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Gates: Afghan decisions important to Obama presidency. The decisions that President Obama will have to make on strategy and forces levels to address the increasing violence in Afghanistan “will be among the most important of his presidency,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates told the opening session of the AUSA Annual Meeting on Oct. 5.

That makes it “important that we take the time to do all we can to get this right,” and it is “imperative that all of us taking part in these deliberations, civilians and military alike, provide our best advice to the president, candidly and privately, Gates said. That was an apparent reference to the controversy over the public comments that Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and Allied Forces in Afghanistan, made supporting his request for additional troops.

“Speaking for the Department of Defense, once the commander in chief has made his decisions, we will salute and execute those decisions faithfully to the best of our ability,” the secretary said.

But before the president announces his decision, Gates said, “I am prepared to respond to urgent needs and will push to get the troops and the equipment they need.” He said combating the deadly IEDs “remains the number one priority” and promised the department “will do everything it can” to counter them and to “protect the men and women in the fight.”

Looking to the future, Gates extolled the rapid changes the Army has made in adapting to counter-insurgency in doctrine, training and technology. The Army must work to retain the young officers and non-commissioned officers who have become experts in the new challenging type of war, he said.

The secretary cited the new advise and assist brigade (AAB) concept, the first of which is about to deploy to Iraq to accelerate development of a national army. By next year, “almost the entire” U.S. force in Iraq will consist of AABs, with a similar situation in Afghanistan further in the future, he said.

He said the Army must counter through future assignments and promotions the perception that the advise and assist roles are “second tier.”

“The advise, train and equip role will be a key function for the Army in the years ahead,” Gates said.

Odierno announces troop cuts in Iraq. The commander of American forces in Iraq said that the United States would withdraw an additional 4,000 soldiers and marines by the end of October. Gen. Ray Odierno told the House Armed Services Committee Sept. 30 that 120,000 American service members would still be in Iraq.

That number will likely stay in place until after Iraqi national elections are held in January and results certified. “I look at the first 60 days or so following the election as maybe the most critical time, if we think there might be some sort of violence.”

Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., chairman of the committee, said that under the status of forces agreement between the United States and Iraq the American combat presence would end by August 2010 and 50,000 would remain in training and assistance units until the end of 2011.

“We continue to make consistent, deliberate progress in improving the security environment in Iraq,” Odierno said reflecting on the changes since American forces left Iraq’s cities. This included moves by the Iraqis to “integrate all of the Sons of Iraq (largely Sunni) into the ministries by the end of the year.”

About 23,000 Sons of Iraq now work for the Iraqi government and 5,000 more are expected soon to be added to the payroll.

Adding, “The Iraqi security forces have made steady progress, and our efforts over the next 2 ½ years will help solidify the foundation of a professional and competent Iraqi security force.” He said that the truck bombings in August of the finance and foreign ministries that claimed the loss of 100 lives was “a clear security lapse.”

Iraq is a predominantly Shi’ia nation with large Sunni and Kurd minorities, and sectarian and ethnic tensions remain, he said.

“I still believe that Arab-Kurd tension is the number-one driver of instability inside Iraq” and is a long-standing problem “over land and resources (particularly oil) and the distribution of those in these key areas,” particularly around Mosul in the northern part of Iraq.

Army works on new leader development strategy. The Army is working to adapt its leader education system to adapt to the new operational environment the service finds itself in, Army leaders have said.

The Army is working on a new Army Leader Development Strategy that will address four broad emerging trends that affect the military environment, said Gen. Martin Dempsey, the commander of Training and Doctrine Command. Those are: uncertainty, an increasing pace of change, the higher levels of competitiveness of the Army's enemies, and increasing decentralization. The issue of leader development, he said, is "the most important topic we face as an Army."

The strategy will have four "annexes," dealing respectively with officers, non-commissioned officers, warrant officers and civilian Army employees, said Brig. Gen. Edward Cardone, the deputy commandant of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. But each of those components will follow the same eight "imperatives" guiding the Army's leadership development: a commitment by the Army to life-long learning; a balance of training, education and experience; outcomes-based education; coordination with the Army force generation system; managing different types of talent in the Army; replication of the complexity of the battlefield in the classroom and home base; a focus on mentoring; and development of leaders to operate at the highest levels of the U.S. government.

The new strategy will ultimately be implemented at every level in Professional Military Education. They were speaking Oct. 6 at the Association of the United States Army's Annual Meeting and Exposition.

The Army is now prioritizing education, in spite of some who argue that it is less necessary because of the large amount of wartime experience most soldiers now possess. But that is still only part of what a soldier needs to know, said Maj. Gen. Sean Byrne, the commander of Human Resources Command. "They are doing a phase, a portion, they're doing COIN [counterinsurgency]. But they're not doing the full spectrum," he said.

Many soldiers lack the education they should have at this stage in their careers: Byrne said that about 59,000 NCOs have missed educational opportunities because of high operations tempo, leaving them "a step or two behind" where they should be.

For the first time, Professional Military Education will be extended to civilian employees of the Army, not just to officers and enlisted soldiers.

TRADOC revamps NCO education process.

With the Army going to a unit rotational cycle of 15 months deployed followed by 12 months at home, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) revamped its educational process to accommodate soldiers during their downtime.

"If you're deployed for 15 months and your dwell time is going to be 10 to 12 months ... you really don't want to come to one of our schools for 32 weeks," said Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks, USA, Ret., TRADOC's former CSM, during an NCO professional development forum Oct. 6 at the Association of the United States Army's Annual Meeting and Exposition. "That's almost cruel and unusual punishment to come to school during the time you should be spending with your family."

Sparks said in an attempt to reduce course lengths, it gave the leaders and educators in TRADOC the opportunity to look across the board at training programs, and they found "we just were not doing the right things." Soldiers were in training for too long, and the needs of the home units weren't being addressed.

This streamlining of courses TRADOC wide is part of what Sparks called "an historic time to be a noncommissioned officer in the United States Army." On the first day of the Annual Meeting, TRADOC unveiled the Institute for NCO Professional Development, which will merge and monitor education and career moves for all NCOs into a single system.

"We want to incorporate change rapidly, we want to make the things happen that benefit the noncommissioned officer population," Sparks said.

Also, earlier this year, Command Sgt. Maj. Ray Chandler was named the first enlisted commandant of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.

"NCOs are taking charge of their own training and their own destiny," said TRADOC Command Sgt. Maj. David Bruner. "That's a huge step forward."

Command Sgt. Maj. Jimmie W. Spencer, USA, Ret., director of AUSA NCO and Soldier Programs, noted that 1989 was the first Year of the NCO, and it marked a time of great change in the NCO corps.

"What happened then is we focused inwardly and we talked about what it was like to be a noncommissioned officer and a leader in the new Army," Spencer said. "In 1989 it really was a new Army because the draft had ended and the techniques and procedures we used had changed considerably."

All components, services meet recruiting goals. The Defense Department reported that for the first time in the history of the All-Volunteer Force all components met their recruiting numbers and quality goals.

Speaking with reporters Oct. 13 at the Pentagon, Bill Carr, deputy under secretary of defense for military personnel policy, said factors working in the services' favor now are this age group is "more inclined toward service to society," Congress' commitment to recruiting "and finally military pay," especially the adjustments in pay for senior noncommissioned officers and the lingering effects of the recession on civilian employment.

"For the active force, about 95 percent this past year had a high school diploma. That's the best since 1996. Seventy-three percent scored above average on the aptitude test. ... That's the best since 2004. For the reserves, 95 percent [were] high school diploma grads and 72 percent above average math-verbal aptitude."

Carr said that the same age group [18 to 25 year old males] show three-quarters with a high school diploma and 50 percent above average in the aptitude test.

Maj. Gen. Don Campbell of the Army's Recruiting Command said the percentage of Army recruits with high school diplomas had risen from 84 percent in Fiscal Year 2008 to just under 95 percent at the end of FY 2009.

Carr estimated the services spend between \$9,000 and \$10,000 in advertising, marketing and recruiter's time to sign a recruit.

Because of this year's success, the recruiting budget, including bonuses, will be cut by 11 percent. The budget for all services and components was \$3.1 billion.

Campbell added the number of Army recruiters in the field will remain about 8,000.

Campbell said the Army has been challenged in meeting recruiting goals for African-Americans and Latinos. "We want the Army to look like America."

He added the Army's mission for the active force is 74,520, for the National Guard 60,000 and for the Army Reserve 20,000.

Carr said the services are continuing to have greater success in recruiting from the South than the Northeast.

"We delivered beyond anything the framers of the All-Volunteer Force would have anticipated."

TRADOC commander calls 'ability to adapt' key to military power. The commanding general of the Training and Doctrine Command said, "Military power in this century will be defined by the ability to adapt" to changing scenarios and environments.

Speaking on Oct. 4 to Association of the United States Army chapter leaders, Gen. Martin Dempsey described four emerging trends: the certainty of uncertainty, the increasingly rapid pace of change, competitiveness ("think Hezbollah, the Israelis fought a militia as well trained, as well equipped as any state and embedded in a nation state") and decentralization ("think al-Qaeda" and "to defeat a network, you have to be a network. We have to aggregate power.")

This leads to an Army Capstone Concept, he said that affects its modernization and leadership strategies and provides for soldiers and their families from 2017 to 2028.

The nature of warfare is not stand-off or totally relying on advances in technology, Dempsey said. "Technology enables."

In leader development, "We have got to train educate and provide experiences" to make them more adaptive. "We've got to replicate complexity in the training base."

On modernization, Dempsey said, "I believe personally we ought to think about re-designing ourselves every five years." Adding, "We can't predict the future" and it makes sense to align modernization efforts to five- to six-year budget cycle. "This way we can provide incremental change—not just in equipment."

The chapter leader's dinner was held before the opening of AUSA's 55th Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington.

SMA: Army's strength rests in its people. The sergeant major of the Army recounted the stories of two reserve component soldiers to illustrate the importance of noncommissioned officers to the Army at a special National Guard/Army Reserve breakfast before the opening of the Association of the United States Army's Annual Meeting Oct. 5.

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth Preston, speaking for the fourth time to the breakfast attendees, said, "We are the best in the world because of people. We intend to keep it that way."

He said this year 2009 is the Year of the Noncommissioned Office and it provides a means to demonstrate "the unmatched skills in defending the nation."

Quoting Gen. George Casey, chief of staff, he said, "NCOs have been the glue that held the organization together" as the nation enters its ninth year of war."

Opportunities abound in Army civilian workforce. Plans to grow the civilian work force by 100,000 during the next several years, and to in-source thousands of acquisition jobs that previously were filled by outside contractors, translate to abundant career opportunities in the Army civilian workforce, according to speakers at the “Civilian Professional Development Seminar,” which was held on the final day of the Association of the U.S. Army’s 2009 Annual Meeting and Exposition.

However, the Army needs to improve how it recruits, hires, manages and retains talented workers, the speakers said.

Karl Schneider, assistant deputy chief of staff, G-1, noted that almost 300,000 civilians work for the Army. “The Army could not operate without its civilian corps; it’s as simple as that,” Schneider said, adding that the workforce is larger than the U.S. Marine Corps.

Schneider also said civilian workers have moved beyond the largely “administrative and blue-collar” jobs of the past and are now filling a larger percentage of the Army’s leadership cadre.

When it comes to recruiting new talent, Schneider said that funding and demographic limitations should not be impediments to landing agile, creative, problem-solving, collaborative workers. “We want the very best ... our country needs the very best,” Schneider said.

Joe McDade, assistant deputy chief of staff, G-1, said that while the Army has some “world-class programs” when it comes to training and developing civilian workers, not all the programs reach that standard.

McDade said 40 percent of the civilian workforce is managed inconsistently, and 60 percent is not managed at all. “This has got to change,” McDade said, adding that one area that needs improvement is the development of internal candidates so they are promotion-worthy when senior job vacancies occur.

Mark Lewis, deputy chief of staff for G-3/5/7, noted that the current budget includes \$50 million for Army civilian leadership development, and \$16 million for training. “We’re not a cost; we’re an investment,” Lewis said, adding that supervisors should make sure they fill training and development seminars so that the money stays in the budget in future funding cycles.

Army Reserve is about 75 percent transformed, continues to adapt. The chief of the Army Reserve told attendees at the Association of the United States Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition that his component is “about 75 to 80 percent transformed and that is about all we’re going to get.”

Speaking Oct. 6, Lt. Gen. Jack Stultz said, “We are going to continue to adapt as we move forward.” He said the functional commands are largely in place and the same is true with the generating force such as trainers, etc.

The Army Reserve’s role does not change – “to provide trained and ready soldiers when our nation calls,” but the vision has changed because of “the value proposition.”

Stultz told the attendees at the seminar, “You are not community-based. The National Guard is. You guys are all over, traveling all over. You are not warrior citizens. [The public] views the active Army as jumping out of airplanes. ... What we find is skills” such as engineers, law enforcement officers, medical technicians and professionals, truck drivers, etc. “That’s what we found out is our value proposition for the future.”

Adding, “Our employers out there told us the same thing. ... [Army Reserve soldiers] bring skills.”

Stultz said the Army reserve is recognized “as that premier organization at delivering skills to support and defend the nation.”

Because of this emphasis on skills, employers, such as Ford and Toyota, are now coming to the Army Reserve and offering to help train soldiers in new technologies, such as hybrid vehicles, that again benefit them in their military and civilian careers.

Looking to the military side, he said, “We have to be very careful that we don’t slip back into tiered readiness, like we were eight to 10 years ago, lacking resources” to keep the Army Reserve operational. Stultz said in some ways the Army Reserve will rely on the civilian sector to maintain readiness “because he will be doing that every day in his life,” after being trained as a medical technician in the Army, for instance. That reservist will be dual used.

“It’s a little different spin than if you are a heavy brigade combat team,” Stultz said.