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General Raghavan, India

Mr Secretary, thank you. As professional soldiers, we see – with not a little admiration – the tremendous job being done by the US forces in Iraq and also in Afghanistan. It is a difficult job under demanding conditions. But if there is one issue that comes out of that, it is the changed nature of conflict, to which you have referred as ‘asymmetric war’, where overwhelming technological and military power by itself is found to be not sufficient to obtain the political aims that are required. That is likely to be the nature of conflict and war in the decades to come.

Therefore, there seems to be a contradiction in applying military force in resolving issues of failing states or, for that matter, states riven with ethnic or sectarian conflicts. With your own great hands-on experience as a military officer and as an intelligence head, and now as Secretary of Defence, what lessons would you have to offer to this audience of serving and retired senior military officers?

Dr Robert Gates

I think the principal lesson of our experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan is one that has been articulated repeatedly, and over some protracted period of time, by our senior military leadership. It is that these conflicts cannot, as you suggest, be won purely by military action. These are fledgling societies, fledgling governments. They lack capacity. They lack the ability to extend services to their people. They often lack infrastructure. They usually lack any experience or a cadre of experts in the government who know how to make things work, whether it is a power plant or fostering greater agricultural productivity. I think one of the lessons that certainly the United States has learned in both of these places is the need to partner whatever military force may be required to take care of the irreconcilables in a country or in a situation like this, while at the same time trying to help build a government and an economy that serves the interests of the people. Quite honestly, this is one of the areas where the United States pretty much unilaterally disarmed itself after the end of the Cold War. When I left the government in 1993, the Agency for International Development had 16,000 employees. Today it has 3,000. We had a strategic communications arm in the United States Information Agency. That has largely been eliminated and folded back into the State Department in a much reduced way. If anything, I think it is our military officers on the scene who have the best appreciation of the importance of economic development, social development, building schools and providing services as part of creating a population that is supportive of a moderate approach and of moving forward, as opposed to moving toward extremism.

I think the challenge that we all face is figuring out how to strengthen the capacity of each of our governments and how we can work together in building those capacities in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the things I think is most heartening in Iraq is that we have 42 foreign governments and 12 NGOs all working together. Many of them are focused in these provincial reconstruction teams, in these efforts to build the kinds of institutions and capabilities that I have just been talking about. My own view is that we need to do a much better job of sharing with each other what we are doing in a place like Afghanistan and coordinating those efforts so that we can benefit from the experience that each has had, both in the positive and negative lessons learned.

You have put your finger on a huge problem. It is one that I think the military recognises more than anyone. Our Congress is interested in trying to help solve this problem, but in trying to figure out the best way to do this in the American government, there are obviously different points of view. One of the proposals of the President is to create a civilian reserve that would have people who are agronomists, who are engineers and others who are critical to the kinds of capabilities I am talking about, who – like our National Guard – could be mobilised in the event that we have to go in and work situations like this. The fact is many of the problems that the international community has confronted over the past 15 years involve the kind of issues you are talking about. It is not just Iraq and Afghanistan; it is the Balkans; it is Haiti; it is a variety of places. We all need to think about how better, for both the public and private sectors, to build capacity to deal with these challenges.

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