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News Transcript

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen
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Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen

SEC. GATES: Good afternoon. First, I'd like to extend my sympathies and commiserate with the secretary of state, with her fractured elbow. Having broken my right arm as secretary of defense, and had the left arm operated on, I think I can truthfully say, I feel her pain. But I wish her a speedy recovery.

As you know, last week, I attended the NATO ministerial in Brussels, along with a meeting of allies and partners who are contributing troops to RC South and Afghanistan. In Brussels, I was pleased to introduce General McChrystal, the new ISAF commander, to the NATO defense ministers and to our troop-contributing partners. He is now, obviously, on the job and in the midst of a 60-day review of our operations there. He'll bring unparalleled energy and determination, as well as substantial counterinsurgency experience and expertise, to the international military effort in Afghanistan. I look forward to the results of his review, which should represent a more comprehensive and effective civil-military approach.

One of the key takeaways from Brussels was an agreement in principle to stand up a new ISAF command structure, including a new operational headquarters. On that front, I look forward to the North Atlantic Council's approval of the new command organization next month and to the Senate's confirmation of Lieutenant General David Rodriguez who, with NAC approval, would assume command of the day-to-day military operations of this intermediate headquarters.

Another important takeaway from last week, and one of the highest priorities for General McChrystal, is a commitment from NATO to do everything possible to prevent civilian casualties during ISAF military operations. It is clear that we need to do much more to overcome what I believe is one of our greatest strategic vulnerabilities. The Afghan people must be reassured that U.S. and NATO forces are there as friends, partners and, along with Afghan security forces, they're protectors as well.

With a comprehensive new civil, military and diplomatic strategy, a great new leadership team, I think the United States, our allies and partners, and above all the Afghan people, will be able to achieve the goal of an Afghanistan that does not provide a sanctuary for al Qaeda, rejects the rule of the Taliban and has an elected government that is working to provide for the needs and security of the Afghan people.

And with that, we'd be happy to take your questions.

Ann?

Q Question for both of you: Why has the report into the May 4th-5th Farah incident in Afghanistan not been released? Do either of you oppose its release? And does the fact that it hasn't yet been released, after word that it would be, sort of play into the idea that the United States has something to hide?

SEC. GATES: No, we -- there's -- first of all, we do not oppose its release, and I don't think anybody else in the administration does either. And I expect that the report will be released in the next day or two.

What we have here is -- this is the first major situation where there were potentially a number of civilian casualties since the new administration came into office and since the development of the new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy. And what we've been trying to do is to give our colleagues in the interagency the opportunity to become familiar with this report and -- and then go ahead and release it. And as I say, we expect it to -- I expect it to be released in the next day or two.

ADM. MULLEN: I would only add that I thought this was important enough to review with the Joint Chiefs, which we just recently did at the beginning of this week. In fact, it's -- it's a report that I discussed with the combatant commanders who are in town for one of our major conferences, and that it is -- as the secretary said, it is a strategic vulnerability that we've got to get right and get the lessons from it both understood and then embedded in our training and in our execution.

And it is also -- the whole area of civilian casualties is something that General McChrystal has made very clear he's going to review very -- very quickly while he's there. But again, there's -- there's support for releasing it, and it will be out here very shortly.

SEC. GATES: This is -- I made a point at the NATO meeting last week that I think is important, because dealing with this problem is not just a U.S. military challenge.

Somewhere between 40 and 45 percent of the close air support missions that are flown are flown in support of our allies and partners. And so it also is going to involve a much greater degree of integration of military operations by General McChrystal and presumably, soon, General Rodriguez, to avoid getting into situations that -- where -- as much as we possibly can -- involving not only our troops but the troops of the other contributing nations where we have civilian casualties.

Q What did the investigation find? Did it find that civilians were killed? And were American forces responsible in any way?

ADM. MULLEN: I think there certainly is responsibility. I thought Ambassador Eikenberry, weeks ago, said that it would -- it is going to be -- we may never know how many. And certainly, as I've looked at the investigation, there are some estimates, but I agree with what he said: I don't think we ever will really know how many. There were command-and-control challenges, chain-of-command challenges, some training issues that we've got to address, as well as -- you may remember there were changes that General McKiernan made in January as a result of incidents last year.

And we've evolved through those changes, and there are additional changes that I think that we're going to clearly have to make to ensure that we do absolutely everything to make sure civilian casualties are eliminated, if possible, or certainly minimized in every situation.

Q "Command-and-control challenges" -- does that mean mistakes were made?

ADM. MULLEN: One of the things that we've been challenged with in Afghanistan for a considerable period of time is the whole chain-of-command issue. And there were some -- there were -- and those -- we've made adjustments in that regard by changes that have been made in the chain of command, as -- last year with U.S. 4A and ISAF -- the combination at the commanders level.

But there are others that down through the chain of command that we're -- that we think we need to address as well. And I know that General McChrystal, who had seen this investigation as well, is going to address those as he takes over.

SEC. GATES: I think one of the reasons that the allies so readily supported the creation of this intermediate headquarters was the recognition of the need for a tactical day-to-day commander who had purview over all of the regional command areas of Afghanistan to get at this chain-of-command issue. Tony?

Q A couple airplane questions. You've got two looming here.

What is the status of your decisions on the tanker program in terms of when a re-competition will start?

Two, what's your reaction to the House Armed Services Committee's markup yesterday that put in money to continue the F-22 line? How much --how hard will you fight that? And is that potential veto material if in fact it remains in the final bills?

SEC. GATES: First of all, on the tanker, I have -- I'm probably within a few days of making a decision on the structure of how we're going to go about the process and who will be the acquisition authority and so on. And I still am hoping that we can get an RFP out midsummer or thereabouts.

With respect to the House mark, I would say it's a big problem. I have a big problem with it.

Q Why?

SEC. GATES: Well, because it continues the F-22 program, which is contrary to the recommendations I made to the president and that the president sent to the Congress in his budget. That's why it's a problem.

Q Is it veto material?

SEC. GATES: I'm not going to go that far at this point. I think describing it as a big problem suggests where I am on it.

Q Admiral Mullen, Secretary Gates, currently the U.S. military is tracking a North Korean-flagged ship, the Kang Nam, which is suspected of proliferating either weaponry, nuclear materials or missile parts. What are your options in terms of enforcing U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874? Are you prepared to board the ship at this time?

ADM. MULLEN: Without going into specific details, clearly we're -- we intend to vigorously enforce the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874, to include -- options to include certainly a hail and query. There are -- part of the UNSCR is to, if a vessel like this is queried and doesn't allow a permissive search, to direct it to go into a port, and the country of that port would, as required to, inspect the vessel, and to also keep the United Nations informed, obviously, if a vessel like this would refuse to comply.

But the United Nations Security Council resolution does not include an option for an opposed boarding or a noncompliant boarding with respect to that. And if we get to that point with a vessel that we suspect has material which is counter to -- unauthorized in accordance with UNSCR, that's a report that goes back to the United Nations as well.

Q What do you think is on board this ship? What has made you suspicious that the military's tracking it?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I wouldn't go into any kind of details, at this particular point in time, except to say that it's very clear that the resolution prohibits North Korea from shipping these kinds of materials, the kinds of weapons that were laid out, in the material, from conventional weapons up to fissile material or nuclear weapons.

And we expect compliance. And I've gone through the steps that we would take.

Q The north has said that they would take that, any sort of interdiction, as an act of war. Would that prevent you from pursuing U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think, it's important that this is a U.N. resolution. This is an international commitment. It's not just the United States. It's a lot of other countries as well. And the North taking steps to further isolate itself, to further non-comply with international guidance and regulations, in the long-run, puts them in a more difficult position.

Q Dr. Gates, I wondered what you thought about the report that North Korea might shoot a ballistic missile toward Hawaii, if you thought there was any accuracy to that. And if that was to occur, would that be a situation where the U.S. would use its missile defense system, to eliminate that test?

SEC. GATES: Well, we're obviously watching the situation in the North, with respect to missile launches, very closely. And we do have some concerns, if they were to launch a missile to the [sic - east], in the direction of Hawaii.

I've directed the deployment again of THAAD missiles to Hawaii. And the SBX Radar has deployed, away from Hawaii, to provide support. Based on my visit to Fort Greely, the ground-based interceptors are clearly in a position to take action.

So without telegraphing what we will do, I would just say, we are -- I think we are in a good position, should it become necessary to protect American territory.

Q With regards to Farah, Mr. Secretary, is there evidence in the report that the mistakes or the problems that you both mentioned contributed directly to the civilian casualties? And does it rise to the level where there needs to be any accountability or disciplinary action?

SEC. GATES: Let me ask the admiral.

ADM. MULLEN: Again without going into the specific details of this, this was a lengthy firefight, a number of hours, on the order of about seven or eight hours. It was very intense. It was by the -- handled very well, by the young captain on the ground, who essentially -- who was in charge of it. And at least in my review, I found nothing that would lead to the need to do -- to take any specific action, along the lines of what you're asking.

A tough fight. What he was mostly concerned about was defending his people. There were some injuries. There was a MEDEVAC involved in this. And I thought what he did with the capability that he had, certainly was supportive of the overall requirements at the time. It went from day to night. It was a very complex operation, sustained, et cetera.

So -- and were there some issues with -- along the lines of what I talked about that we've got to adjust? Absolutely, and we'll do that.

SEC. GATES: I think it is worth making the point that there should be doubt in no one's mind that we will do what is necessary to protect our troops. The question is, how do we carry out our operations in a way to minimize the need for the use of close air support? And I think those are the kinds of things that General McChrystal is going to be looking at.

ADM. MULLEN: And there have been suggestions that close air support would be somehow in jeopardy in terms of using that capability. And I just don't see that. It's got to be used very carefully, so it meets the standard that the secretary just described.

Q Are you satisfied, sir, that the air forces that were involved were sufficiently sure of their targets and that civilians would not be injured when they released their ordnance?

ADM. MULLEN: Yes, I am.

SEC. GATES: Barbara.

Q Mr. Secretary, I'm sure both of you have watched this week the use of social networking unfold on the streets of Iran, and I want to ask you about that, not from the standpoint of the politics going on in Iran, but social networking as a tool. Given your -- some of your previous government jobs in the information business, what do you think about all of this? I mean, certainly -- it certainly must strike you that social networking, regardless of the mechanism, impacts decision-making speed, national security. A lot of people say that it's something to be considered these days.

SEC. GATES: I think one of the more -- maybe more significant developments in the last 20 years or so has been the advance of communications technology in the hands of average citizens around the world. There is no question but that the easy availability or the easy access to Western communications and media played a part in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberation of Eastern Europe.

It is increasingly difficult for an authoritarian government to maintain control of all the means of communication that are available to its citizens, and especially when -- I mean, you either have economic stagnation and backwardness, or you allow modern communications.

And it makes the control of communications, by a government, extremely difficult.

And frankly I think it's -- you know, it's a huge win for freedom, around the world, because this monopoly of information is no longer in the hands of the government.

Q So when you look at a country like Iran and the government there right now, which is clearly trying to control modern communications, what is it -- will they succeed, do you think? And how do you think about this, in terms of U.S. national security? Is it something that we need to take into account, in this country?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think, frankly the freedom of communication and the nature of it is a huge strategic asset for the United States. And without being specific about Iran, there are clearly a number of governments, around the world, that try to control these communications -- that try to control the Internet and so on.

And I would just say, I think, their efforts, while successful in some respects, they just can't draw the net tight enough to stop everything. And you know, if you can't text, then you Twitter. And you know, my guess is, in some of these countries, that the leadership is kind of like me. They don't have a clue what it's about. (Laughs.)

Q Well, I want to ask you both that because, I mean, I mean this with all respect. Do you both -- do either of you have a Facebook page? Do either of you actually Twitter yourselves? Or does your staff Twitter for you?

SEC. GATES: Absolutely not.

ADM. MULLEN: Well, actually I do. (Laughter.)

SEC. GATES: He's more technologically advanced.

ADM. MULLEN: But let me -- let me just see if I can take a crack at part of what you asked about, which is the speed issue, because I think the speed of communications and information for -- in lots of domains, but let me talk about security, creates a flexibility and an adaptability. It meets needs for flexibility and adaptability, which we have to have in our forces, first of all.

Secondly I think our force, whose average age is 20ish, 20-21, you know, they -- this is how they live. It's what they've grown up on. And so for leaders -- I mean, I'll take myself in particular -- I think, it's really important to be connected to that and understand it, certainly not be as facile as they are on it, but to understand because I think communicating that way and moving information around that way, whether it's administrative information or information in warfare, is absolutely critical.

SEC. GATES: I would just add -- I would just add one point. What Admiral Mullen just said, I think, is absolutely critical.

So what I have been saying in terms of our hiring a new assistant secretary for public affairs in the Department of Defense -- and when I have talked to people and when I interviewed Price Floyd, the key issue that I have been after is, we have 2 million people, most of them around the -- in uniform, most of them around the age that Admiral Mullen described. And how do we communicate better with them? How do we -- how do we get reactions from them to things that we're doing? How do we get better plugged in with what they're thinking?

Also, in terms of our strategic communications, that's the age, or -- if not younger, of many of the people around the world we are trying to reach. And how do we reach them in a way that they understand? And this department, I think, is way behind the power curve in this, and it's an area where I think we have a lot of room for improvement.

Q Well, what do you think as to how the people of Iran are doing it --

Q Have you -- has either you or Admiral Mullen or anyone else in this building been stepping up your communication with the Chinese, the South Koreans, the Japanese about interdicting North Korean ships? And if so, are you sensing more of a willingness, particularly on the part of the Chinese, to monitor and, if necessary, to interdict North Korean ships?

SEC. GATES: I'll just say that when I was in Singapore I had bilateral meetings with both my South Korean and Japanese counterparts, and then we had the first-ever trilateral meeting of the defense ministers of the three countries. And our focus was on how do we improve our defensive capabilities together in response to what's going on in North Korea. I'm not aware of -- I certainly have not had any communications with the Chinese in terms of the North Koreans.

ADM. MULLEN: No, I haven't, although I know Admiral Keating has, as a combatant commander in the Pacific -- has engaged both Japanese and Korean -- my counterparts in Japan and Korea. And I'm not aware of any contact with the Chinese.

SEC. GATES: Tom?

Q If I could just follow up briefly -- you've periodically said that, in the case of Pakistan, there was a shift where, after a long time of paying lip service, Pakistan now takes the Taliban as an existential threat. There was a shift in how it saw the Taliban.

Is there a shift in the way that the Chinese see North Korea? I mean, is there -- have they hit a -- crossed a Rubicon where they now, perhaps, are more amenable to the thought that North Korea is a problem for them as well, not just a problem for the U.S.?

SEC. GATES: I think that remains to be seen. Communicating that message was clearly one of the purposes of the delegation led by Jim Steinberg, deputy secretary of State, to China a week or two ago.

It was that, yes, we understand your concern about instability in North Korea and its implications for you, but you need also to be concerned about the implications of instability in Northeast Asia created by the behavior of North Korea. And since that visit was relatively recently, I think it just remains to be seen whether it had any impact. Tom?

Q Thank you, sir. Coming to the question about Iran and communications, the Obama administration has recently announced a new cyber-initiative. We're standing by perhaps for the announcement of the cyber command here. So is the Pentagon watching what Iran is doing, the government, in trying to control, monitor, shut down cyber-communications internally, to draw lessons for what they might do offensively against this nation?

SEC. GATES: To be honest, I'm not aware of analysis going on along those lines. But you know, there are 3 million people in this department, so somebody may be doing that, but not to my knowledge.

Q But do you see their capabilities to try to shut down these networks, try to control dissent as an offensive capability that could be used against the U.S., its allies and its interests?

SEC. GATES: I suppose so. But you know, that would be true of all the governments that try and shut down the Internet. It's not unique to Iran by any means.

Q Mr. Secretary, the department is engaged in the Quadrennial Defense Review, department-wide review of strategy, weapons systems. And I take it from your public comments in recent months that the framework is that the U.S. should be focusing, at least right now, on the current conflicts it's engaged in, conflicts of the irregular type that could last into the foreseeable future.

There are officers in the military who at least privately express some reservations that large numbers of conventional forces for an open-ended commitment in a place like Afghanistan or -- perhaps less so -- Iraq is the way the United States should be looking at the world in terms of its defenses.

If you do this review, will that construct itself be under review? In other words, will you analyze whether or not this type of operation is what the U.S. should be focusing on for the next decade?

SEC. GATES: Those who believe that is what we are trying to do, and that that's what I believe, do not understand what we are trying to do or what I believe.

The reality is, the vast preponderance of the Defense Department procurement budget will still be for large systems used and sophisticated systems useable against near peers and that will continue to give us a technological edge for the next 20 to 25 years.

What I am trying to do is simply get a place at the table, when resources are passed out, for those who are fighting today's wars, and to institutionalize what we've learned about counterinsurgency, so that we don't forget it like we did after Vietnam.

So this notion that I'm tilting the scale dramatically against conventional capabilities, in order to fight irregular or whatever, asymmetric wars or whatever you want to call it, is just not accurate.

You know, \$1 trillion for the Joint Strike Fighter, a fifth generation fighter that has some capabilities the F-22 does not, is not a trivial investment in the future. Neither is -- I have hardly read about the fact that we're initiating the replacements for the Ohio-class SSBN with this budget.

So the notion that we are not taking seriously the range of potential future conflicts, I think, frankly is just a misunderstanding of what we're trying to do. It derives from my view that the old way, of looking at irregular warfare as being one kind of conflict and conventional warfare as a discreet kind of warfare, is an outdated concept.

And my belief, that conflict in the future will slide up and down a scale, both in scope or scale and in lethality. And we have to procure the kinds of things that give us -- the kinds of equipment and weapons that give us the maximum flexibility, across the widest range of that spectrum of conflict.

And frankly I think that there is broad agreement, on the part of the senior military leadership, that that kind of a construct going forward is what we ought to be looking at. If there is one major aspect of the QDR that I have insisted that we try and get away from, it is this construct that we've had, for such a long time, that we size our forces to be able to fight two major combat operations.

I think that is not a realistic view of the world. We are already in two major conflicts. So what if we have a third one or a fourth one or a fifth one? And how do you -- along that spectrum, how do you -- where do you characterize a Hezbollah that has more missiles and rockets than most countries or a violent extremist group that may acquire a weapon of mass destruction?

So it's this -- it's the versatility of our force and our ability to be able to respond, to a wide range of conflict, that we're trying -- that I think is important, in trying to build the programs for this department, for the future. But there is a huge investment in trying to protect our technological edge for the future. And frankly, to be blunt about it, the notion that not buying 60 more F-22s imperils the national security of the United States I find completely nonsense.

But mark me down as undecided. (Laughter.)

Q Yesterday in President Obama's announcement on federal worker benefits for gay employees -- in this building there's a whole lot of civilians alongside military personnel. Did you or do you have concerns about any type of a double-standard, and with reports this morning even of possibility of a high-ranking official named Bill White from the Intrepid Foundation possibly being nominated for a high civilian position?

But also, before that announcement yesterday, there seemed to be a bit of back and forth between the White House and Congress over who should be or is taking the lead on "don't ask, don't tell." Without allowing them to speak over your heads, who should be taking the lead, do you think, from this department?

SEC. GATES: This department's position is dictated by the fact there is a law. And the law only applies to people in uniform. So on the civilian side, we will absolutely comply and implement everything the president announced yesterday. But until the law is changed, our ability to change the policy is extremely limited, if not non-existent.

Q Sir, it's been some weeks since you removed David McKiernan from Afghanistan. There continues to be head-scratching, though, about the way in which it was handled. Recognizing that what's done is done, do you have any regrets at all about the way it was done?

SEC. GATES: I think that -- I think I probably could have framed it better when I announced it, and particularly in terms of the desirability of, just as we installed a new commander in Iraq when we initiated a new strategy, the belief that it was important to have a new commander in Afghanistan as we initiated and began to execute a new strategy, and in particular to have one -- to have a commander who could be there for a prolonged period of time in the implementation of that strategy, for a year, 18 months or more.

Q At the beginning?

SEC. GATES: Whatever period of time. And so, in all honesty, in retrospect, I would have done General McKiernan a better service to have described it that way.

Q Have you reached out to him since?

SEC. GATES: No. Jim?

Q You had said earlier that in the event where collateral damage and civilians are killed in Afghanistan, that the U.S. should be as up-front as quickly as possible.

Are you at all concerned that by this investigation being dragged out, that America's credibility in Afghanistan is being undermined and -- or do you think that in this particular case in Farah, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Afghanistan people is already lost?

SEC. GATES: No, I don't think that battle's lost at all. But I think that, you know, I -- what I have said in the past is that where we believe there may have been civilian casualties -- what I've said months ago was we should immediately express regret if there were indeed innocent civilian casualties; if necessary and appropriate, make amends; and then investigate; because the truth is, the way we do investigations, which is to say thoroughly, takes time. And that's the problem.

In the past, we have not taken the first two steps until we finished the third step. And so the changes that General McKiernan put in place months ago -- put more emphasis on doing the expression of regret and making amends, if necessary, and then carrying out the investigation. So I don't think the length of time of the investigation itself is an issue. I think what we do in the immediate aftermath of one of these tragedies is what's important.

I don't know if you want to add any more?

ADM. MULLEN: No, sir.

Q And you said that there was a training issue? After the priority, Mr. Secretary, that you, and you Admiral, gave to this issue, how could there possibly be a lack of adequate training in regard to avoiding civilian casualties in Afghanistan?

ADM. MULLEN: Very, very complex environment for an extended period of time -- complex change of platforms involved in the fight, and it exposed some deficiencies from a training standpoint that we have to back all the way up in to our schools here, and then make sure that that's trained to in our rehearsal exercises, et cetera.

And we -- you know, as the fighting changes over time, you know, we constantly adapt. And what we've found from this investigation very thoroughly is there were some things -- there's an awful lot of things that went well. There are some things from a training perspective that we've got to fix.

Q Was there excessive force in this case?

ADM. MULLEN: I won't go into that.

Thank you.

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