

"Secretary of Defense Update"
Q&A Session
Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

16 September 2009

Moderator: Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and thank you for agreeing to take a few questions.

Your recent announcement, and there were quite a few, but your announcement concerning the KCX takes care of 50 percent of these questions. [Laughter].

The first one concerns our nuclear forces, and you mentioned the standup of Global Strike Command. As we continue our efforts to reinvigorate the nuclear enterprise, what could you share with us on the status of the Nuclear Posture Review and what impact that might have in terms of major changes for our Air Force?

Secretary Gates: Well, the Nuclear Posture Review is well underway. I would say we're beginning to see what some of the likely conclusions are.

I would say that it is clear, at least to me, that it is important for us to continue to make investments, and I think larger investments, in modernizing our nuclear infrastructure, the labs and so on, the expertise in those places, to have the resources for life extension programs, and in one or two cases probably new designs that will be safer and more reliable.

We have no desire for new capabilities. That's a red herring. This is about modernizing and keeping safe a capability that everyone acknowledges we will have to have for some considerable period into the future, before achieving some of the objectives of significant arms reduction and eventually no nuclear weapons at all. All recognize that is a considerable distance in the future and we have an obligation to keep this capability safe.

I also believe that these capabilities are enablers, arms control and our ability to reduce the size of our nuclear stockpile. When we have more confidence in the long term viability of our weapon systems, then our ability to reduce the number of weapons we must keep in the stockpile is enhanced.

So I see this modernization effort, if you will, as a vehicle and an enabler of arms control and stockpile reduction.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

This concerns our efforts to build partnerships with regard to air power. Do you see a continued expansion of efforts of building partnerships with air forces like Iraq and others?

Secretary Gates: Yeah, I think this is an area where the Air Force is really stepping out both in Iraq and Afghanistan, and frankly, their ambitions for air power, in my opinion, probably exceeds their capabilities in the near term. So I think the Air Force has taken a very smart approach to this in terms of helping them walk before they run, or fly in simpler, easier to maintain aircraft, rather than a high end aircraft right away. And this I referred to in my remarks about the need to develop some capabilities where we can actually more easily hand over to them an aircraft that they can use and one that is easier for them to fly and maintain, at least as they're getting started in building these capabilities.

Moderator: This one is sort of a follow-up to that concerning air power in Afghanistan. And our NATO air forces and our Air Force has experienced considerable success in our efforts there. What is your view of the use of air power in Afghanistan? What do you see coming down the road in the future?

Secretary Gates: Well as I indicated in my remarks, it's even more important in Afghanistan than it is in, has been in Iraq, if only because the infrastructure is so much more primitive in Afghanistan. The absence of paved roads, the absence of roads altogether. The size of the country, the isolation of many of our forward operating bases, the isolation of our units as they operate out in the field, valley by valley, mountain by mountain.

So I think the demand for air power in Afghanistan will only grow, and obviously as we've nearly doubled the size of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in the last year, and clearly the demand for logistical support has increased dramatically.

Let me just highlight something with respect to Afghanistan where I think the Air Force has really stepped up to the plate and done a remarkable job, and that is since last January moving our medevac capabilities in Afghanistan from around two hours down to on average an hour, and in many cases much less. Given the size of the country this is a remarkable achievement. I think you can hardly imagine the impact that that has had I think on morale of our ground troops, in knowing that the Air Force is forward deploying.

I was told when I was out there a few weeks ago and visited, as I mentioned, a couple of the units that are doing the rescue operations, we had not had a double amputee survive those wounds in Afghanistan until this kind of additional air power came along. So that's the kind of difference it's making. Now they are being saved.

Moderator: The next one concerns the area of cyber. You commented on 24th Air Force. Would you also comment on the standup of U.S. Cyber Command and your expectations of how the services will organize and present a full range of capabilities to this new command?

Secretary Gates: I think all of the services have readily embraced the reality that this is important and vital to us for the future. Each of the services is establishing its own cyber organization such as the 24th. All of the, I've asked each of the service chiefs to consider as a first priority filling the billets in the cyber schools. We were not filling all of those billets, and clearly the demand for trained people in each of the services in this area is critically important.

I think everybody understands this is a huge potential vulnerability for us because of our dependence on the electronic world for communications, for everything we do. I think Cyber Command really is a recognition of the need, the U.S. Cyber Command as a sub-unified command under STRATCOM. I think the reason it's really important is the need to integrate the different elements from exploitation to defense and so on, all in one place so that we have a unity of effort in this respect, and working with the individual service components.

I think we've made a lot of institutional and structural progress over the past years to 18 months in getting ourselves better organized to deal with a threat that is only going to grow in the future.

Moderator: This is a follow-up on that. You described well what we're doing within the department, but how will operations in cyberspace be coordinated between the Department of Defense and other civil and national agencies?

Secretary Gates: Well, I'm sort of speaking a little out of turn here because I can't speak for the administration as a whole so I'll just give you a personal opinion. I think the notion of being able to replicate NSA for the civilian side of the government is wholly unrealistic. We lack the human capital as well as the dollars to be able to do it, and frankly, we lack the time to be able to do it. You just couldn't build another NSA in a year or two. This is a 10 or 20 year project.

So I think we have to figure out a way. I think that the concerns of people of all of us concerned about civil liberties and so on have to be taken into account. My own personal view is that one way to do this would be to double hat a deputy secretary or an undersecretary of Department of Homeland Security and have that person also be a civilian deputy at NSA, and then figure out a way to put some firewalls in that make sure that the authorities that we have that we can use for going after foreign threats do not spill over into the civilian world.

But clearly the need to address this issue, and the vulnerability of the dot-com world in this arena I think has to be addressed, and better sooner than later.

Moderator: Thank you, sir.

The next question has to do with our growing reliance on space and our services and certainly our nation and the world continue to rely heavily and even more so on our space capabilities. What are we doing to address the potential threats of our space assets that have been appearing over the past several years?

Secretary Gates: This is a worry for me, and especially once the Chinese demonstrated their anti-satellite capabilities. They're working on them. Clearly the Russians have some capabilities in this area. Others may have in the years ahead, and maybe in the not too distant future.

So I think we have to look at it in a couple of ways. We have to make what we do put in space more survivable, but also what kind of alternatives can we develop in the atmosphere to be able to provide at least short term substitutes for space assets should they be denied to us? And I would tell you, we've made some good progress, but we've got a long way to go in this area.

Moderator: The next question looks to the future. Would you care to expand a little bit on what you see as the Department of Defense has got three or four challenges as we look to the next five to ten years?

Secretary Gates: I think the biggest challenge the department will face is sustaining the programs that we have in a very straightened budget environment and an environment where the government is facing gigantic deficits.

I always used to say that the U.S. defense budget, if you graphed it over the past 30 or 40 years, would look like the EKG of a fibrillating heart. [Laughter]. The truth of

the matter is, radical ups and downs are about as inefficient a way to do business as there is.

So my pitch basically has been give us whatever the rate of growth, try and give us a steady rate of growth that we can plan on for years at a time, whether it's a FYDP or even longer. Whether it's two percent real growth over inflation, whether it's three percent. Whatever that number is. Give us some predictability. I think everybody in the room who's managed programs knows you can do a lot if you've got some predictability and know what's coming next year and the year after that.

So I think that's the biggest challenge that we're going to face. We obviously have a challenge, in particular, of the war in Afghanistan. As I said, I think that's entering a decisive phase over the next year or so.

I think trying to organize ourselves and our thinking and our programs in a way that provides for the maximum possible flexibility or versatility across the widest possible spectrum of conflict is a challenge we need to face. We don't have the money to have a lot of single vision niche capabilities. We need to have platforms that have applicability in a number of different areas. There will be some where we have to have a niche capability, and we have to preserve those. The F-22 is a good example of that.

But by and large, we need to look at procurement in the future to say can this help us in a number of different forums, a number of different kinds of conflict, whether at the high end of conventional conflict or in irregular conflict.

Moderator: This question also looks to the future. You described the challenges. What do you see as the things that you view as the greatest hope for our future?

Secretary Gates: That's really the easiest question of all. It's the men and women in uniform. They are all amazing. And they are principally the reason that I came to this job and principally the reason that I stayed in this job.

Moderator: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for those kind words about our great Airmen. And thank you for being with us today.

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