

# FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

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

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Fletcher Security  
Review Discusses  
US & Global  
Security with  
**Frances  
Townsend**

*Frances M. Fragos Townsend is the former Homeland Security Advisor to United States President George W. Bush. She currently serves as an Executive Vice President of Worldwide Government, Legal and Business Affairs at MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings, Inc. and as Operating Advisor of Monument Capital Group, LLC. She has over 25 years of experience in legal, law enforcement and security. She speaks to FSR on the most pressing threats and opportunities facing the United States today.*

**FSR: What do you think are the top three threats to the United States today, domestic or external?**

**Townsend:** Three, in no particular order, would be proliferation, cyber, and economic threats. We now understand that there is a worldwide lack of security related to nuclear materials – if the materials themselves fell into the wrong hands – that could still be a danger even without a technical delivery system. So I think the increasing quantity of those materials, the lack of security, the more broadly-dispersed knowledge of the materials, the ability to do dangerous things without a technical delivery system, tell us that we ought to be increasingly concerned about proliferation. Now there are perfectly legitimate civilian programs like the one in the UAE, but with increasing instability, not in the UAE but in the region, and the increasing potential for conflict, it seems to me that we ought to really care about nuclear security. President Obama has had two nu-

clear summits; former President Bush likewise raised this bilaterally with leaders – but there needs to be greater action, as opposed to rhetoric, in response to the proliferation problem. Iran is not the only place that concerns me.

When I was leaving the Bush Administration, I left on the President’s desk what was his classified presidential directive on cyber. The new Obama Administration has moved that substantially forward. Here’s the issue: we have made good progress in our ability to defend our critical systems inside the government. Much of our national assets are not in government control or government managed. Critical infrastructure like electric grids and air traffic controls are less well defended. The financial sector has really increased their resources and capability.

But what we now know is that nation states will attack critical infrastructure to put pressure on the government.

That's what happened when the financial sector in 2013 suffered a series of Dedicated Denial of Service Attacks. You're going to see more of that from our adversaries or those who disagree with our policies. In the Cold War, we had the mutually assured destruction policy so the Soviet Union and we understood where the lines were. We haven't really done that in the cyber realm. When is a cyber attack an act of war? Everyone agrees that if a cyber attack caused physical damage or death that would be an act of war but everything short of that is not clear. What is the appropriate response? The US government has lots of capabilities- when will it use that or react ostensibly, under what circumstances and how will it coordinate that with the private sector? Not clear. I have spent time with folks in the financial sector and they are frustrated and ask if the US is under attack and the government will affirmatively act, then why can't they let us affirmatively act? Those sorts of policy questions must be wrestled to the ground and dealt with.

The last threat – economic – has two aspects to it. As the US government goes through a time of increasing budget constraints, we have to make smart choices – not all cuts are equal; not all cuts made can be easily turned back on or reconstituted. We found, after the Cold War, under what was euphemistically referred to as the peace dividend, that there were huge cuts in the CIA and in the intelligence community. Post 9/11, to

recruit, field and train those same operatives and rebuild that capability took more than five years. So we have to understand that there are real vulnerabilities we create in these cuts – they are not equal; they cannot all be turned on quickly or easily reconstituted, so I view that as an internal threat. The other economic threat is external – disruption of shipping lanes, just-in-time delivery of goods and our supply chain due to regional instabilities pose an economic threat to the United States. You imagine the closing of the canal, straits of Hormuz, the threats to the shipping lanes along the East African coast, all of which pose indirect economic threats to us. People think about this in terms of oil and liquid natural gas but it's more than that. We have to understand the potential consequences of regional instability and its direct ability to have an economic impact.

**FSR: We have talked about threats; do you see opportunities for the United States – if yes, what might those be?**

**Townsend:** At a strategic level, as it has an impact on everything else, is the opportunity for leadership and clarity. You have to decide: What do I believe in? How do I articulate what my beliefs are? What am I willing to invest in them? What do I stand for? Where you spend money is what you believe in, frankly, in the government. Where am I going to make those investments? What are my strategic principles?



Folks may have disagreed with the Bush Doctrine of pre-emption—pre-empting a threat before it had manifested itself and posed to a physical threat to the United States. You understood what the principle was and the President articulated it clearly and was willing to stand behind it. I think we don't have a sense at the moment of policy or frankly, moral clarity. We believe in freedom, democracy, and opposition movements – we'll talk about it but we're not very good about doing more than that.

I think you can't simply say that you

object to the Assad regime's behavior and incrementally back that up. By incrementally, I mean that the assistance that was provided to the Syrian Free Army was very little, very slow, and very late and that has continued to the case and a source of friction with our allies. There is a generation of people in Syria and in the opposition now who are being radicalized. Is that because that is their philosophy? Absolutely not, it's because they're the only people they can get weapons, training, and guns from, in a time and manner that allows them to protect their families. I am deeply troubled – a lack of action in Syria has caused, perhaps irreversible damage in terms of stability to one of greatest regional allies in Jordan. I think leadership and clarity are important – those aren't just bromides. It's important to the world to understand what we believe and what we're willing to do about it in order to live those policy goals and beliefs. I think it's very, very important and frankly, lacking right now. I'd rather have an articulation that I didn't agree with rather than a lack of clarity because the latter is more dangerous than the former.

The second opportunity is what the President talked about as a pivot to Asia – that is an example of clear articulation of a policy objective. In every administration, Republican or Democrat, inevitably a president will articulate a policy objective and then everyday crises get in the way and I think largely that

has been a problem. We haven't seen much of an Asia pivot and in part, presumably, because the President and his foreign policy team are caught up with other events. But it doesn't just rely on him and it takes more than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to take a trip, the Secretary of Defense to take a trip—trips are key to a broader strategy of engagement and we haven't seen that or a broader, strategic plan and execution of an engagement strategy in Asia. In the meantime, while that's not happening, we have problems with North Korea, the Chinese military build-up continues, we continue to see cyber threats from China and again, inaction is a decision. A lack of engagement has consequences. It's not as though we haven't got to it yet – there are consequences to that failure to engage.

The third opportunity is we must, as a nation, learn to close. Look at Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—those are just three instances across two administrations. We have the greatest military in the world – we can arm, train and equip them, deploy them and they can be successful in the objectives given by policy makers. But it's not their job to close – it's not what they're trained, equipped and manned to do. Phase Four operations require a 'whole of government' approach. What is common across the two administrations is that everybody failed; it is just extraordinary to me. We, as a nation, have not learned how to close. I'm in the private sector now and

we wouldn't be successful in the private sector if we didn't know very well how to close. We just have to make up our minds- to not learn to not close or close badly is actually more expensive because of the loss of blood and treasure on the front-end of it. There is a real opportunity here- we have the experience and people in government who've lived through the conflicts I've mentioned and others.

**FSR: Could you elaborate on how to close that gap? Is it by incorporating civilian planning and civilian efforts within the government, the State Department and the NGOs? What is the best approach to getting that right?**

**Townsend:** Sure. Under Secretary Rice's leadership, a volunteer Civilian Reserve Corps was proposed. Inside the State Department, there is an office to coordinate these things. The problem with such initiatives is that when there is no conflict or need – they get little attention and less resources and the State Department alone cannot do it. It is a classic role for a cross-government coordination effort – like we've done with the National Security Council at the White House and the Homeland Security Council. It requires a better private-public partnership – and you mentioned the non-profits. I'll give you an example: in Afghanistan you had the Business Task Force and that worked – it was run out of the Department of Defense and had a scratchy relationship

with the State Department, and even inside the Department of Defense. There needs to be a function where someone takes responsibility for integrating kicking in doors and facilitating bringing the private sector in, because now we know that unless you help build an economy behind the conflict, it falters and risks failing.

There needs to be a retinue of people across the government with different capabilities and expertise – legal, law enforcement, scientific, regulatory – who are prepared to deploy behind the US military to help these governments with good governance and building ministries – a public service core of career public servants. We need financial experts to put in internal controls, and teach people the procurement process. I am by no means suggesting that this is a US or just a US government effort – I think it's much broader than that, and you must institutionalize it. You must have available to you, people who have retired from the US government who would be willing to serve as a type of reserve force. There is no reason why we as a country don't have a civilian reserve force as the military services do. But we should and we know how to do that – that requires leadership, clarity and money. It requires a commitment; it requires somebody to say that this is a policy priority because we've had big, real and expensive setbacks. You have to admit that you had failed at something to say that you have to fix it. None

of which – I come from the government and so I say this with all humility – the people in the government are very good at doing. Now in the private sector, there is no getting away with it. If you don't make the numbers at the end of a quarter, you've failed. It's not ambiguous and you have to fix that. People in the government don't do that and part of that is the politics of Washington – this effort of building a long-term capability ought to be bipartisan and ought not to be just the executive branch but done together with Congress.

**FSR: Has the United States lost credibility abroad? It seems that in your judgment there is a lack of clear American leadership. When you think about issues like Ukraine, or Afghanistan, for example, how do you see those through the prism of American leadership, or lack thereof?**

**Townsend:** I think in many ways those populations and those countries do feel abandoned by the US. And by the way, long before you could say that that would be true, those countries were complaining about it. They would say, "You will go, you will lose focus, you will not stay, you will leave us." And we, of course, said "no, no, no."

Look, I think it's in some ways just tragic, in the sense of Afghanistan – when would complain about the Pakistani government's lack of support for the US and NATO strategy in there, they would

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say, “You will leave, you will lose focus, this won’t be important to you.” And again, we said, “no, no, no.”

It’s also not just in these countries. It’s their neighbors, it’s their region. They watch what we do. So, do I think we’ve lost credibility? Yes, but it’s not just for now. You know, when you lose credibility, you don’t lose it just in the moment, and just on one issue. You lose it for a period of time. And it is very hard to regain, very difficult over the course of a single term, or even, for a President, two

terms. Very difficult, because of the budget cycle, because of the political cycle.

Look at Iraq. Iraq is devolving into levels of violence we haven’t seen since 2003. The Maliki government is very weak, and far more closely aligned with the Iranian government than we would have ever expected. And again, I think you look at things like, a lack of focus, a lack of commitment, and a lack of leadership. We should have gotten a Status of Forces Agreement in Iraq, but we waited too long and it was not a priority. It pains me to say it, because I do not enjoy being critical of the current administration, but from an American perspective, it’s painful to watch.

**FSR: Sticking with the Ukraine theme: What is your assessment of the US response? What is the right balance between responding to provocation in Crimea and potentially in Eastern Ukraine with those other areas where the United States has been cooperating with Russia, at least to some degree, such as Syria and the Iranian nuclear talks?**

**Townsend:** We are in a horribly weak position with Russia, and I frankly think Putin has played us masterfully. He knows we’re in a weak position with him because we need him on other things. He understands from watching some of the other things we’ve already spoken about – the President’s reluctance to act outside the US, specifically in Syria – and

I think he has actually calculated our interests and our willingness to engage pretty well. That's unfortunate.

I do think in order to figure out how to deal with Russia you have to understand what's important to them. Russia has a huge arms business that they care about tremendously and which motivates them. Russia has sold billions of dollars worth of military equipment to the Assad regime and maintains its only Mediterranean deep water port in Tartus. Russia's ability to impact energy flows into Western Europe also motivates them tremendously, and they'll leverage that. So I think we talk about geopolitics at a strategic level without actually saying, pragmatically, "What are Russia's carrots? What are the things they care about? And then, how can I influence those things?" Whether that is lessening the impact of Russia's ability to control energy resources in Western Europe, or incentivizing them in some way. That's the prism through which you've got to try to view this, as opposed to sort of the emotional Cold War reaction – Putin's playing to type, et cetera. I do agree we have to be very careful not to make a misstep in terms of escalation. But I think we also have to be mindful of our lack of leverage on Russia.

This is where our allies and our leadership are probably the most important tools we have if we exert them. I am not confident that our allies will hang with us over the long term with Russia. As

Russian forces pull back from the eastern border with the Ukraine, I think there will be those that say, "Oh good, this is over, this crisis has passed," and it will become increasingly hard for the administration to hold a coalition together. This is an issue on which I think we cannot revert to kind of Cold War interactions. What do I mean by that? We must keep the lines of communication open, no matter how angry we get with Russia, because we need Russia on other issues like Iran and Syria. We have to find common ground on things we can continue to communicate about, while holding a coalition together that exacts a price for Russia's bad behavior. This will require not only sanctions on individuals but sector wide sanctions targeting Russian financial and business sectors. That's easier said than done, but I think that's the challenge that confronts the administration.

**FSR: How do you assess the threat to the mainland United States from transnational terrorist organizations, or the jihadi threat, in the next 5 to 10 years?**

**Townsend:** I think we have taken a good deal of comfort from the fact that we have not seen a major terrorist attack on US soil since 9/11, without considering the dozens of attacks disrupted by the federal government and by local police departments like the New York City Police Department. What we know for sure is these terrorist groups continue to

evolve and have maintained their commitment to be a direct threat to the United States and to her citizens around the world. Look at things like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and you've got an innovative evolution in bomb-making – from underwear, to computer cartridges – and the ability to communicate over the Internet and radicalize people inside the United States has mitigated the diffi-

***“We are in a horribly weak position with Russia, and I frankly think Putin has played us masterfully.”***

culty they have in a post-9/11 world to get people across borders. There will be some steady state of the threat against us, including over that long term. The minute we stop believing that is when they will strike, because we will stop spending money, stop maintaining resources, and they will see an opportunity. So, at some level, we need to sort of look ourselves in the eye and say, “Just because we haven't seen a successful attack doesn't mean that the threat's not still there.” The threat is still there. The US Intelligence Community and our foreign intelligence allies around the world see it every day. So it's not going away, and the only thing that keeps it at bay is our vigilance and our capabilities.

I think it becomes hard to push back on the natural complacency that sets

in. For this administration and for future administrations it's going to be very difficult to make the argument, because people then say, “These are war-mongers, they're frightening the American people.” It's hard for the administration to point to facts, because most of those are classified. But I do think you're going to continue to see this threat. I think you will see it here in the US both from Al Qaeda affiliated or inspired groups and from foreign fighters who leave Syria with battlefield experience and travel to the US and Western Europe.

When you talk about the domestic threats, Al Qaeda has been known for large-scale, near-simultaneous attacks – two places, large explosions, near or about the same time. That's hard to do. That takes a significant level of sophistication, planning, training, communications, and financing. We now have a more sophisticated capability to interrupt those cycles at various points in the planning process.

What's easier for them, now, is radicalizing somebody over the Internet who can get lost in the ether, in the traffic. Think about a single individual's ability to cause death and terror. Think about the Navy Yard shooting, April 2<sup>nd</sup>'s Fort Hood shooting – I'm not saying these are terrorist events related to Al Qaeda, but they show that a single individual can conduct an attack. There's the radicalized guy who tried to drive his car into the middle of Times Square and blow it

up. I worry about the individual, radicalized over the Internet, with a weapon, who can do harm. That's, oddly enough, a sign of our success, that that's what they're left with – if they can't pull off a larger attack – but I think we have to continue to worry about those kinds of attacks as well.

**FSR: We'd like to talk about the relationship between the United States and Iran. There are obviously negotiations ongoing, and the two sides have signed the Interim Nuclear Accord. What are your thoughts on that relationship? Can you address the risks and rewards of potentially warming relations between Washington and Tehran, particularly with respect to American allies in the region, like Saudi Arabia and Israel?**

**Townsend:** I think we ought to always approach Iran with a certain amount of humility, because, I think we misread them almost every time. It's incredible to me, our lack of real understanding about what motivates Iran, what are the levers of power, what are the carrots, how do we engage. There have been more foreign policy failures with Iran than there have been successes. Looking back: It's the overthrow of the Shah, and US involvement in the fall of the Mossadegh government. There is real history here, and – this is not a political statement – there are just failed interventions and failed policies as relates to Iran over decades. So any interac-

tion with them has got to be approached from a point of humility, and with an understanding of that history.

I don't believe there are credible signs that these negotiations are going to yield real results. I think what we're seeing right now has reinforced the skeptics' view that this was an Iranian play for time. That leads you into the discussion on our allies in the region and the impact to those allies. This is where clarity really matters. You've got to be able to articulate, not simply to the Iranians, but to your allies, the objectives of the engagement. And, before you start, you've got to say to those allies, "You will be able to judge yourselves whether or not I've been successful because here are the necessary outcomes to determine whether the engagement was worth the risk." And then you've got to measure yourself. You can tell I've really adopted a very private sector view. Here in the private sector, I don't pay for goods I haven't received yet. I just won't. So the notion of easing sanctions before you actually getting something back from the Iranians is mystifying. Yes, the negotiations are a give and take, and you've got to be careful about what your preconditions are – but when you're dealing with someone who has not dealt with you, honestly, I think you've got to be very cautious about the level and pace of engagement.

The reason there was bipartisan agreement to pass proposed legislation that ba-

sically said, if negotiations fail, the following additional sanctions will apply, was because people were skeptical that the Iranians would take this negotiation process seriously, and that the negotiations would yield real results. That legislation was meant to be a hammer put at the disposal of the negotiators. It wasn't going to be implemented during negotiations. Why would the President and the White House not want to have another arrow in their quiver that could be deployed if the negotiators were having difficulty?

Our allies are watching. You talk to the Emiratis, you talk to the Saudis, they will say to you, "We are closer to the problem than you are, and if we don't understand, clearly, what your strategy is, how can we be anything but skeptical and believe that we can only rely on ourselves here in the region to deal with the inevitable problem?" They're looking for real results, because they believe they're the closest to the impact of the problem, and that's right.

The Bahraini government, during the protests there, believed that the Iranians themselves helped to foment the opposition. Let me be clear, there's a real opposition in Bahrain – but the allegation has been that the Iranians, seeing the real opposition, then used that to foment further instability in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia sees a direct threat in their eastern province, which is closest to Iran, has a large population of Shia, and where most of their oil fields are. By the way, the Iranians got

people into the Kingdom under the guise of the Hajj in the late 1970s, and tried to overthrow the Saudi government. So the Saudis have their own history with Iran. In Yemen, the Houthi tribe, on Saudi Arabia's southern border and Yemen's northern border is fighting Yemeni government forces – the Houthi are a Shia tribe, largely supported by and a prop of the Iranian government. We know that the Iranians have tried to provide support to Palestinian groups to de-rail the peace process with Israel. We know that the Iranians had a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador here in the United States. This is the context. Iran is the largest single state sponsor of terror, using Hezbollah, and in deploying the Quds Force into Syria to support the Assad regime. We tend to look at negotiations as a single issue, but the Iranians don't look at it that way. This is not a one-note tune.

So when you go into a negotiation, you cannot permit the Iranians to circumscribe the talks to the one issue that they want to talk to you about. You've got to deal with all of it, and you've got to understand all of it, and all of it's got to be on the table, because the bilateral relationship is more than just one issue. And if your allies don't see that you understand all of it, are willing to deal with all of it, and that you have a plan for dealing with all of it, that will generate skepticism and concern about our commitment. ©



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