush] administration and bring our soldiers home," said Dan Seals, who narrowly lost to Kirk last fall. Added Jay Footlik, a former Clinton administration official also gunning for the Democratic nomination, "The fact is Kirk has completely ignored the Iraq Study Group's recommendations by consistently voting to rubber-stamp George W. Bush and the Republicans' failed policies in Iraq."

Another Republican co-sponsor of the Study Group bill, retiring Rep. Ray LaHood of Illinois, predicted the bill is "certainly not going to be enough for Democrats" in the House. "They're going to want a lot more," he said.

Democratic leaders sent mixed signals this week about what they would accept in any new war-funding measure. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) said Friday that he would not approve more funding unless it is tied to a plan for troop withdrawal. Earlier in the week, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) sounded a more compromising tone.