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U.S. Works To Add Allies in War on Terrorism

John Hillen, Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs

Interview on NPR News by Vicky O'Hara

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STEVE INSKEEP, host: Here in Washington, the Bush administration wants more help from its allies in fighting the war in terrorism. That may surprise those accustomed to an administration willing to act alone. In recent testimony before Congress, Pentagon officials emphasized the United States cannot fight 21st-century threats by itself, and you see evidence of the Pentagon's evolving thinking in its proposed defense budget for 2007.

Here's NPR's Vicky O'Hara.

VICKY O'HARA, reporting:

The proposed defense budget for fiscal 2007 calls for new resources for fighting irregular wars. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Congress that means shifting more money into unmanned surveillance air crafts, special operations forces, intelligence, language, and cultural training; and that's not all.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD: We're also shifting from the typically American impulse to try to do everything ourselves, to helping partners and allies develop their own capacity to better govern and defend themselves. This is particularly important in the global war on terror where many of our nation's most dangerous enemies exist within the borders of countries that we're not at war with.

MONTAGNE: At the State Department John Hillen, assistant secretary for Political Military Affairs, says the administration is using diplomacy to try to increase the odds that Washington, in a crisis, will have friends at its side.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY JOHN HILLEN (Assistant Secretary for Political Military Affairs): Since the 1991 Gulf War and the 1990 piecing together of the Desert Shield coalition, I think there's been a general recognition that, quite often if the U.S. has national security interests in areas where it doesn't have a long standing, rehearsed and practiced military alliance--like Western Europe and NATO--that it will probably do a lot of military operations in coalitions of the willing.

O'HARA: Hillen says his office is trying to regularize the process of putting coalitions together. He says that means maintaining constant contact with possible partners, doing joint military exercises with them, and trying to work out the kinks before there is an emergency.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILLEN: For instance, planning. How do we plan? Who does what? Where does intelligence fit in? What form the intelligence come in? How is it communicated?

O'HARA: Hillen says it's also important to work out technical issues, such as command and control, so that U.S. forces and their foreign counterparts can work and talk together in the theater of operations.

It's almost impossible to predict where the next crisis will arise. But military analyst Anthony Cordesman, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says that is not the idea.

Mr. ANTHONY CORDESMAN (Military Analyst, Center for Strategic and International Studies): You don't streamline coalition-building by trying to anticipate every crisis. You streamline-coalition building by being prepared to deal with it, as the crisis develops.

O'HARA: Cordesman says the Pentagon's latest Quadrennial Review of the nation's military needs, with its emphasis on irregular warfare, indicates the U.S. military is committed to the concept of coalition building. U.S. treaty allies, such as the members of NATO, have not always responded in a timely fashion to Washington's requests. And there are no guarantees that coalition partners, who are not bound by treaty, would either.

But Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, says that Washington must do what it can to forge bonds with other governments.

Mr. RICHARD HAASS (President, Council on Foreign Relations): The United States, for all of its powers, simply does not have serious but sustainable unilateral options. And this administration, I believe, has come to this realization, perhaps belatedly, perhaps reluctantly. And interestingly enough, more than anything else, it is Iraq, which has brought us to this point.

O'HARA: Haass says that because of the prolonged war in Iraq, the United States is stretched militarily, economically, and diplomatically.

Mr. HAASS: For all those reasons, this war of choice has now narrowed any options for acting alone. And it has propelled the United States in the direction of having to forge coalitions, to deal with the pressing problems on the agenda.

O'HARA: Assistant Secretary Hillen notes that since 9/11, 63 nations have established military liaison offices at the U.S. Central Command in Florida. Centcom, as its called, is responsible for U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY HILLEN: You'll see 63 trailers with 63 different flags flying from 63 partner nations, that are participating in some military way in the global war on terror.

O'HARA: Hillen says that Centcom plans to move its partners out of those trailers and into a proper headquarters building.

Vicky O'Hara, NPR News, Washington.



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