

US Defense Secretary Calls for More Leverage on Iran Before Talks

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U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates says the United States should develop some leverage on Iran and then hold talks with the regime that the U.S. government says supports global terrorism and sponsors insurgents in Iraq who are killing American troops. VOA's Al Pessin reports from the Pentagon.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates speaks with members of the press at the Pentagon, 08 May 2008

Secretary Gates says the United States needs to recognize that Iran will need to get something out of any talks, so U.S. officials should not expect to simply go into talks with Iran with a list of demands. He also said more people-to-people exchanges could help build such U.S. leverage on Iranian leaders.

The secretary spoke to the American Academy of Diplomacy Wednesday evening, but reporters were not allowed to record the event for broadcast.

He said the 2006 Iraq Study Group's recommendation for more engagement with Iran has not been implemented. Secretary Gates said the United States might have missed an opportunity to engage with Iran during the term of former president Mohammad Khatami. But he indicated it will be more difficult to have constructive talks with Iran today, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Secretary Gates said that is why the United States needs to develop some leverage.

On Thursday, the Pentagon spokesman, Geoff Morrell, said Gates was only speaking about increasing current diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Iran. Geoff Morrell, 09 May 2008

"The only incentive that would be offered to the Iranians would be a reduction, a diminishment, of that pressure if they were to change their behavior, if they were to abandon their pursuit of a nuclear program and stop destabilizing the region in which they live," said Geoff Morrell.

Morrell said that is the only way there could be U.S.-Iranian negotiations.

Secretary Gates' comments came just a few hours before President Bush appeared to rule out any talks with Iran. During a visit to Israel, the president put Iran's leader in the same category as terrorists from Hamas and Hezbollah, who Iran supports.

"Some seem to believe that we should negotiate with the terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them they have been wrong all along," said Mr. Bush. "We have heard this foolish delusion before. We have an obligation to call this what it is - the false comfort of appeasement, which has been repeatedly discredited by history."

Pentagon Press Secretary Morrell was quick to say Gates is not calling for negotiations with Iran now, which would contradict the president's position.

"I can tell you there's absolutely no gap between the secretary's position on Iran and the president's position on Iran," he said.

Morrell says there is no plan for any U.S. military officials to hold talks with Iran, and he is not aware of any other plans in the U.S. government, beyond the U.S.-Iran-Iraq ambassadorial talks held from time to time in Baghdad.