

# FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

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Opportunities in the  
Next American Century:  
*A Conversation with*  
**David H. Petraeus**

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Proxy War?  
Geraint Hughes

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Proxy Wars in Cyberspace  
Michael N. Schmitt & Liis Vihul

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Purveyors of Terror  
Thomas Dempsey

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# FSR Exclusive with David Petraeus Fletcher Security Review Sits Down with Former ISAF Commander & CIA Director

**General (Ret) David H. Petraeus** is Chairman of the KKR Global Institute. Prior to joining KKR, Gen. Petraeus served over 37 years in the US military, including command of coalition forces in Iraq, command of US Central Command, and command of coalition forces in Afghanistan. Following his service in the military, Gen. Petraeus served as the Director of the CIA. Gen. Petraeus graduated with distinction from the US Military Academy and subsequently earned MPA and Ph.D. degrees in international relations from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He also serves as a Visiting Professor of Public Policy at CUNY's Macaulay Honors College, as a Judge Widney Professor at the University of Southern California, and as a member of the advisory boards of a number of veterans' organizations.

**FSR: What, in your opinion, are the top three threats to the United States today, and how can the United States deal with them?**

**Petraeus:** Constructing such lists is always hazardous, as there clearly are more than three significant threats to the United States that could and should be identified. But, as a top three for today, I'd pick: Al Qaeda and affiliated trans-national extremist organizations that still would like to carry out attacks on our homeland; Iran's nuclear program and support for terrorist operations around the world; and the threat posed by various organizations that have the capability to conduct offensive cyber operations. If allowed a few more, I'd add North Korea, the increasingly worrisome tensions between China and its maritime neighbors, the ram-

ifications of the instability and fighting in a number of the Arab Spring states, and, on particularly partisan days in Washington, the inability of our legislative and executive branches to agree on legislation that could resolve issues that pose head winds to the momentum that is gathering in the US and North America thanks to the energy, IT, manufacturing, and life sciences revolutions.

**FSR: What are the top three understudied opportunities for American security, and how can the United States take advantage of them?**

**Petraeus:** Great question! Let me just focus on the most significant opportunity: as I hinted in my answer above, I believe there is no country in the world better positioned for the coming decades than the United States, and no region better posi-



tioned than North America, writ large – albeit with a host of challenges that need to be addressed. Those notwithstanding, and despite all the talk about American “decline” that became fashionable after the 2008 global financial crisis, we are actually on the threshold of what likely will be the “North American Decades,” thanks to the energy, IT, manufacturing, and life sciences revolutions and a variety of other geopolitical, economic, and demographic factors. That is going to be the big story of the years ahead, not the so-called “rise of the rest” or the “Chinese century,” neither of which appears quite so imminent now – though, to be

sure, even China’s “slower” growth rates will still enable it to account for 1/4<sup>th</sup> to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world’s growth.

I emphasize the importance of North America here because, some 20 years into implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the US, Canadian, and Mexican economies have become highly integrated, with the energy revolution in the US beginning to transform global geopolitics – and with Mexican energy reform likely to achieve dramatic results, as well. Moreover, all of this takes place on a continent where overall demographics are good, in con-

trast to Japan, China, and most European countries, in which populations are becoming older and smaller quite rapidly, with the prospect of an ever more highly integrated North American market of nearly 500 million people, and with a situation in which all three countries share a fundamental belief in democracy, market economics, and individual freedoms.

**FSR:** Today much of the public discourse on American foreign policy centers on constraints – budgetary limitations, reluctance to engage in protracted conflicts like Iraq/Afghanistan, and a sense of paralysis to shape events (in Syria, Ukraine, Iran, etc.) How can the United States move away from a reactive foreign policy to a proactive one?

**Petraeus:** Short of outlawing surprises – which is not particularly realistic – that’s a tough question. Obviously, the key to being ahead of events is to anticipate them and then plan for them. But history has shown at various junctures how difficult that is. In fact, we were reminded of this reality yet again when the situation in Ukraine developed so rapidly. And former Defense Secretary Gates noted in his recent book our “perfect record” of not anticipating contingencies that developed in recent decades. Beyond that, I think it is understandable to see, in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, the emergence of considerable national reservations about getting committed to difficult, lengthy en-

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deavors. That sentiment notwithstanding, however, it is the job of national leaders to figure out whether, when, where, why, and how to get involved in missions overseas. And regardless of the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, we need to remember that inaction, as well as action, has ramifications, including for our security here at home. That, after all, was one of the lessons of 9/11. Whether we like it or not, the security and prosperity of the United States depend on events overseas, and there is simply no substitute on the horizon for American leadership. It is, of course, the responsibility of national leaders in Washington to make that case to the American people. That isn’t an easy task, but except for very rare moments in our history, it never has been easy; indeed, Americans have long been skeptical of ‘foreign entanglements.’ The key, obviously, is to get intervention decisions right. And that, in turn, often hinges not only on having anticipated a broad range



of potential contingencies, but also on having thought through as many of those potential contingencies as possible.

**FSR: In your April 30, 2013 Politico article, “Fund – Don’t Cut – US Soft Power,” you argue in favor of foreign aid as a critical component of US diplomacy. A critic might argue that such efforts carry negligible or unidentifiable return on investment in terms of benefits to American interests, and that the United States has a historically poor record of anticipating long-term negative trends that may in fact be abetted by American aid. How do you answer such criticisms?**

**Petraeus:** I think that, while it is sometimes difficult to measure the impact of foreign aid in terms of benefits to American interests – and while there is no question that aid has sometimes been wasteful and even counterproductive, there are numerous examples of assistance producing very beneficial outcomes. The best example of this was the Marshall Plan; however, there certainly have been other instances when US assistance – security, economic, political, etc. – has made a very positive impact. Consider our efforts to help South Korea as it rebuilt and transformed itself in the decades after the Korean War or, more recently, the hugely impressive results of the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in saving countless lives. Even in Afghanistan, where many ask hard questions about what we have accomplished, aid has in fact had a huge impact. For example, life expectancy has increased since our intervention by more than 15 years since 2002 from about 44 years to 61 years; under-five mortality has dropped from 257 to 99 deaths per live birth, and maternal mortality fell even more dramatically, from 1600 to 460 deaths per 100,000 births. In 2002, only 900,000 boys were in school in Afghanistan, and almost no girls. Now there are some 9 million students enrolled in school, 40% of them female. None of that is to dismiss or diminish the enormous challenges that Afghanistan still faces or to ignore the reality that the

progress in Afghanistan in these areas is fragile and reversible. Nor does it gloss over examples of waste and inefficiency in some instances; however, these examples do illustrate that our assistance can have a significant impact for the better.

**FSR:** You recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs* advocating for greater unification and cooperation in North America, as a means to capitalize on some of the continent's economic and strategic advantages. Is this a tacit recognition of the argument advanced by some policymakers and pundits that the United States has overstretched itself abroad? You do state that "it is precisely the broader global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that make an ambitious strategy to strengthen North America so important." Could you expand on the relationship between North American strength and coordination and global power?

**Petraeus:** Well, a state's "national power" is derived from a number of factors, including, of course, its economic strength and vitality. So any initiatives that can help us strengthen our economy obviously improve our overall power in the world and provide us greater levels of resources with which to support the pursuit of our foreign policy objectives.

The point I have sought to make is the one that I explained above – that the US has extraordinary opportunities at pres-

***“Iraq, for example, needs to recall the comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency strategy adopted during the Surge, which emphasized securing the people in threatened areas by “living with them” – and by holding and rebuilding, after clearing – aggressively promoting reconciliation with Sunni Arab elements”***

ent, thanks to our geopolitical blessings, America's leadership in various technological areas, the energy revolution (and the others I note above), our demographic trends, etc. Beyond that, the economies of the three North American countries are highly integrated some 20 years into implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with both Canada and Mexico – the latter having just begun a number of critical reforms that will enhance productivity across the board and help Mexico dramatically increase its production of oil and gas.



***“The counterinsurgency era is not over. That is the case because, quite frankly, the insurgency era has not ended.”***

Taken together, these factors inform my proposition that the United States can actually be at a stronger position over the coming decades to continue to do – in a thoughtful manner – what we have sought to do over the last several decades – which is to further foster, in cooperation with other countries, a rules-based, liberal international order that has brought about historic gains in the prosperity, security, and freedom for people around the world.

**FSR: In your opinion, what’s the best way the United States can support freedom and stability in Iraq and Syria?**

**Petraeus:** Each of those situations is unique, of course, and each requires an approach that reflects the unique circumstances. Iraq, for example, needs to recall the comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency strategy adopted during the Surge, which emphasized securing the people in threatened areas by “living with them”—and by holding and rebuilding, after clearing – aggressively promoting reconciliation with Sunni Arab elements (and Shia militia extremists, as well) to give them a stake in the success of the new Iraq, rather than a stake in its failure; precisely and

relentlessly targeting the irreconcilable leaders of extremist elements and insurgent groups; supporting development of local security forces and institutions; improving basic services; supporting development of rule of law elements, etc. Sadly, we have seen some of the most important of the “big ideas” that guided the overhaul of our strategy during the Surge undermined as the Iraqi government has pursued actions that the Sunni Arab community perceived as sectarian and undermined the trust needed to keep the fabric of Iraqi society together. Although the United States no longer has troops, beyond several hundred performing security assistance program tasks, in Iraq, we continue to have vital national interests there. Consequently, we need to stay engaged and use all of the available instruments of our national power to push the Iraqis towards political compromise and reconciliation, on the one hand, while bolstering the capabilities of their security forces to combat a resurgent Al Qaeda, on the other hand.

The deterioration in security in Iraq is at least partly linked to the collapse of Syria, a situation which appears to argue for considerably more assistance to the moderate elements fighting against Bashar al Assad’s regime – and the Hezbollah and Iranian Qods Force personnel supporting the regime – as the Obama Administration appears to be doing, to a greater extent, in recent months. Without that, the momentum –

currently with Bashar and his regime – is unlikely to shift. Without such a shift in the balance of power on the ground, it is highly unlikely that diplomacy will succeed. Beyond that, of course, the moderates are also fighting the extremist elements in the Sunni opposition, some of which would like to establish a sanctuary for Al Qaeda-affiliates in northern Syria. That terrorist safe haven would obviously be much closer to the borders of the European Schengen Zone than the mountains of Pakistan’s Tribal Areas, and will also increasingly pose a direct threat to our homeland security in the United States.

**FSR: Is counterinsurgency an aberration? The US military is experiencing a mission change as combat troops depart from Afghanistan, from irregular to conventional wars. How critical is it to sustain counterinsurgency capabilities?**

**Petraeus:** As I noted in a speech at the Royal United Services Institute in London last June, the counter-insurgency era is not over. That is the case because, quite frankly, the insurgency era has not ended. In fact, there are numerous insurgencies ongoing around the world. And the US has an interest in the outcome of at least some of them. To be sure, a light US footprint in such endeavors is always desirable – when that is enough to get the job done. However, we do need to recognize that there may be some cases when a light footprint will not be enough, and

we then will have to make very difficult decisions, with our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to remind us of the potential challenges and costs of counter-insurgency operations. Beyond that, we should seek to retain the hard-earned lessons and experience gained through the past decade of US engagement in the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Yemen, and so forth. Moreover, we should always keep in mind that, as *Army Field Manual 3.0* explains, all operations include a mix of offensive, defensive, and stability operations. That was the case in the past decade, and it will continue to be in the decades ahead, albeit with the mix – and the other elements of the context – unique in each situation and each location. 🕒



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