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**Remarks as Delivered by
Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates,
The Nixon Center's Distinguished Service Award
The Nixon Center, Washington, D.C.
Wednesday, February 24, 2010**

Thank you, Jim, for that introduction.

This is certainly an elegant gathering. I must say, seeing the men in black tie, women in beautiful evening dresses, and the open bar, reminds me of a story involving a former European foreign minister on a trip to Peru. The minister – who was a notorious drunk – was attending a reception and the music started. He saw a person in a flowing gown going by and asked that person to dance. The person stopped, glared at him and said, “First, sir, you are drunk. Second, this is not a waltz, this is the Peruvian National Anthem. And third, I am the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima.”

It’s certainly an honor to be here tonight. Since its founding in 1994, the Nixon Center’s programs and scholarship have made valuable contributions to the debates over America’s role in the world since the end of the Cold War. The Center’s overriding goal – the enlightened pursuit of the national interest that takes into account the legitimate perspectives of other nations – is one that all people of good sense should embrace. But then again, common sense has not always been a surplus commodity in Washington, D.C.

Receiving the Nixon’s Center invitation got me thinking about my brief experience working for President Nixon – though I probably don’t quite qualify as a “Nixon Alum” because CIA was never one of his favorite organizations (to say the least) and I didn’t join his NSC staff until the early summer of 1974. We did, however, have a number of long conversations beginning some years later. He especially liked my views about the Soviet Union. That made two of us.

Joining the NSC in 1974, of course, was my first introduction to your honorary Chairman, Henry Kissinger. There are many wonderful stories about Henry. One I thought you would appreciate, given the center’s emphasis on diplomacy, involved a meeting between President Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, shortly after Henry had been appointed as Secretary of State. With Golda Meir in that meeting was her very erudite foreign minister, Abba Eban, a graduate of Cambridge University. At one point in the meeting, Nixon turned to

Golda Meir and said, “Just think, Madame Prime Minister, now we both have Jewish foreign ministers.” And without missing a beat Golda Meir said, “Yes, but mine speaks English.”

These light moments aside, it is worth reflecting on the daunting challenges that faced President Nixon when he took office:

- Roughly a thousand young Americans dying every month in Vietnam;
- A Soviet Union that had just invaded Czechoslovakia, and was striving for strategic advantage through a massive build-up of more powerful and accurate nuclear weapons and missiles; and
- An American social, political, and cultural fabric torn by riots, assassinations and racial and generational divisions.

Then, of course, there came the 1970s – where it seemed that everything that could go wrong for the United States just about did. I know – I was there in the White House for pretty much all of it.

This historical perspective is useful to have, first, because when looking around at the growing threats and steep obstacles our country faces today, there is a tendency to grow overly pessimistic about U.S. prospects and position in the world. And, erroneously, in my view, to start contemplating American retrenchment, or even American decline. I heard this 30 years ago. It is always worth remembering that our country, starting from the earliest years as a beleaguered young republic, has overcome a good deal worse in the past. And history’s dustbin is populated by empires and dictatorships that underestimated America’s national character, resolve, and resilience.

This history also informs what I’d like to discuss tonight: the need to adapt and reform our 63-year old national security apparatus to be more effective, above all, at building the capacity of other countries to provide for their own security.

Helping other countries better defend themselves or fight beside us – by providing equipment, training, or other forms of support – is something the United States has been doing in various ways for nearly three-quarters of a century. It dates back to the period before America entered World War II, when Winston Churchill famously said, “give us the tools, and we will finish the job.” Through Lend-Lease, some \$31 billion worth of U.S. supplies – in 1940s dollars – was sent to Great Britain over the course of the war. American aid to the Soviet Union during that period exceeded \$11 billion – to include hundreds of thousands of trucks and thousands of tanks, aircraft, and artillery pieces.

Building the military and security forces of key allies and local partners was a major component of U.S. strategy in the Cold War, first in Western Europe, then in Greece, South Korea, and elsewhere. In fact, as many of you know, one of the major tenets of the “Nixon Doctrine” was to use military and economic assistance to help partners and allies resist Soviet-sponsored insurgencies without using U.S. troops – the kind of military intervention that had proven so costly and controversial in Korea and Vietnam.

No doubt, our global security environment has been radically transformed since that era – more complex, more unpredictable, and, even without a superpower adversary, in many ways more dangerous. Our military – though resilient in spirit and magnificent in performance – is under stress and strain fighting two wars and confronting diffuse challenges around the globe.

In Iraq, we have shifted almost entirely to an advisory and support mission. American troop levels are projected to drop as low as 50,000 by this fall, and go to zero at the end of 2011. In Afghanistan, U.S. force levels will near 100,000 this year, and our troops and allies are in the midst of the biggest military offensive of the war. But, as the President has said, the purpose of these operations is to set the conditions that will allow the Afghans to take responsibility for their own security.

More broadly, there continues to be a struggle for legitimacy, loyalty, and power across the Islamic world between modernizing, moderate forces, and the violent, extremist organizations embodied by Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other such groups. We are unlikely to repeat a mission on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan anytime soon – that is, forced regime change followed by nation-building under fire. But, as the department’s Quadrennial Defense Review recently concluded, we are still likely to face scenarios calling on a familiar tool-kit of capabilities, albeit on a smaller scale.

In these situations, the effectiveness and credibility of the United States will only be as good as the effectiveness, credibility, and sustainability of our local partners. As I mentioned earlier, building the governance and security capacity of other countries was a critical element of our strategy in the Cold War. But it is even more urgent in a global security environment where, unlike the Cold War, the most likely and lethal threats – an American city poisoned or reduced to rubble – will likely emanate from fractured or failing states, rather than aggressor states.

It is in many ways the ideological and security challenge of our time. It is the primary institutional challenge as well. For the most part, America’s instruments of national power – military and civilian – were set up in a different era for a very different set of threats. Our military was designed to defeat other armies, navies and air forces, not to advise, train and equip them. Likewise, our civilian instruments were designed primarily to manage relationships between states, rather than to help build them from within.

The recent history of America’s dealings with Central Asia – Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular – exemplifies the challenges we face. In the decade before September 11th, the U.S essentially abandoned Afghanistan to its fate. At the same time, we cut off military-to-military exchange and training programs with Pakistan, for well-intentioned but ultimately shortsighted – and strategically damaging – reasons.

In the weeks and months following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government faced a number of delays in getting crucial efforts off the ground – from reimbursing the Pakistanis for their support to standing up a formal Afghan military. The security assistance system, which was designed for the more predictable requirements of the Cold War, proved unequal to the test. The resources and programs we urgently needed had to be assembled quickly from scratch.

Once funding streams and authorities were established, efforts to train the Afghan and later the Iraqi security forces were not an institutional priority within the military services – where such assignments were not considered career enhancing for ambitious young officers – and relied heavily on contractors and reservists.

More recently, the advisory missions in both the Afghan and Iraq campaigns have received the attention they deserve – in leadership, resources and personnel. Within the military, advising and mentoring indigenous security forces is moving from the periphery of institutional priorities – where it was considered the province of special forces – to a key mission for the armed forces as a whole:

- The Army has stood up specialized Advisory and Assist Brigades – now the main effort in Iraq – and is adjusting promotion and assignment processes to account for the importance of this key mission;
- The Air Force opened an air advisor school house and is fielding a fleet of light fighters and transport aircraft optimized to train and assist local partners; and
- The U.S. Navy works with African countries to improve their ability to combat smuggling, piracy, and other threats to maritime security.

One institutional challenge we face at the Pentagon is that the department’s various partner capacity and security assistance functions are scattered among different staff and headquarters elements of the military. An exception is the Air Force, where most of these functions – from foreign military sales to training exchanges – are grouped under one civilian executive – the equivalent of a three-star general – to better coordinate and integrate them with larger goals and national strategy. This more integrated and consolidated approach makes better sense for the department, and for the government as a whole.

Furthermore, we have made great strides in building up the operational capacity of our partners – training and equipping troops and mentoring them in the field. But there has not been enough commensurate attention paid to building the institutional capacity – such as defense ministries – and the human capital – leadership skills and attitudes – needed to sustain security over the long term. We have come to recognize that the security sector of at-risk countries is in reality, a system of systems tying together military, police, justice, and other governance and oversight mechanisms. As such, building a partner’s overall governance and security capacity is a shared responsibility across multiple agencies and departments of the U.S. national security apparatus – one that requires flexible, responsive tools that incentivize cooperation. Operations against extremist groups in the Philippines, and more recently Yemen, have shown how well-integrated training and assistance efforts can achieve real success.

But for all the improvements of recent years, America’s interagency toolkit is a hodgepodge of jerry-rigged arrangements constrained by a dated and complex patchwork of authorities, persistent shortfalls in resources, and unwieldy processes. Consider that the National Security Act that created most of the current interagency structure was passed in 1947. The last major legislation structuring how America dispenses foreign assistance was signed by President Kennedy. The law governing how U.S. exports military equipment was passed in 1976. All the while, other countries that do not suffer from our encumbrances are taking full advantage to more quickly fund projects, sell weapons, and build relationships.

To respond to the most pressing needs, nearly five years ago the defense department obtained authorities that enable the military to respond to unforeseen threats and opportunities by providing training and equipment to other countries with urgent security needs. These new tools came with an important innovation. Their use requires the concurrence of both the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State in what is called a “dual key” decision-making process. In recent years, both secretaries have used these authorities to assist the Lebanese Army, Pakistani Special Forces, and the navies and maritime security forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

Those authorities and programs – and the role of the defense department in foreign assistance writ large – have stirred debates within the government and with the congress as well. I never miss an opportunity to call for more funding for and emphasis on diplomacy and development. I also once warned publicly of a “creeping militarization” of aspects of our foreign policy if imbalances within our national security system were not addressed. As a career CIA officer who watched the military’s role in intelligence grow ever larger, I am keenly aware that the defense department – by its sheer size – is not only the 800 pound gorilla of our government, but one with a sometimes very active pituitary gland.

Nonetheless, in my view, it is time to move beyond the ideological debates and bureaucratic squabbles that have characterized the issue of building partner capacity in years past, and move forward with a set of solutions that can address what will be a persistent and enduring challenge.

Last year, I sent Secretary Clinton one proposal I see as a starting point of discussion for the way ahead. It would involve pooled funds set up for security capacity building, stabilization, and conflict prevention. Both the state and defense departments would contribute to these funds, and no project could move forward without the approval of both agencies. What I found compelling about this approach is that it would actually incentivize collaboration between different agencies of our government, unlike the existing structure and processes left over from the Cold War, which often conspire to hinder true whole-of-government approaches.

Regardless of what approach we take to reform and modernize America’s partner capacity apparatus – whether it is something like the proposal I just mentioned or some other arrangement – it should be informed by the following principles.

First, it must provide agility and flexibility. Under normal budgeting and programming cycles, a budget is put together in one year, considered and passed by the congress in the second, and then executed in the third. For predictable, ongoing requirements this is appropriate and manageable. But, as recent history suggests, it is not well suited to the emerging and unforeseen threats – or opportunities – coming most often from failed and failing states.

Second, there must be effective oversight mechanisms that allow for the Congress to conduct its constitutional responsibilities to ensure that, with more discretion and flexibility given to the executive branch, these funds are spent properly. Tools that foster cooperation across the executive branch could also enhance cooperation across jurisdictional boundaries among Congressional committees – thereby actually strengthening Congressional oversight in the national security arena.

Third, our security assistance efforts writ large must be steady and long-term, in part to provide some measure of predictability and planning for our government, but more significantly, for our relationships abroad. Convincing other countries and leaders to be a partner of the United States, often at political and physical risk, ultimately depends on proving that our own government is capable of being a reliable partner over time. To be blunt, that means we cannot cut off assistance and relationships every time a country does something we dislike or disagree with.

Fourth, whatever we do should reinforce the state department's lead role in crafting and conducting U.S. foreign policy, to include foreign assistance, of which building security capacity is a key part. Proper coordination and concurrence procedures will ensure that urgent military capacity building requirements do not undermine America's overarching foreign policy priorities.

Finally, everything we do must be suffused with strong doses of modesty and realism, as President Nixon would say. When all is said and done, there are limits to what even the United States can do to influence the direction of countries and cultures radically different than our own. And even the most enlightened and modernized interagency apparatus is still a bureaucracy, prone to the same parochial and self-serving tendencies as whatever system it replaced.

In closing, I believe our ability to help other countries better provide for their own security will be a key and enduring test of America's global leadership in the 21st century, and a critical part of protecting our own security. Though so much has changed from when President Nixon took office and I began my career in government, one thing has stayed the same. In any matter crucial to the peace and prosperity of the world, if the United States doesn't lead, what must get done won't get done.

I thank you for this award, which I accept on behalf of our men and women in uniform, whose service and sacrifice make it possible for us to gather here in comfort and safety this evening.