



May 18, 2010

Letter from Washington

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates chose an interesting venue to fire a devastating broadside at the Navy and Marine Corps this past week. He went right into the lions' den, so to speak, and addressed his critique of the sea services at the annual Navy League Sea-Air-Space meeting in Washington, DC.

Gates, never accused of being a shrinking violet, has previously turned his sights on the Army and Air Force, which resulted among other things in dismissals of the Air Force top leadership and the death of the F-22 aircraft. This event in early May was however, the first time that he has publicly taken on the Navy and Marines' strategy and associated acquisition programs.

Gates specifically took issue with the Navy's reliance on aircraft carriers, and the out-of-sight costs of present and future naval systems. The subtext of the discussion was costs, but the apparent growing vulnerability of large deck carriers and amphibious ships to Chinese Navy ship-killing ballistic missiles was also a key part of his discussion.

"Consider the massive overmatch the US already enjoys. Consider too the growing anti-ship capabilities of adversaries. Do we really need 11 carrier strike groups for another 30 years when no other country has more than one?" Gates asked. "But mark my words, the Navy and Marine Corps must be willing to re-examine and question the basic assumptions in light of evolving technologies, new threats and budget realities".

"We simply cannot afford to perpetuate a status quo that heaps more and more expensive technologies onto fewer and fewer platforms --- thereby risking a situation where some of our greatest capital expenditures go toward weapons and ships that could potentially become wasting assets".

Gates also wondered out loud if the Navy's \$20B+ shipbuilding program, which has doubled over the last few years (but most analysts agree is underfunded by at least 30 percent) would provide an increase in capability or security commensurate with the huge jump in cost.

Gates asked rhetorically whether it was necessary to field "...6 billion dollar destroyers, 7 billion dollar submarines and 11 billion dollar carriers...to chase down and deal with a bunch of teenage pirates wielding AK-47s and RPGs?"

Finally Gates recalled that at the beginning of World War II the US and Britain were surprised by the rapid shift from battleships to aircraft-led war at sea. They were, however, prepared and made the transition to the carrier strike group very quickly. At this point, there is no future technology available to shift to if the carrier battle group is rendered obsolete.

Several days after his Navy League speech, Gates delivered another talk at the Eisenhower library in Kansas. In that event he declared an objective of reducing DoD overhead by 2-3% which would reportedly lead to a saving of \$15B annually. Examples of overhead that he cited were duplicative headquarters staffs --- staffs whose only function is to supervise other staffs --- and the over-population of flag and general officers. Gates understands full well that the "gusher of money" that has been directed at DoD since 9/11 has dried up, and that unless overhead can be pared drastically force structure will be at risk.

So all in the same week, Gates declared war on the Navy and Marine Corps, flag and general officers across the board, and the Pentagon's Senior Executive Service.

All of this is interesting in an academic discussion, but what will it really mean in practical terms for the services?

First, Gates is a wily bureaucrat, who grew up in the most convoluted of Washington bureaucracies, the CIA. If we have learned nothing else about him during his tenure it is that he chooses his battles carefully, and makes sure that his position is consolidated and secure before committing. So it doesn't make much sense that Gates would take on the crown jewels of US maritime power without offering an alternative vision.

More likely this perceived threat to the Navy's carriers is in the form of a bargaining chip, and his real target may not be the Navy at all but the Marine Corps.

The Marines' core competency is forcible entry by amphibious landing. This is what the Corps did in the island-hopping campaign across the Pacific in World War II, and in executing the Inchon landings during the Korean War. An amphibious assault is a strategic capability that no other country possesses, but it requires that a good portion of the Navy be dedicated to it in the form of amphibious transport and assault ships, as well as gunfire support and mine clearance from other surface combatants.

In Gates' vision, this capability which we have not used against serious opposition since 1950, risks the very scenario he warns against with too many men and too much equipment hostage to an asymmetrical counter by an adversary. Even with the Navy expanding its Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense capability to 60 ships through FY 24, the potential for the

catastrophic loss of an amphibious assault group seems quite high in the environment of the next 20 years.

For the Marines, amphibious assault is their *raison d'être*, and eliminating that capability turns the Corps into just another ground force that will arrive at the fight by air. When that unique capability is allowed to atrophy, or worse, intentionally degraded, then the whole logic of having a separate sea-borne forcible entry force goes away.

Gates definitely has his sights on the Marines' Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV). This troubled program has struggled for almost two decades of redefinition and risk reduction attempts, and has been described by Gates as "exquisite". In Gates-speak, "exquisite" is reserved for over-engineered, over-capable systems that do not perform their basic function, and are targets for cancellation. Without the EFV, the Marines do not have the means to get ashore in an assault landing, and the capability dies by definition.

We can pretty safely assume that Gates doesn't really intend to take on the Navy on the subject of carrier battle groups. The recently completed Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a document that contained much Gates direction, called for maintaining 10-11 CVBGs into the foreseeable future. It seems unlikely that he would have let that appear in print as a DoD recommendation if he intended to countermand it shortly. However, the Marines and the EFV seem like a logical target, and one that can be attacked with little help from the Navy, once the carriers are safely off the table.

Can Gates really single-handedly defang the Marine Corps? Probably not. We have seen in the past year that the real final decision-making authority for DoD programs rests in the Congress, not the Pentagon. People recall that Gates was successful in getting the F-22 program terminated last year, but lose sight of the fact that he also went to the mat over the C-17 and the JSF back up engine. Both of those programs were restored by the Congress despite veto threats from the administration.

Gates has said again this year that he would recommend that the President veto the military appropriation if it contains funding for either the C-17 or the JSF engine. Congress plays a high stakes game of chicken with the President, basically daring him to veto the bill in time of war, so that many favored programs can be preserved. At the end of the day, unless the President is willing to lash himself to the mast with him and veto the bill, Gates has very little leverage with the Congress.

At the same time, the Marines are probably the most skillful of the services at developing and maintaining friends in Congress. The Marines' friends will not allow Secretary Gates to irreparably damage the Corps.

Gates you recall is a holdover from the Bush administration, and reportedly is tired of fighting two real wars (as well as the inside the Beltway war that never ends) and is ready to return to Texas. The Marines may feel that they are looking down the barrel of a gun, but that time is on their side if they can dodge the first few volleys.