

Gates Pushes for Stronger Relationships

Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service

Gates Pushes for Stronger International, Interagency Relationships

WASHINGTON, Oct. 16, 2008 – Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said last night he's struck by universal interest in bridging stronger ties with the United States in the roughly 50 countries he's visited since taking office, and that allowing the evolving U.S.-China relationship to unravel would be a huge strategic mistake.

Gates also offered assurance that the military has no interest in dominating in operations best left to other departments and nongovernmental agencies.

Responding to questions at the U.S. Institute of Peace's first Dean Acheson lecture, Gates called insights he's gained during meetings with his international counterparts one of his biggest surprises during his 22 months at the Pentagon.

"Every single one of these countries wants to have a better relationship with the United States, wants to have a stronger relationship, wants to increase our military-to-military relationships," he said following his address.

Gates said these countries view the United States as "the last, best hope."

"They want to have a better relationship with us, and we just have to open our arms and welcome them into that relationship," he said.

That acceptance extends to China, Gates said, noting progress in the U.S.-Sino defense relationship he insisted must continue.

"China is a competitor, but it is not necessarily an adversary," he said in response to a question from the audience. "We are increasing our military-to-military relationship with the Chinese, we have opened the strategic dialogue with them in terms of where they think they are headed and what are their worries about us.

"I think there is absolutely no reason in the world for China to be a strategic adversary to the United States," he said.

Gates conceded that the circumstances or politics in either country could reverse the positive trend lines and create an adversarial relationship. "And I think that would be a tragic mistake," he said.

Meanwhile, Gates assured a questioner that as he pushes for stronger coordination among the military, diplomatic and economic elements of U.S. national power, he doesn't see the military dominating in roles best assumed by others.

Gates referred to former U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld's assertion that "peacekeeping is

not a soldier's job, but only a soldier can do it," and said the military is happy to relinquish nonmilitary responsibilities to organizations trained to conduct them.

He pointed to the provincial reconstruction teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, where, although the military is a big player due to the security situation, "there is never any question that the civilians in the PRT are leading the effort."

"The military really doesn't want to be in the lead in these areas," he said. "We have to have the military and the civilians working together, and the reality is in these PRTs, it is the civilians who are in charge, and it is the civilians who are leading the way. And I can tell you, that gives comfort to the military."