

Colloguy

*The U.S. elections,
military balance and
Obama's second term*

**Donald
Rumsfeld***

**Donald Henry Rumsfeld served as the 13th Secretary of Defense from 1975 to 1977 under President Gerald Ford, and as the 21st Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2006 under President George W. Bush Jr. He is also the founder of the Rumsfeld Foundation (2007), which has granted over hundred fellowships for U.S. graduate students and young leaders from Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. Mr. Rumsfeld published his autobiography *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, in 2012.*

CI: *Secretary Rumsfeld, thank you for accepting our interview request. It is a real honor for us and for our readership. Our first question is the about U.S. presidential election. Now that it is over, the public is turning its attention to the plans of the Obama administration for the next four years. Can you give us your assessment of the election results?*

Rumsfeld: As you say, the elections are over. The Democrats and President Obama ended up with something like 51% or 52% of the vote, while the Republicans and Governor Romney ended up with 49% - so it was a close one. As the result of the election, the Republicans held the House of Representatives and Democrats made gains in the Senate. So, what have is a government where the President and House of Representative are going to negotiate and work out what happens, because the House of Representative can block what he, the President, wants - and he has the ability to veto anything the House wants, so, they going to have to agree or disagree. What is not clear to me is Obama's statement after the election, where he repeatedly mentioned his electoral victory and set the tone by warning Republicans in Congress that he had earned political capital. It sounded to me as if they believe that they have some sort of mandate - probably to try to raise taxes and resist significant cuts to the budget. In my view that's probably not good thing for country, the result will be a

less competitive economic environment. That's not the way to create more jobs, reduce unemployment, and get the economy going again. In my view, that is not the way to reduce the deficit, which has been accruing at

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a rate of over a trillion dollars a year for the past several years. The way to reduce the deficit is to have your economy grow and have revenues grow as a result of that. If they can come up with a reasonable combination, involving reasonable cuts and without increasing tax rates, then I think they can probably put the country on a path of economic growth. If they don't, however, then it is likely we will see a double dip recession.

CI: *Secretary Rumsfeld, following your insights, I would like to ask about one of the key debates in the U.S. at the moment -- the cutting of military expenditure. Especially after the tragic loss of U.S. diplomats in Bengazi, what's your take on these cuts?*

Rumsfeld: Setting Bengazi aside and talking just about the so-called sequestration, they are talking about

adding an additional 400 - 500 billion dollar cut to the defense budget in addition to the 415 - 500 billion dollars already cut. That is to a trillion over the next decade. We cur-

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rently are spending less than 4% of GDP on Defense. Back in the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations, that figure was 10%. The deficit we facing are not the result of defense spending; it is the result of entitlement spending. I don't believe that additional cuts to the defense budget will solve our deficit problem. There are some Republicans who oppose the President on the tax increases, and their thought is that if he insists on raising tax rates, let's reject that as a proposal, but allow the sequestration in its place. Indeed, government spending is not a bad thing, but the question is how that will happen in the Department of Defense. If they cut costs by reducing civilian employees in the Department of Defense, it would probably not be hurt too badly. If they did it by modifying some of the entitlements that have occurred over the years with respect to Department of Defense personal, that will hardly hurt at all. But if they do it by reducing the capacity of the Navy and other things like, then going forward the U.S. Armed

Forces and our capabilities will be weakened. That would mean cutting our valuable middle care capabilities to contribute to a more peaceful world. That will hurt, because to the world, that sends the message that the U.S. will not be as strong or capable over the decade ahead, which creates a huge power vacuum. The nature of such a vacuum is that somebody will rush to fill it – and who is that going to be? The standpoint of America is whoever fills that vacuum, they are probably less likely to carry out our values or our interests – and as a result, the world will be a more dangerous place.

CI: *Sir, you are one of the supporters of a strong U.S. presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but since 2008, the region feels that U.S. engagement has weakened. The regional countries, however, are keen to see U.S. political presence, especially, in the context of Iran's nuclear enrichment program, which poses a threat to neighboring countries. What are your thoughts?*

Rumsfeld: I looked out at the world from a geostrategic standpoint, and it seems to me that the Caucasus, Central Asia and Mongolia are geographically situated at an intersection of competing and very different regional powers. These are important countries, with important histories. While we don't have a lot of immigrants from this part of the world, and therefore these countries don't influ-

ence our voting population to such an extent, and it seems to me that it is nevertheless in U.S. interests to pursue engagement in the area. That is one of the reasons my wife and I decided to open this foundation [Rumsfeld Foundation]. I think it is in our interests, U.S. interests, to have a local presence - I don't mean military,

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I mean a political presence, and to be perceived by those countries as a nation that is interested in them. I think to put myself in your shoes, the people in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Mongolia and Afghanistan probably benefit by having U.S. interests engaged. The political involvement is probably helpful from an economic standpoint; having people sufficiently familiar with those countries makes them more likely to invest there. It is a good thing for those countries to see that the U.S. is investing in them. So, my thought was that by connecting people from ten nations, all of whom are active in their respective fields, whether that is business, academia, government or journalism, by having them come here and meet people, they would gain a more accurate sense of who they are and what they think I thought it was a positive thing to do.

CI: *Secretary Rumsfeld, the current administration is planning to gradually withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan; on the other hand the short to medium term possibilities for a stable Afghanistan are questionable. What is your opinion on this; what problems and challenges do you see in the Afghanistan strategy?*

Rumsfeld: I think it's unknown - I look out and I see fog and mist, I don't see clarity. I do not believe that the U.S. or any other country can go into a neighboring country or even a distant country and *nation build*. I think what you can do is you can be helpful, you can encourage, you can provide examples, you can provide military assistance and training, and you can provide unique systems, you

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can encourage other countries- political encouragement to be cooperative to those countries. And all of those things are good. The final point of the analysis is that those countries must build themselves, and you can look at enormous successes of Japan, South Korea and Germany. They came out of wars, devastated, having been ruled by dictators, and they managed to create free democratic systems; not *Damocles* and arms, but with proper representation, and fair economic systems that provide econom-

ic opportunities to the people. Think about it - look at Japan, Germany - how did they do that? Did we do it? No. We helped, encouraged them in developing free political and economic systems not because we believe that those are the only models. They could have chosen another path of development. It was their choice. But in the end, they speak different languages, have different neighbors, different cultures, different histories, and they have to build it themselves. The Afghan people have enormous resources. The country is landlocked but they have a wealth of mineral resources, a big population, and sure they have tough neighbors, but they will have all kinds of opportunities with the return of the large educated population that left the country when civil war broke out. There is a chance that this will help the prosperous development of Afghanistan. And now the Afghans who left their country before have to grab the opportunity to make this system work.

CI: *Looking to Georgia, in the wake of its recent parliamentary elections, there are concerns about NATO's commitment to Tbilisi regarding its clear membership aspirations. Do you see the next NATO Summit as an enlargement summit, as U.S. leadership declared at the Chicago Summit? What implications might this have for Georgia's aspirant status?*

Rumsfeld: I think it would be a good thing for Georgia, and good for

NATO. How it will work out, I don't know. I don't know the new leadership. When they start working with Parliament we will see what direction they will take. I know some of the early statements from the new government were positive in respect to NATO and U.S., and I certainly hope that U.S. will be very supportive if Georgia makes specific moves to continue the process towards joining NATO.

CI: *Secretary Rumsfeld, looking to Syria, Bashar-Al-Assad is killing his people, which he has the power to do, bolstered by the certainty that the West will not interfere. On the other hand, the West and NATO have the power, but not the certainty - neither political nor legal - for intervention. What's your perspective? Why is there this uncertainty?*

Rumsfeld: The Assad regime, over time, has been a brutal one. His father killed, I would estimate, ten thousand innocent people decades ago and now his son is estimated to have had thirty thousand people killed by the Syrian armed forces. He [Bashar Al'Assad] is the closest ally of Iran, and both countries support terrorist organizations. The world would be a prosperous place without Assad regime. The question is, what is required to successfully remove Assad from power. The answer to that is that it's unknown. Given that the U.S. does not have the same level of influence in Syria as we have in other Middle East

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countries, what we do is with the help of Turkey and neighboring countries, with the exception of Iran, the full-time supporter of Assad. The key element is finding rational opposition forces – a group that thinks and acts rationally rather than in the extremist Islamists way, as a private takeover. Whatever group there is there that can reasonably be supported in building a post-Assad regime in Syria would create better nation in that part of the world - a better nation from the point of view of Israel, and from the point of view the other neighbors, including Turkey. Working with other countries to provide support to for positive developments may or may not be helpful in replacing Assad. That seems to me the right position for the U.S. to take. There are a few key principles that provide the foundation for good bilateral relations: that the country does not support terrorist organizations, that is does not attempt to impose its will on their neighbors, and to the extent that it is possible, it governs inclusively and is respectful of the diverse elements of society. Looking to the history of

the Middle East, we see examples of religious violence, including attacks by marginal groups on Christians in Egypt, or ethnic cleansing as between Christians, Shi'as, Sunnis, Kurds or others. Those are harmful things that cause human lives to be lost, which in turn threatens peace and stability in the Middle East. And therefore, we would like to see leadership that repudiates ethnic violence and such harmful activity. And that's what I think about Syria. Moreover, I don't think that my country has done a good job; the idea that the U.S. can lead from behind in the case of Syria is misguided, and this behav-

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ior makes it look like that we are declining, withdrawing, or unwilling to participate in filling the vacuum, a vacuum that risks being filled by someone else, very likely by countries, elements, entities, or factions that have interests quite different from us. I don't mean that they must be like us; they don't even need to be a democracy. They can choose what they want to be. We are not here impose our values on others, but that doesn't mean that they don't need to

respect their fellow human beings. The world cannot be free until every man and woman feels himself or herself free. We saw repression under the Communist systems; they killed enough people and jailed enough people to maintain power. In free societies, the biggest difference is that they think differently about maintaining power. The obvious example is the Korean Peninsula: they have the same people and the same resources in South and North. But if you look at a satellite photo¹ taken at night, you can see South Korea, the de-militarized zone, full of energy, activity, freedom, a free political system, and a free economic system. And you can see North Korea, where the capital Pyongyang is as dark as the whole country.

CI: *Secretary Rumsfeld, my further question is about your fellowship program for young leaders in the Caucasus-Central Asia. This program has engaged with a large number of youth leaders from the region. What was your original idea; what do you see happening now, and what is your vision for the future?*

Rumsfeld: We now have a total of around eighty-two young leaders who have come to the U.S. under this program over the last five years, from the Caucasus, Central Asia, Mongolia and Afghanistan. The original idea was based on the thought that the U.S.

has a good relationship with Eastern Europe, we have a lot of immigrants from Poland and former Czechoslovakia, but when the Warsaw Pact countries gained independence, these countries already had a lot of connections with the U.S.; they had relatives and friends living there. For this reason, Americans reached out to them quickly, and we understood that it was a difficult path from the Communist system to the free economic system. But we didn't have this kind of relationship with the Caucasus and Central Asia. I spent so much time in this region during my time in office, and I thought it would be helpful to reach to out younger leaders and bring them to the U.S., to give them a chance to meet people who could be helpful, to develop relationships with those people, and to show the U.S. as it is, how the political system works, how people live. That was the original theory that my wife and I had, and the past five years of the program shows that these young leaders have maintained ties with people in U.S., exchanging views and e-mails. This legacy shows that the Fellows left the U.S. with a different impression than when arrived. The program provides them with a unique opportunity to meet the people they read about, and to understand better how this place [DC] works, how Congress works, etc. Something I didn't anticipate was that the people here who met with the Fellows would become interested in thinking about and learning about the Caucasus and Central Asia more

¹ Editor's Note: You can view this image at, <http://bigthink.com/strange-maps/218-koreas-dark-half>

than they did before. A lot of influential people in U.S., in politics, in business, in academia, in journalism all have to sit down and think about their questions for the Fellows in advance of their meetings, and these exchange have proved enormously valuable.. My other observation is that these Fellows, from ten neighboring countries, have rarely visited one another's countries, but now they share a common experience and common interests, which are created by anticipating an evolved network. This could lead to business relationships, maybe to linkages at the governmental level.

Colloquy conducted by Zaur Shiryev, Editor-in-Chief of CI, November 2012, Washington DC, U.S.