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For Immediate Release

December 16, 2010

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, Secretary of State Clinton, Secretary of Defense Gates and General Cartwright**James S. Brady Press Briefing Room**

12:00 P.M. EST

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, good morning. I appreciate very much the President's words about Ambassador Holbrooke. It was a week ago this morning that he and I and members of our team were meeting about this review and the conclusions to be drawn.

As many have observed, he was certainly a giant of diplomacy, but he understood how difficult the mission that he'd been given was, and he threw himself into it with every fiber of his larger-than-life being.

He was deeply committed to its success, and he and his team, two members of which are with me today -- the Acting Special Representative Frank Ruggiero, who has on-the-ground experience leading one of our civilian teams in Kandahar for a year; and Dan Feldman, who has been another deputy in the operation focusing on our strategy going forward.

Both Ambassador Holbrooke and I approached this review keenly aware of where things stood 22 months ago. This administration, I think it's fair to remind us all, inherited an extraordinarily difficult situation. There was no coherent strategy to unify America's efforts in the region. There was no clearly defined mission. And our people, both our military and our civilian forces, lacked the resources they needed to get any progress accomplished.

Today we have a very different story to tell. President Obama announced a strategy a year ago that defined a clear mission and committed the resources needed to accomplish it. Today's review shows that while we face serious challenges, as the President has just outlined, key parts of our strategy are indeed working well.

In Pakistan, we have moved beyond a purely transactional relationship dominated by military cooperation. We now have broad engagement on both the civilian and military sides.

Through the strategic dialogue that we established last year, Pakistan and the United States have begun a long-term commitment to work together not just on security but on energy, agriculture, education, health and other areas that directly affect the daily lives of the Pakistani people.

There have been, there will continue to be obstacles and setbacks, but our conclusion is that our partnership is slowly but steadily improving. We have greater cooperation and understanding, and that is yielding tangible results on the ground.

In Afghanistan, our surge is not simply military. We have expanded our presence from 320 civilians less than two years ago to 1,100 today. Accomplishing our mission requires close cooperation between our civilians, our troops and our international and Afghan partners. We have worked together to arrest the momentum of the Taliban.

Civilians have been particularly instrumental in the progress we've seen in Helmand and Kandahar, and they will be critical in helping us consolidate the gains we've made in the last year as we move toward a transition to Afghan responsibility.

Our strategy also recognizes that rebuilding Afghanistan is a global commitment. The ISAF coalition continues to grow. Today it stands at 49 countries. NATO and our partners, including the many OIC, the Organization of Islamic Countries, that have recently joined the International Contact Group, know that helping the Afghan people and standing up against violent extremism is essential for the region and the world.

This alignment of our international effort was on full display at the NATO summit in Lisbon last month where the coalition committed to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan while laying out a plan for the Afghan government to take responsibility for its own security. The transition will begin in 2011 and conclude in 2014.

Now, of course we are clear-eyed about the way ahead. The review emphasized the need for a political process in Afghanistan, including reconciliation and expanded regional and international diplomacy. It needs to complement the continued military presence and to leverage the consensus that we reached in Lisbon.

In Pakistan, it will be important to keep making progress in eliminating sanctuaries for extremists, and we must

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continue to close the gap between Kabul and Islamabad.

Now, we know we won't accomplish the goals that the President has set forth today, tomorrow or next month, but we are committed and believe we are progressing in our core goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda in the region, and becoming strong partners with both countries for the long term.

We will not -- in fact, we dare not -- repeat history. We will continue to support the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan as they work to build their future -- one that is secure, prosperous and free, and does not pose a threat to the people of the United States.

SECRETARY GATES: I'd also like to add my condolences to the Holbrooke family. Richard was a tireless advocate for peace, a dedicated public servant, and an old friend. We at the Department of Defense will miss him.

I just returned a week ago from another trip to Afghanistan where I saw firsthand our efforts across the country, and met with troops and commanders on the ground. I saw personally how international and Afghan forces have halted Taliban momentum throughout the country and are reversing it in their traditional strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand.

The sense of progress among those closest to the fight is palpable. In my last visit last week with troops at a forward operating base near Kandahar, I met with our brave young men and women and their Afghan army partners, who have taken new territory, cleared it, secured it and held it; and who are now in the process of linking their newly established zone of security with those in Helmand province.

As we expected and warned, U.S. coalition and Afghan forces are suffering more casualties as we push into these areas long controlled by the Taliban. Fighting in the east, where I saw how our troops are focused on disrupting Taliban insurgents and preventing them from gaining access to population centers, has also picked up.

But as a result of the tough fight underway, the Taliban control far less territory today than they did a year ago. The bottom line is that the military progress made in just the past three to four months since the last of the additional 30,000 U.S. troops arrived has exceeded my expectations.

Central to these efforts has been the growth of the Afghan security forces in both size and capability. And they are ahead of schedule. More than 65,000 new recruits have joined the fight this year, and virtually all of them are now rifle qualified, as opposed to only a third of them in November of 2009.

Afghan troops are already responsible for security in Kabul, and are increasingly taking the lead in Kandahar, where they make up more than 60 percent of the fighting forces. They are performing well in partnership with coalition troops and will continue to improve with the right training, equipment and support.

The growth of local security initiatives is helping communities protect themselves against the Taliban, while denying insurgents sanctuary and freedom of movement. At the same time, Pakistan has committed over 140,000 troops to operations in extremist safe havens along the border in coordination with Afghan and coalition forces on the Afghan side.

Though we believe the Pakistanis can and must do more to shut down the flow of insurgents across the border, it is important to remember that these kinds of military operations in the tribal areas would have been considered unthinkable just two years ago. And the Pakistani military has simultaneously been contending with the historic flooding that has devastated much of the country.

While our progress in Afghanistan, as both the President and Secretary Clinton have said, is fragile and reversible, I believe that we will be able to achieve the key goals laid out by the President last year and further embraced by other NATO heads of state in Lisbon. That is, for Afghan forces to begin taking a security lead in the coming year, and for the Afghan government to assume security responsibility countrywide by the end of 2014.

This process has already begun in places like Kabul, and will accelerate in the spring and summer of 2011. The transition will spread nationwide over time. It will be gradual, and it will be based on conditions on the ground.

I'd like to close with a special word of thanks and holiday greetings to our troops and their families, and especially to those who are serving in Afghanistan. It is their sacrifice that has made this progress possible. I regret that we will be asking more of them in the months and years to come.

MR. GIBBS: Mr. Kuhnhenh.

Q Thank you, Robert. A two-part question for Secretary Gates, Secretary Clinton, General Cartwright, and if I may follow up with you on a separate matter.

MR. GIBBS: That covers it. (Laughter.)

Q The key phrase is gains that are fragile and reversible. And I'm wondering -- I think the American public would like to know is it fair to assume or conclude that the bulk of the 100,000 troops there will be there for a long haul, and that the withdrawal that begins in July will be quite gradual, lower than modest. And so, when and for how long will those -- will the bulk of the troops be there?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, first of all, the key to our success and to the completion of the transition of security responsibility in 2014 is the continued expansion of the Afghan National Security Forces.

And I think the expectation on the part of both ourselves and our partners in the coalition is that as the Afghans increase their capability, then we can move to more challenging parts of the country and at the same time all of us begin drawing down our forces, again, based on conditions on the ground.

But just as the Afghans are already in control of security in the Kabul area and, as I mentioned, are taking the lead in the Kandahar area, this is really the path out for everybody. As the Afghans -- the whole idea in the military strategy is to halt the momentum of the Taliban, reverse it, degrade their capabilities and deny them control of major population centers. At the same time, you build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces to take on a degraded Taliban.

In terms of when the troops come out, the President has made clear it'll be conditions-based. In terms of what that line looks like beyond July 2011, I think the answer is we don't know at this point. But the hope is that as we progress, that those drawdowns will be able to accelerate.

Q But conditions-based right now indicate a commitment of well into 2013, well into -- what does it tell you based on the conditions you see right now?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, one of the metrics that we're looking at is the importance of continually testing whether we're achieving our goals by whether we are able to transition to Afghan authority within a period of 18 to 24 months of arriving in a particular area. And, for example, the campaign in Marja has been -- has taken longer and been more difficult than we anticipated, but the reality is we have made significant progress at this point. And if you look at Marja in terms of next summer -- so six months from now -- we think we're going to be in a pretty good place in Marja and will be -- and our troops already have thinned out in Marja itself and are moving to other areas beyond Marja.

So this is going to be a process that goes on and we'll be evaluating it on a continuing basis.

Q Can you win this if militants continue to have free passage into Pakistan, find safe haven there? Can you crack down in a stronger way with the Pakistani government to crack down on their safe havens?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, first of all, they don't have a free pass at this point. There is -- there are a lot of, as we say in our building, kinetic actions taking place along that border. In terms of people coming across, one of the areas of progress has been not only the 140,000 Pakistani troops working some of these safe havens in Swat and South Waziristan and elsewhere, but it is the fact that there is increasing cooperation on both sides of the border in coordinating their military operations.

So the Pakistanis come in behind the insurgents from the Pakistani side and, coordinating with us and the Afghans, we're on the other side. And so they're the meat in the sandwich. And we expect to see more of that, and the cooperation is increasing between the Afghans and the Pakistanis.

Everybody knows that failure to deal with the safe havens does present a real challenge, but I would argue that we are in the process of dealing with those safe havens -- the Pakistanis on their side of the border, and Afghanistan and Pakistan and us working together.

Q Robert, on the omnibus, this is legislation that contains about \$8 billion in pet congressional projects. These are the type of earmarks that the President said he would oppose. And I'm curious why didn't he simply tell Congress that he would not sign a bill that contained pork-barrel projects and that -- how can the White House urge passage of this with things in it that the President stood against?

MR. GIBBS: Jim, let me -- I want to go to Secretary Gates on this because I know they've had conversations about this, and then I'll come back to this in particular.

SECRETARY GATES: I don't much like the earmarks, either. I consider the second engine the poster child of earmarks. But what I have to look at is the alternative to the omnibus. A year-long continuing resolution would be a gigantic problem for the Department of Defense.

First of all, it's a \$19 billion cut in the budget, already a third of the way through the -- or a fourth of the way through the fiscal year. We have very little flexibility to move money around the Pentagon budget without getting congressional approval for reprogrammings, which is always a complicated and time-consuming process. We have no flexibility in starting any new programs, such as funding for Cyber Command.

So a year-long continuing resolution, as far as I'm concerned, for the Department of Defense is the worst of all possible worlds. The omnibus is not great, but it beats a year-long continuing resolution.

MR. GIBBS: And, Jim, I would just add to this. The President would strongly prefer a piece of legislation that doesn't contain any of those earmarks. But as you heard Secretary Gates tell you, he's told you all exactly what he's told the President over the course of the last several meetings about the importance of this to the flexibility of his department and then also to Secretary Clinton's department.

Yes, sir.

Q I have a question for Secretary Clinton and one for Secretary Gates.

Secretary Clinton, in the new ABC News/Washington Post poll, 60 percent of the American people say the war in Afghanistan is not worth fighting anymore. That's a high. Considering that the U.S. withdrawal date is not until 2014, how can the Obama administration continue to wage this war with so little public support?

And then I'll have -- I guess after she answers it, I'll ask Secretary Gates.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, first, Jake, I think it's important to remember, as the President reminded us once again, why we're fighting this war. We all understand the stresses that this war causes first and foremost on the men and women of the military and our civilian forces who are there and their families. And we certainly understand the budgetary demands that are called for.

But it is our assessment, backed up by 49 other nations that are also committing their troops, their civilians, their taxpayer dollars, that this is critical to our national security.

Obviously, if we had concluded otherwise, we would have made different decisions. But having inherited what we did, and having spent an intensive period of time in 2009 reviewing every possible approach and, frankly, listening to quite contrasting points of view about the way forward, the President and we agreed that this was a commitment that we had to not only continue, but we had to adopt a new strategy, we had to resource it more, and we had to pursue it. And the diagnostic review that we have just undertaken, that we've described to you, has concluded that we are making gains on that strategy.

I'm well aware of the popular concern and I understand it. But I don't think leaders, and certainly this President, will not make decisions that are matters of life and death and the future security of our nation based on polling. That would not be something that you will see him or any of us deciding. We're trying to do the very best we can with the leadership that we've all been entrusted with to avoid making the mistakes that were made in previous years, where we did not develop the kind of relationship and understanding and coordination with either Afghanistan or Pakistan that would enable us to have a better way of interacting with them and perhaps preventing some of what came to pass, and where, frankly, we walked away at some critical moments in the last 25, 30 years that created conditions that we had a hand in, unfortunately, contributing to.

So I think it's understandable and I'm very respectful of the feelings of the American people. But the question I would ask is, how do you feel about a continuing American commitment that is aimed at protecting you and your family now and into the future? Because that's the question that we've asked, and this is how we'd answer it.

Q Secretary Gates, I was wondering if you could comment on reports from our reporters in Afghanistan, first of all, that conditions in the west and the north of Afghanistan are actually worse now than they were a year ago, as the U.S. has focused on the south, and also the fact that even in Kandahar, which is cited in this report as a place where there has been some success, two-thirds of the municipal jobs there are unfilled because the local population is afraid to join the government. They're afraid of the repercussions. And that's an area that you're citing as a success. I wonder if you could comment on that.

SECRETARY GATES: First of all, let me just add to Secretary Clinton's response to you that I think if you look at polling in almost all of our 49 coalition partners' countries, public opinion is in doubt. Public opinion would be majority -- in terms of majority, against their participation. I would just say that it's obviously the responsibility of leaders to pay attention to public opinion, but at the end of the day their responsibility is to look out for the public interest and to look to the long term.

What I would say is that one of the -- first of all, the security gains, what I was talking about in my remarks, really had to do with the security gains in terms of clearing the Taliban out of areas that they've controlled for years. And what we're seeing is, as the security environment improves in places like Nawa and places like Marja and so on, more people are willing to sign up. But there's a lag time -- and General Petraeus has briefed this -- in terms of the lag between greater violence, greater military success, and then the quality of governance and having people come in behind.

This is something that we're focused on. Ambassador Eikenberry is focused on it. We are all focused on it -- Secretary Clinton, obviously -- in terms of doing what we can to increase the number of Afghans who can come in behind our security forces to provide the circumstances for governance. There is no doubt that the Taliban has a very targeted assassination program against people who are working with the coalition and people who are associated with the Afghan government, even at local levels. But as we deny them safe havens within Afghanistan, their ability to carry out these kind of terrorist acts will be diminished. And that's why we talk in terms of 18 to 24 months.

MR. GIBBS: Caren.

Q Are you worried about the perception that you're sugarcoating this with the review and the talk of progress? And also, if you could also talk about START a little bit and where you think the state of play is on that would be great.

SECRETARY GATES: I think we've been very conscientious all along in terms of trying to be realistic about the prospects, and I think that those of you who have listened to General Petraeus's briefings, those of you who have talked to us, I hope see that we've tried to be realistic in terms of identifying the challenges as well as the successes. The challenges clearly are governance issues, civilian capacity, the Pakistani safe havens. But what -- the main purpose of this review was for us to identify those areas where we think we have concerns, where we're not progressing as fast as we would like to be so that we can focus on those in the months to come. The whole purpose of this review was not to re-litigate the entire strategy but rather to say, how's it going and where is it going as well or better than we like, but where is it not? And then -- so we can focus our attention and our resources on addressing those shortcomings.

SECRETARY CLINTON: I think if you start from the context that we inherited two years ago, you can

understand why we think on the one hand we're making progress, and on the other hand we have a long way to go. And I don't see that those two thoughts are in any way cancelling each other out or leading to some kind of rosy outlook. I think we're very clear-eyed and realistic.

If you had -- when we came into this administration, we had very little in the way of an understanding with Pakistan that the extremists who threatened us were allied with extremists who threatened them, and that in effect they were creating a syndicate of terrorism. And in fact, when we came into office, the Pakistanis had agreed to an ill-conceived peace agreement with the Pakistani Taliban that was consistently and persistently expanding their territorial reach. And we pointed out firmly that this was not a strategy that would work for them, and in fact we had very strong objections to it because it would provide greater and greater territory for al Qaeda and their allies to operate in.

So what happened? The Pakistanis took an entirely different approach. They moved, what, 140,000 troops off the Indian border. They waged an ongoing conflict against their enemies who happen also to be the allies of our enemies. They began to recognize what we see as a mortal threat to Pakistan's long-term sovereignty and authority. That was not something that was predicted two years ago that they would do. They've done it.

They've also maintained a civilian government against great odds, and something that has provided more legitimacy to our interactions with them. And we have started what has turned out to be a quite effective, robust strategic dialogue with them, engaging the whole of their government with ours. We also have helped to broker better relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and played a major role in bringing about the signing of something called the Transit Trade Agreement, which they had been trying to agree to since 1963.

So we have a long list of things that we believe are creating a better context in which we are waging this struggle against al Qaeda and their extremist allies. But, you know, those kinds of things rarely get the sort of continuing attention that we pay to them because we see them as building blocks, not just as one-off events. And there's much more.

So in addition to Bob's point, I don't think you will find any rosy-scenario people in the leadership of this administration, starting with the President. This has been a very, very hard-nosed review.

On START, we were encouraged by the vote yesterday to proceed to START. We have good reason to believe that there is a growing willingness on the Republican side to look at the merits of this treaty, to understand what it means to not only American security but the continuing effort to create the relationship with Russia that has brought us a lot of benefits in the last two years, including agreements for transiting Russia to resupply our troops.

So I think that START is not only on its own, by its own merits, worthy of the Senate's ratification; it is in the line of arms control agreements going back many years that have won overwhelming bipartisan support. And it is part of the efforts that we see moving forward well to bring Russia and Europe and the United States closer together to cooperate on what the threats of the future are, not to be looking back at the threats of the past.

MR. GIBBS: Let me get General Cartwright in here on that one as well.

GENERAL CARTWRIGHT: First, I want to go back to the question about sugarcoating. And what's fundamentally different at this point that we didn't have when we started, we had one basic metric against which to judge value and progress, and that was this construct of 18 to 24 months, based off the Marines arriving in July of 2009 in the Helmand province; that takes you to July of 2011. Would that concept work? Would this idea of COIN be able to be applied?

What Lisbon gives us is another set of metrics now that we can judge our progress as we go forward. So, from July of 2011, the transition to Afghan control of security has to occur between then and 2014, and after 2014, the proof that we are an enduring partnership with the Afghans. Those metrics, added to what we had in 2011, give us signposts by which we can judge our progress. And I think that's an important context.

The second, on START, for me, all of the Joint Chiefs are very much behind this treaty, because of the transparency, because of the reality that both the United States and Russia are going to have to recapitalize their nuclear arsenals, both the delivery vehicles and the weapons. To have transparency, to understand the rules by which to put structure to that activity, we need START and we need it badly.

I think the last piece of that that oftentimes gets overlooked when you're thinking about START is that this is a relationship between our countries. And in the context that Secretary Clinton just put forward, much more than just the nuclear is relying on this treaty. This is no prohibitions to our ability to move forward in missile defense, which gives us a much better deterrent when combined with the offensive side as we move to the future. A single mutual assured destruction approach to deterrence is just not relevant as we move into the 21st century. We need this treaty in order to move in that direction.

MR. GIBBS: Chuck.

Q Two questions, one for Madam Secretary and one for Secretary Gates.

Is it fair, Secretary Clinton, to look at this review and say -- and come to the conclusion that it's -- you feel you've made a lot more progress with the Afghanistan roles than on the Pakistan side?

And second, you were just referring to the civilian leadership. Who's in charge of Pakistan, and -- in that larger sense? I mean, who is it that's running Pakistan? Is it the civilian government? Is it the military? Is it the intelligence agency?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, Chuck, first, I would argue that we have made progress with Pakistan, and I think the President and each of us have alluded to some of the signposts of that progress.

We still have a lot to do. And the floods were a major challenge to the -- not only the people of Pakistan but also to our strategy, because we had adopted an approach to change how we were doing aid to be much more responsive to what the Pakistanis themselves needed and wanted as opposed to what we thought they should need or want.

And so I think that we have made progress. We've made progress in certainly our military cooperation but also our civilian cooperation.

And I think as with any question about leadership or who's in charge, we deal with the entire government. We -- as the President said, he talks to President Zardari. I deal with the civilian leadership. We also talk to the military leadership. Admiral Mullen has developed a very positive, cooperative relationship with General Kayani. Leon Panetta deals regularly with the Director General of the ISI, General Pasha. We are in constant communication.

And there are certain decisions that are made by different leaders within their government. But it would be a mistake, and it's a mistake that the United States has made continuously over the last 63 years, to move away from the democratically elected civilian leadership of Pakistan. Our goal is to help support that leadership, help them understand how to deliver and show that democracy produces results for people. And we intend to do that.

And that's -- so our answer is we deal with the leaders of Pakistan, and we do it in a very whole of government approach. And the strategic dialogue has given us the mechanism to be able to do that.

Q Secretary Gates, are you surprised at how hard your -- has your relationship with Senate Republicans, have you just noticed this change just simply -- because you worked for a different administration, are you surprised at how hard it's been for you to get a budget, how hard it's been for you to get START? And I know you've been involved in a lot of those lobbying efforts. Can you just describe how your relationship with Senate Republicans has changed going from one administration to another?

SECRETARY GATES: They may have a different view, but I don't think it's changed at all. I mean, these things have always been hard. They were hard in the last administration.

Q Do you think you'd be getting your defense budget if this were a Republican administration?

SECRETARY GATES: I think that they would be wrapped around the axle on a lot of the same issues they're tied up with now. I don't think it's a partisan issue. Actually, the defense budget and the defense authorization bill, for a long time, has not really been a partisan issue. It's had as many Democrats -- many Democrats supporting both, along with Republicans.

So I've had the advantage in that I think certainly both the armed services committees and the appropriations committees that I deal with kind of across the political spectrum are, first of all, very supportive of the military, very supportive of the Department of Defense. And I feel like I've had a great relationship with them.

I would like to add one comment on the strategic dialogue, just to reinforce Secretary Clinton's point. When we have the strategic dialogue meetings that include Secretary Clinton and myself, and did include Ambassador Holbrooke and Chairman Mullen, our counterparts in that, in these very small, very private meetings, are not just General Kayani; it's the defense minister, it's the finance minister, it's the foreign minister. So, it is, in fact, in reality, a whole of government approach with these guys.

Q Just quickly on START, I just want to follow up. Do you feel like that got politicized? Do you feel like it's getting politicized?

SECRETARY GATES: I think that there were some genuine concerns on the Hill, particularly on the Republican side, but not exclusively on the Republican side, about the modernization of our nuclear enterprise and a reluctance to go forward on START without the assurance that the resources would be made available to be able to carry out the modernization programs that General Cartwright talked about. I think there were some misunderstandings, frankly, on missile defense.

I hope that the testimony of the Joint Chiefs, and especially General Cartwright, who is expert in this area, and perhaps me to a lesser extent, have provided reassurance to people that this treaty in no way limits anything we have in mind or want to do on missile defense. So I think that there were some legitimate concerns. But, frankly, I think they've been addressed.

MR. GIBBS: Mike.

Q We remember the Christmas Day attempted attack? And I'm wondering if any of you can comment on how serious the threat picture is heading into this Christmas season?

MR. GIBBS: Who wants that one? (Laughter.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: I think that goes to you, Robert. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: Yes, I will --

Q Merry Christmas.

MR. GIBBS: Merry Christmas, right. (Laughter.) Look, obviously -- and this is true in the counterterrorism meetings that the President has and the President's daily briefing, obviously we're not going to get into commenting on the specific intelligence. We know that al Qaeda and its extremist affiliates want to, and seek to do, harm and damage in Europe and in the United States. We have good relationships with those governments and information sharing. And we're taking all the steps that are necessary to ensure that we're doing all that we can. As we did earlier this year with AQAP's attempt in using the computer printers, obviously we will continue to remain vigilant on this topic.

Q Any reaction from any of you to Julian Assange being granted bail in England?

MR. GIBBS: I'm not going to let anybody let me take that one. (Laughter.) Bill.

Q Understanding that you feel that you've not painted too optimistic a picture in this assessment, there are reports from on the ground, from various sources, and apparently reports of intelligence agency reports recently, which paint a darker picture, a picture of corruption, incompetence, weakness or absence of government in Afghanistan, and your own comment in the report that a major challenge will be demonstrating that the Afghan government has the capacity to consolidate the gains which ISAF forces make. So what reason is there to believe that in the long run you can prevail in Afghanistan? Why does not the absence of troops whenever, whether it's 2014 or 2020, mean that things go back to pretty much the way they were?

SECRETARY GATES: I think part of -- I think the key here is identifying our objectives carefully. What do we need to accomplish to achieve our goals? Our goal isn't -- as the President said, our goal isn't to build a 21st century Afghanistan. Our goal is not a country that is free of corruption, which would be unique in the entire region. Our goal is, what is necessary -- in my view, our goal is, what do we need to do, along with our partners and the Afghans, to turn back the Taliban's military and violent capabilities to the degree that the Afghan government forces can deal with them; and to provide some minimal capability at the local, district and provincial level for security, for dispute resolution, for perhaps a clinic within an hour's walk. What we are trying to work our way toward is, what are -- just what do we have to do to be able to turn over security responsibility to the Afghans with us in the background and perhaps in a train-and-equip mission like we've increasingly taken on in Iraq.

And I think one of the things that the administration has done, and, frankly, one of the benefits of the protracted review a year ago and the review that we've just been through, is keeping us focused on not getting too ambitious, in not setting goals that we can't achieve, and trying to have a minimalist approach that focuses on al Qaeda and on the Taliban and on Afghan capabilities, both military and civilian.

The civilian piece is a challenge, there's no question about it, but we've got 1,100 U.S. civilians, we have thousands of partner civilians in Afghanistan working to help provide that capital. And I would say it's important to have it not just in the central government in Kabul, but to have it at same minimal level also at the local district provincial level.

And one of the virtues of the local police initiatives that we're seeing, the local security initiatives, is that they are empowered by the local tribal elders, or the shuras, and so they're taking leadership of this. And as far as I'm concerned, if that can provide security for that village or that area, we've accomplished our objective.

Q You're confident that it can?

SECRETARY GATES: Yes, I am.

MR. GIBBS: Scott.

Q Thank you. It's possible to read the overview assessment that we all received and draw a conclusion that the clearest statements of success on the President's primary goal of defeating al Qaeda came in counterterrorism operations. I'm thinking of the paragraph -- the second paragraph of the assessment says, "Most important, al Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan is weaker and under more sustained pressure than at any point since it fled Afghanistan in 2001." That same paragraph ends with the fact that U.S. troops are arresting Taliban momentum but quickly adds that those gains are fragile and possibly reversible.

My question is -- and I know Secretary Gates said this wasn't a time to relitigate the debate of last year -- but if the goals are being achieved, those main goals, with counterterrorism operations, with -- that don't involved the troop surge, don't involve the heavy footprint of the counterinsurgency strategy, will that dictate the direction after July of 2011, the pace of withdrawal, and the strategy ahead?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, first -- I'll start, and then Secretary Gates and General Cartwright can come in.

This is, by necessity, an overview. Certainly from our perspective, the what you call counterterrorism successes are part of the overall effort and cannot be separated out. That was one of the very vigorous discussions that we had in the review of '09. And I think General Cartwright and Secretary Gates can add to this, but it's hard to separate out what is necessary on the ground in order to support counterterrorism efforts and to say that you can do one without the other. So I would caution that conclusion because I think it's much more complex than just the shorthand overview.

GENERAL CARTWRIGHT: I think also that you have to look at that integrated strategy. It is a balance, and that balance is something that the commander on the ground is constantly adjusting. And we have seen increases in our focus on counterterrorism -- at times, when maneuver forces, our forces that came from sanctuary, came in, whether

they be Taliban or al Qaeda -- to be able to get at them, to stop them, to thwart them, to reduce their ability to plan.

And it's not just in Afghanistan. It has to be in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We have the advantage in Afghanistan of having boots on the ground so that we can actually defeat, rather than just disrupt. We have to get that kind of capability as we look towards Pakistan. That has to be done in partnership with Pakistan. It doesn't mean you have to have American boots on the ground, but you need both. So on the counterterrorism side.

The COIN side of the equation brings the structure to it, brings the enduring piece to it. This is the piece that we talked about that was fragile. Will we be able to endure? Will the COIN capability actually provide the sufficiency to endure as we go forward? That's the question that we're trying to answer.

MR. GIBBS: Helene.

Q I'd like to ask about the issue of Pakistan and the Pakistani safe havens. The Pakistani government has made some moves in places like Waziristan and Swat, but usually only after their own government has been directly threatened. There still -- you still have al Qaeda and Taliban senior leadership protected in Quetta and in Karachi and in other parts of Pakistan. What specifically do you plan to do to push the Pakistani government? And if they don't go ahead with cracking down on this, what can the U.S. do, given that you say these gains that we have will remain fragile and reversible unless we solve the issue of the safe havens?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, first of all, I would say that the Pakistanis have indicated their willingness to move into other areas in addition to South Waziristan and Swat. But as I mentioned in my opening remarks and as Secretary Clinton referred to, it's hard to overstate the impact of the flooding in Pakistan and the role of -- and the degree to which the military -- military assets were drawn off the border to be able to deal with the flooding.

They also have to have an enduring presence in the places that they've cleared and so -- to make sure that the enemies they cleared out don't come back as well. So I think that like in many of the things that we've dealt with with Pakistan, things will move in the right direction. It'll probably take longer than we would like, but they have made clear their intentions.

I would say, though, that this underscores the importance of the broader strategic dialogue between ourselves and the Pakistanis. I think that they are coming to have a better understanding of the threat that is posed to them by this syndicate of terrorists that's not just the Pakistani Taliban that's a problem for them. And I think that the degree of cooperation and bilateral cooperation on both sides of the border is a manifestation.

This is something we've wanted to do for a long time. We're now doing it. We've wanted the Pakistanis to be on that border for a long time. Eighteen months ago I would have thought the idea of 140,000 troops on that border was an impossibility.

So I believe that the relationship that we have with them and the more confident that they are that we have a long-term relationship in mind with Pakistan, then I think the more willing they're going to be to take actions that serve both our interests.

MR. GIBBS: Jill, and then I'll let these guys go back to work.

Q Secretary Clinton, maybe this would be best for you. The President mentioned reconciliation. To what extent is that still a priority? Degrading the leadership -- what effect has that had on prospects for reconciliation? And then also, remembering Ambassador Holbrooke, who said there is no Slobodan Milosevic, there's nobody really out there in that conventional sense to talk to. So where does this stand at this point?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, Jill, as Ambassador Holbrooke also said many times, there's no military solution, which of course we recognize, which is why we have an integrated civilian-military approach.

And among the areas in which we are engaged is working with the Afghan government on reconciliation and reintegration. This is, from our perspective, necessarily an Afghan-led process. It also is one in which the regional partners have interests and to some extent stakes.

So we have dramatically increased our regional diplomacy. We are working closely with a number of parties to explore what is and what isn't possible on the reconciliation front.

But at the end of the day, it has to be Afghan-led. And so we are supporting President Karzai's efforts, and I expect that we'll be evaluating that because we certainly believe that the increased military pressure is a necessary component of getting to a point where there can be a genuine discussion about reconciliation.

MR. GIBBS: Thanks, guys.

Q Thank you very much.

Q Thank you all.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, sir.

Q Robert, can you clarify something for us?

MR. GIBBS: Possibly.

Q Were you saying earlier that President Obama would sign the omnibus bill with \$8 billion in earmarks if it reaches his desk?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I would reiterate that our strong preference would be a bill that didn't contain any of that. But as you heard from Secretary Gates, this is a -- a continuing resolution would represent a significant disruption and a significant shortfall in the Pentagon's budget. And that's not to say we would also -- as I think I said, represents a shortfall as well at the Department of State as we are transitioning out of a military-led role in Iraq into one that is more civilian.

Mark.

Q So he will sign it?

Q But how is that -- yes. First of all, will he sign it? And how is that --

MR. GIBBS: Again, I would wait to see what the final bill will look like. But, again, our preference would be none, but at the same time and as I think the Vice President has said, we understand it is not perfect but it is what the leaders in very important departments like the Pentagon and the State Department have said are necessary and needed.

Q But just to get clear, this is the one thing, this area of signing a big earmark-laden bill, that he said he regretted. So when does the new approach to this start? I mean, he keeps on saying he doesn't want to do this but he does it anyway.

MR. GIBBS: Well, Mara, I'd say two things. I mean, obviously this is a -- this is going to be somewhat dependent upon Congress. I mean, I think we've all seen interviews over the past 24 hours with people specifically opposed to this bill, specifically opposed to the earmarks in this bill, with earmarks in this bill.

Q But they're voting no.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, and --

Q As ridiculous as it seems, they're still voting no.

MR. GIBBS: They've voting no and I bet their press people are writing the press releases on the grants right now. I mean, at some point, Mara, that -- I assume at some point those get pulled out or that has to stop. But the President -- again, we are long overdue on these bills and the President has to make tough determinations about the equities as they are. And I know that he and Secretary Gates have spent quite a bit of time on this.

Margaret, did you have something?

Q Well, I did. I'm not sure -- well, I'd like to -- I'll give it a try, if you can do it. But it's sort of a technical question, which is that in the five-page unclassified that was released, there's not actually a lot of numbers or data or metrics. And I'm wondering if the administration can actually quantify the case that the Taliban controls less territory now. I mean, I think that's true in Helmand and Kandahar, but it may not be true in the north and the east -- well, maybe it is true, but we don't have -- it's sort of like a take-it-on-faith thing.

MR. GIBBS: You mean the north and the west.

Q Yes. Can you back that up with data?

MR. GIBBS: Let me see if there are numbers that are releasable around that. Look, let me -- I want to speak broadly for a second about the overview, because a series of questions were on this and I think -- I think as you have -- you heard me talk about the review and the process around this review on Tuesday, and as this review states, we are not -- we're not ignoring the challenges, the many challenges and significant challenges that still remain.

And I think we're pretty forthright in here about the notion that while we have seen, on a security side in Afghanistan, the stemming of momentum, we understand that clearing and securing -- and clearing are different than holding. And we have those challenges on the civilian side.

We mentioned the progress that has been made in -- and as you heard both the Secretaries talk about, 140,000 Pakistani troops who understand the threat as they didn't 18 or 20 months ago. But we still have challenges with -- and they've been mentioned in here -- not just the safe havens in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas but in other portions of the country.

So I think we are -- I think as we've seen gains, we understand that many challenges are apparent and still have to and will be dealt with.

Q I think the press corps understands the need for you to be able to keep some of your information out of the eye of enemies, but in reporting it's much easier to -- it's much easier -- it would be easier for us to write a story if we had data to back up the claims.

MR. GIBBS: I will say this, Margaret. I think there -- I will check on what metrics -- I think if -- and you all have some very good reporters in the region. I think they'd back up that statement. I feel enormously confident of that.

Kerry.

Q Thanks, Robert. So today Senators Brown and Murkowski came out in favor of "don't ask, don't tell" and yesterday Olympia Snowe. So it's looking like the votes could be there. But Senator Reid is sort of giving mixed signals about whether or not there's going to be time to do this and how committed he seems to be to making it happen before the end of the year. You've said a number of times that this is important to the President. Why not put the President in front of a camera? Why not let him use his bully pulpit to lobby for this getting done before Congress goes home? Because, for instance, with START, he was in front of camera with General Powell and --

MR. GIBBS: Kerry, I think he's -- on every chance that he's been asked about this, he has talked about and started a process -- the Pentagon study didn't happen out of thin air. It was a process that started as a way of measuring the attitudes of those, as the President understood and realized, that either legislatively or judicially the policy was going to end. The President has been on the phone with -- as you've asked me about -- been on the phone with members and senators on this very important issue.

Let's be clear, we would not be at this point if it wasn't for the President's leadership in bringing this issue to the forefront. You mentioned, I believe, we have the votes. You will also notice -- and you brought START up -- yesterday there was going to be -- there was -- Senator DeMint had an effort to read a treaty and its attachments that had been available to the public for eight months. I would -- there's time to do this if there are those on the other side of the aisle that wish to get this done. And it is clear that whether it's Senator Brown or Senator Murkowski or Senator Snowe or others, there's an effort to get this done if we have time to do it.

Sam.

Q Is the President communicating with Senator Reid on that? I mean --

MR. GIBBS: They talk regularly.

Sam.

Q Thanks, Robert. Largely absent from the discussion today and the review is the question of President Karzai and whether he can or will be the partner the President needs him to be for the strategy to succeed. Was that included in the President's review? What conclusions were drawn? Is the --

MR. GIBBS: Well, Sam, I don't -- I think when we're talking about civilian capacity -- and I think it's important -- you heard what Secretary Gates said -- there's governance at a national and then there's governance at a sub-national provincial district and local level, all of which we have challenges on.

The President -- President Obama talked with President Karzai last evening, and we continue to work with our partners to see progress.

Q If anything, though, that relationship seems to have gotten more strained, or just stranger in the last year, and I'm curious what the hope is going forward. I mean, is that one of the realistic challenges that the White House -- that the President is facing?

MR. GIBBS: Is what one of the realistic --

Q In getting Karzai to be the person, the partner that the President needs him to be.

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, there are -- civilian capacity at a number of different levels is most definitely, as the report is clear on, is most assuredly one of the challenges.

David. And then I'll take Roger --

Q Robert, in the discussion we just had on the AfPak review, there were two central goals that were laid out by the President when he started the first review. The first we've discussed extensively today, which was degrade and ultimately defeat al Qaeda. The second goal the President laid out was to assure the security of Pakistani nuclear weapons. It wasn't mentioned in the material that was released earlier. It wasn't mentioned in the course of today's discussion. And yet we know from some cables we've read in recent times that there was at least concern within the embassy in Islamabad after the President said at a press conference that he was not particularly concerned about security. So can you tell us, was this reviewed as part of this year-long review? And did you come to any different conclusions than you'd come to a year ago?

MR. GIBBS: David, our full relationship with Pakistan was part of this national security staff two month-led review. And for a lot of intelligence reasons, I'm not going to get into its conclusion.

Roger.

Q I just had sort of a clarifying question. The President said he wanted to visit Pakistan next year. Are there certain things that need to happen before that trip comes off? And roughly when might it be? Summer or fall?

MR. GIBBS: I don't have scheduling information. I know that President Obama spoke with President Zardari several weeks ago about this and I believe it likely came up on their call in the last 24 hours. And it is an important -- as I said earlier -- a very important relationship that we have, and he looks forward to it.

Thank you.

END
1:03 P.M. EST

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