

## Worldview: The focus is on 'soft power'

**Obama's new security team must first rebuild America's diplomatic machine.**



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At first glance, President-elect Barack Obama's new national-security team of experienced heavyweights may not look like a change-oriented bunch.

Look again.

Robert Gates, the current and future defense secretary, and former NATO commander Gen. James L. Jones, Obama's pick for national security adviser, advocate sweeping change in the way America pursues its security interests. Their thinking syncs with Obama's core vision.

Gates and Jones want to bolster our capacity to project "soft power" - diplomacy, and foreign aid for development and reconstruction. They view soft power as an essential complement to hard, military power, and as a way to prevent future conflicts.

Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton supports this shift, though she sought to project a tough-guy image in the presidential race. It will fall to her to implement one of the hardest parts of the new strategy - rebuilding a State Department so depleted that it can't do what needs to be done.

For years, the Bush administration derided soft power as "social work" - no substitute for the tough work of war-making. Its attitudes shifted as Afghanistan and Iraq fell apart following U.S. military actions. But the United States lacked the civilian skills to help those nations recover.

This forced the military to take on nation-building tasks for which it wasn't trained.

Meantime, Gen. David Petraeus' new emphasis on counterinsurgency doctrine stressed that such fights could not be won through military means alone, but also require political and economic components.

Jones came to similar conclusions about Afghanistan in a report to Congress this year. He said the country was in danger of becoming "a failed state." That was due in large part to a lack of economic aid and the administration's failure to undertake "regional diplomacy" - enlisting Afghanistan's neighbors in stabilizing the country.

So it is not surprising that Gates wants change.

"What is not ... well-known," Gates said in a 2007 lecture at Kansas State University, "was the gutting of America's ability to engage, assist and communicate with other parts of the world - the 'soft power' which was so important during the Cold War."

For example, the United States has more members of military marching bands than Foreign Service officers. Gates also noted that the number of Foreign Service officers was frozen as the number of embassies grew after the Soviet Union breakup. Meantime, "the United States Agency for International Development saw deep staff cuts ... and the U.S. Information Agency was abolished."

These were steps taken by the Clinton administration under pressure from Jesse Helms, the late Republican senator who chaired the Foreign Relations Committee.

The extent of the problem was described graphically in a report on the crisis in diplomatic readiness recently released by the American Academy of Diplomacy and the Stimson Center (available at [www.academyofdiplomacy.org](http://www.academyofdiplomacy.org)). The report details the shortage of Foreign Service officers, and particularly of those with training in critical languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Urdu.

At a time when America's need to engage with the world has never been greater, funding for public diplomacy has been shrinking. USIA libraries and cultural centers, where young Arabs once could interact with Americans, have long been shuttered. While terrorists set up Web chat rooms, we have no capacity to interact with a global generation that uses the Internet.

"We are not staffed to keep up with old needs, let alone new needs," said Ronald Neumann, president of the American Academy of Diplomacy. He calls for more staffing for public diplomacy, new Web outreach, reopened cultural centers, and more exchanges.

As for economic aid, USAID staffing is so depleted - despite huge amounts of aid sent to Iraq and Afghanistan - that it must hire outside contractors to do projects. We have seen the results - and the wasted money - in Iraq.

Nor do we have diplomats trained for economic development in risky places. Neumann's report calls for a standing "active response corps" for such missions.

It won't be easy to rebuild - and fund - soft-power agencies at a time when Obama is beset by crises. We don't know whether Clinton has the needed management skills. Obama's team will have to work together closely to give him the soft-power tools he seeks.