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CHANGE WITHOUT CHANGING: Obama's Gate-keeper in Defence

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President-elect Barack Obama's decision to keep Robert Gates as the United States Secretary of Defence sends the right message to America's partners and will benefit its military. Secretary Gates' leadership and vision will facilitate a smooth presidential transition and should allow the new president to more easily set in motion some important long-range plans.

MUCH OF Barack Obama's presidential campaign was spent convincing voters he had the ability to serve as commander-in-chief. This is an important consideration given that the United States is involved in two major wars and plenty of smaller operations. By the end of the campaign, however, the public's attention had shifted to the economy. Now the time has come to refocus his attention on national security affairs.

The recent announcement of Robert Gates' agreement to continue as Secretary of Defence is a major step in addressing immediate concerns while setting the stage for dealing with long-range issues. In his two years as Secretary of Defence under President Bush, Dr. Gates has brought fresh ideas and a firm but fair leadership style to the Department of Defence while also providing insightful military advice to the president. Now that he is staying on, the Obama administration will be the better for it.

Leadership

We should remember that Cabinet members are also responsible for the day-to-day leadership of their departments. As director of the CIA and, later, as president of Texas A&M University, Secretary Gates exhibited the ability to lead very large, and very different, organizations. At the Department of Defence he has reopened lines of communication that had been stifled in recent years.

He acknowledges and uses the expertise of experienced military and civilian leaders and is willing to listen to different points of view, while never abandoning his own responsibility to make the final decision. During the last year, he has also shown the willingness to hold senior officials accountable for what he considers to be failures in leadership. As unsettling as it can be to remove senior leaders from their positions, it has earned him the respect of many military and civilian personnel who prefer

to see those leaders held to high standards.

Vision

Secretary Gates has a sense of what is necessary for the future. This is not only with regard to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also for the US' role in the world and the long-term effects of the current conflicts on the health and strength of the military. In the face of strong institutional resistance he continues to push the military services to address the needs of the current, and likely future, conflicts rather than feeding their sense of "last war-itis". He has called for inter-agency partnerships to meet the demands of modern conflicts and has openly advocated increased funding for the State Department, an uncommon position for a Secretary of Defence.

He has acknowledged the strains on the military resulting from operations overseas and has identified immediate fixes, such as shortened combat tours, as well as measures addressing long-term reconstitution of military capabilities. He worked with senior military leaders to build a better counterinsurgency plan for Iraq and is refocusing US efforts on Afghanistan. For two years he has been a voice of reason in unreasonable situations, and is well-positioned to put plans in motion before finally departing once again from government service.

International Relations

As the Obama administration seeks to repair relations with other countries, it will help to have senior members of its foreign policy team who have good reputations abroad. While President-elect Obama may still have to prove himself internationally, Secretary Gates does not. This will give the new administration a headstart on strengthening American friendships abroad. At this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, for example, he strongly reaffirmed America's identity as "a Pacific nation with an enduring role in Asia".

In that same speech he discussed the evolving interaction between the US and Asia and explained how he expected it would continue under a new presidential administration -- a prediction he is now in a position to help carry out. He has been well received by allies and partners who see an open-minded and pragmatic official leading the Department of Defence. International leaders may not always agree with him but they do hear him out and consider his views. A new, untested Secretary of Defence would have to earn the trust and respect that Secretary Gates already has.

Change

Following some of his earlier Cabinet nominations, President-elect Obama was criticized (mostly, it should be noted, by Republicans) for bringing "Washington insiders" back to town -- a potential contradiction of the "Change" message he championed during his campaign. Certainly, keeping a senior leader like Secretary Gates in position seems to reinforce that perception. But a change in the direction of the government does not always require a change in current personnel. During the last two years, Secretary Gates has already shown a desire for a different direction from the first six years of the Bush administration.

While trying new approaches in Iraq and Afghanistan, he has also worked closer with America's NATO allies and has increased the US' security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. It would make no sense to replace someone who is already looking in the same direction as the new president. The fact that Secretary Gates is a Republican also suggests Mr. Obama's desire to reach across party lines is genuine. Bringing someone from the other party into such an important position in the Cabinet is something we have not seen since President Bill Clinton appointed William Cohen as his Secretary of Defence.

Neither President-elect Obama nor Secretary Gates will say how long they expect him to remain in this position; Dr. Gates has reportedly said only that it will be “under four years”. What is important is having him in the administration at the beginning, not only to facilitate the first wartime presidential transition in 40 years, but also to start some important processes for the new administration.

Once those processes have begun, perhaps Dr. Gates will return to the academic world, or maybe even to a well-deserved retirement. The important thing for Asia is that he will be here for now.

As Secretary of Defence, Gates has ensured the US military does not get so distracted by events in Iraq and Afghanistan that it neglects its relationships throughout the Asia-Pacific region. He has worked to enhance American cooperation with Asian nations in such missions as counterterrorism, maritime security, disaster response, and counter-proliferation. He has also reinvigorated bilateral ties and enhanced multilateral relationships in the face of evolving political situations and emerging security threats.

Political and military leaders throughout Asia have learned that Secretary Gates is a man with whom they can easily work. His continued presence in Washington may allow those leaders to feel that, when change comes, the changes in US-Asia relationships are more likely to be positive than negative.

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