

PRESS CONFERENCE WITH SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT GATES AT THE NATO
DEFENSE
MINISTERS MEETING

LOCATION: VILNIUS, LITHUANIA

DATE: THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2008

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SEC. GATES: Good evening. This afternoon I've had a productive series of
meetings, starting with our discussion at lunch about alliance operations. We
discussed our significant military successes during 2007. We also talked about
progress on economic development, education, health care and more. We discussed
the need to strengthen and better coordinate our civil governance and economic
activities as an alliance.

In that session, I emphasized that the deployment of U.S. Marines to
Afghanistan is a one-time measure intended to help prevent any surge of violence
in the spring. And as I extended one brigade and sent another brigade of
American forces last year at this time to ensure that the spring offensive was
NATO's offensive, we are doing that again.

This deployment like last year's demonstrates America's commitment to
Afghanistan and to reinforcing the security gains we have achieved over the past
year. I called on the other allies to make further commitments to the mission,
to do what they could to meet unmet needs as articulated by the commanders out
there, and to consider other more creative ways that they may be able to
contribute.

Afghanistan was the main item on the luncheon agenda, but we also
discussed the way ahead in Kosovo. KFOR remains a strong and vigilant force,
and as we move toward settlement of final status issue, the U.S. already -- also
stands ready to offer assistance to the European Union with its rule of law
mission.

Following the press conference, I will join the NATO-Ukraine Commission, where I will repeat what I just told Minister Turchynov a few minutes ago -- that we commend Ukraine's ongoing defense reform efforts and support their euro-atlantic aspirations.

The meetings tomorrow will include sessions dealing with alliance capabilities and our relationship with Russia. Missile defense will play a prominent part in each of these discussions as we consider building NATO capabilities.

With that, I'd be happy to take a few questions.

Q (Off mike.) Mr. Secretary, you have spoken and asked for greater cooperation from other members of the alliance regarding combat elements in Afghanistan. In your estimation, what is the risk posed to the mission if all of the alliance members don't step up to the plate? Is it as some have said even -- and this might sound extreme -- even representing a failure of that mission if all alliance members don't step up?

SEC. GATES: No, I don't think it's a failure. I think it would be a disappointment. But, you know, the truth is a number of alliance -- members of the alliance have stepped up. They are continuing their deployments. And I think that -- I don't think that there's a crisis. I don't think that there's a risk of failure. I guess what I -- my view is that it represents potentially the opportunity to make further progress faster in Afghanistan if we had more forces there.

I think we've done pretty well. The gains on the civil side a lot of people gloss over. The fact is, since we began this mission, under the Taliban, health care was available to about 8 percent of the population; now some kind of health care is available to 80 percent of the population. Under the Taliban, a million children were going to school; today 7 million children are going to school, and 2 million of them are girls. Something like 14,000 kilometers of new road has been laid. So there have been a lot of achievements along the way here. And it just seems to me that if we redouble our effort at this point we can accelerate the progress that we're making. I don't think that the mission is in trouble.

Q Should more alliance members get involved?

SEC. GATES: Well, most are involved in one way or another. What we are obviously interested in is more who will have no caveats on their forces and those who are willing to engage in the fight itself.

Q As you looked around the room today, did you get the sense that Canada will get the thousand troops it's requesting? And if it doesn't and pulls out, what are the implications for the mission in Afghanistan?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think it would be -- it would certainly be a setback if Canada left. And in a way, Canada has kind of caused the alliance to face up to this differential between those like Canada and Australia, Britain, the Dutch, the Danes, who are fighting and who have taken casualties, as opposed to some of those who are in less violent areas and not at such risk. So I think that there is -- I think people take the concerns expressed by the Canadians very seriously. And my hope is that the need the Canadians have identified will be satisfied.

Q Okay. And just as a follow-up, General McNeill used -- or talked in The Washington Post about the U.S. taking over from ISAF in the south. Do you think that's realistic? Do you support that idea?

SEC. GATES: I don't think that that's realistic any time soon.

Q How much of your discussions here are trying to persuade other countries to send more troops, and how much of them are trying to persuade countries like Canada not to withdraw, and other countries to step in so that Canada doesn't have a need to withdraw?

SEC. GATES: Would you try that one on me again? (Chuckles.)

Q Sure. How much of the discussion is trying to find countries willing to send more troops, how much of it is trying to persuade countries from reducing the troops that they already have there?

SEC. GATES: We really -- you know, this isn't a force generation conference, so I think that there was just a -- you know, all of the people who spoke talked about the contribution that they're already making. And several of us talked about the need to meet the need that -- how we needed to meet the requirements that the Canadians have placed.

There really wasn't -- I can't recall really any conversation in terms of trying to persuade people not to reduce their commitment, because based on the comments that were being made around the table, it sounded to me like people recognize that they needed to be there for the long haul. So it was really more focused on how do we meet the unmet requirement for forces, rather than talking people out of drawing down soon. Yeah.

Yeah?

Q Brooks Tigner, Jane's Defense News. Common sense would suggest that it doesn't matter how many troops you put in the south of Afghanistan as long as you don't prevent the Taliban from escaping across the border with Pakistan. Otherwise they can resupply, and they can regroup. This has been a problem for two or three years. We were told you did not discuss this issue today. Why not, and when are you and the other ministers going to discuss this issue? Thank you.

SEC. GATES: Well, we didn't get into the -- this was not a meeting at which either General McNeill or General Craddock briefed on the tactical situation or the military situation on the ground. I would say we have seen in RC East a significant reduction in the number of people coming across the border from Pakistan, based on what General Rodriguez has told me.

What you describe is a concern; it is a problem.

And frankly I think that it's only been in the last few months, in my opinion, that Pakistan has come to realize that the situation along the border with Afghanistan, on the Pakistani side, potentially represents a serious threat to the state of Pakistan itself.

Al Qaeda and some of the other insurgent groups there have threatened to kill the leadership of Pakistan. They've threatened to destabilize the country

and the government. They're almost certainly responsible for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

So I think it's been a relatively recent development in Pakistan, that they have seen the situation along the border as something significantly more consequential than a nuisance. And so my view is, my hope is, that we will begin to see the Pakistanis taking a more aggressive stand out there.

Q Andrew Gray from Reuters.

Mr. Secretary, if I could follow up on the earlier question about General McNeill's comments in an interview published today, you said you don't see American command in the South anytime soon. Can you elaborate a bit on that? Have you looked at this proposal? Have you considered seriously the idea of a change in structure, which would give the U.S. the lead in the South? And do you think it has any merit?

SEC. GATES: I have thought about the command structures. From the American standpoint, I've decided not to make any changes and I think we've had a very good British commander. We now have a very good Canadian commander. I see absolutely no reason to change those arrangements.

Q (Name and affiliation inaudible.)

Your letter, especially to Berlin, has gotten quite a negative response from the political sector in Berlin. Was that the intended effect or a predicted effect? Or was it a surprise that the response was so negative?

SEC. GATES: Well, frankly, I think that this whole business about the things I've said and written has been overblown.

First of all, in the interview that I gave to the Los Angeles Times, what I was saying was that the alliance as a whole had not exercised or trained for counterinsurgency. I didn't pick out a single country. Unfortunately what was juxtaposed in that article were quotes from other people about specific countries, including a couple about the United States.

But the point is that my comments were addressed to the alliance as a whole, not those who were fighting with us in the south. The letters --

Q (Off mike) --

SEC. GATES: No, I'm going to talk about it. Just give me a second.

The letters -- I wrote a letter to every minister of Defense in NATO, and I decided to do that after I had made the decision and announced the decision to send the 3,200 Marines to Afghanistan. And what I asked each of them was we had had to dig deep and find these additional troopers to send to Afghanistan, and essentially all those letters did was ask them to look and see if they could dig deeper and come up with more troops as well. That's all there was to it. There were no demands. The letter was, I think, very matter-of-fact, and I think it was polite. So I think -- as I say, I think the whole thing has been overblown.

Q May I ask a question? Here down in the first row.

SEC. GATES: We've got one back here.

Q Yeah, hi. Jim Neuger from Bloomberg. What indications did you get today that European allies will step up to fill holes in the south or to replace the Marines after their seven-month deployment? And did today's meeting leave you more concerned or less concerned that NATO may be evolving into a two-tiered alliance, as you said yesterday?

SEC. GATES: Well, as I indicated, this isn't a -- this wasn't a force generation meeting. The allies talked about what they were doing. Some of them announced that they were thinking about increases. Some of them announced that they were going to deploy OMLTs. So I think -- I came away from the meeting -- I would say, I came away from the meeting encouraged. I think everybody understands the nature of the problem.

As I said in my testimony yesterday, we're realistic -- and I'm going to say this at Verkunde in a couple of days -- we're realistic about politics here in Europe. We understand -- my view is the governments here in Europe get it. They understand the importance of Afghanistan, but many of them are in minority governments, many of them are in coalitions, and they just aren't able to do certain kinds of things, and we understand that.

And so one of the things that we've been talking about is let's think a little more creatively, and if somebody can't send combat soldiers into a certain area just because of the politics at home, then perhaps they could pay for helicopters or provide helicopters to somebody who could, so that there are different ways to try and resolve some of these problems. And I think we just need to be more creative about it, and I think there's some real opportunities there.

Q General McNeill spoke yesterday at the Pentagon and responded to a question about why the U.S. counterinsurgency is so effective in the East. He spoke at length about the 15-month factor and how you need a sufficient amount of time on the ground in a rotation to really get acquainted with the landscape, with the principal people that you're going to have to be working with and against. We don't see that with some of the alliance partners. We see shorter-term rotations; six months is quite common.

Do you have any thoughts on that? Do you agree with that assessment that a longer rotation allows a counterinsurgency to be more effective?

SEC. GATES: I think that as a -- if you're addressing it as an intellectual matter, that a longer tour and greater familiarity does enhance your ability to carry out a counterinsurgency. The other side of that coin, though, is the longer tours have a real wearing effect on the troops. And Admiral Mullen talked about this in our congressional testimony yesterday. So there's a trade-off between the benefits of longer tours and the consequences for the soldiers and the Marines of longer tours. So I mean, frankly, I would like to get back to 12-month tours, as opposed to 15-month tours, as quickly as possible.

Q Twelve might be the sweet spot between 15 and six?

SEC. GATES: Well, my guess is the troopers would think shorter than 12 would be the sweet spot.

Q (Name off mike) -- Lithuanian Television. Poland has recently indicated it would welcome a NATO base, saying in particular that it would welcome the American presence there. Are you willing to meet that request?

SEC. GATES: For?

Q A NATO base with American soldiers in Poland.

SEC. GATES: I don't know of any plans to do that. The only thing, obviously, that we have in mind in terms of an American facility in Poland would be a missile defense facility.

STAFF: We'll take two more, quickly.

Q Bob Burns, from Associated Press. Mr. Secretary, a Taliban group in Pakistan has announced that it reached a cease-fire deal with the Pakistani government. I'm wondering what your thoughts on that sort of approach are, given the history of those kinds of arrangements. This one was in South Waziristan. Are you aware of the arrangement?

SEC. GATES: This is the first I've heard of it. I would say, on the Afghan side of the border, one of the things that we've all been talking about and certainly President Karzai has been talking about is, in Afghanistan, trying to identify Taliban who are potentially reconcilable, sort of along the lines of what happened in Anbar province in Iraq. And I think that there have been some very modest arrangements made with Taliban, but not very large numbers of people involved.

So I think, you know, as I say, this is the first I've heard of it, so I just -- I don't know whether it's a good idea or not.

Last question.

Q Heinrich Hueppchen (sp) from Deutsche Welle, German Television. You've just elaborated a bit on creative ways the alliance could find to cooperate better in Afghanistan. You said those countries who cannot send combat fighters might pay for countries who can. So will we have two-tier alliance of payers and fighters in the future? Is that what you envision?

SEC. GATES: Well, I wasn't thinking of paying as much as if they -- if one country had helicopters that another country could use, to loan those helicopters to another country. And maybe there are other kinds of facilities and capabilities that could be shared.

Another possibility would be, where there are countries like ourselves and the others that are in static positions doing security, perhaps some of the others who don't want to be in -- who can't, by virtue of their caveats, be in combat, perhaps they could do that static security job while we -- that would release others to go fight.

Thank you all very much.

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