

ICI VIEWPOINTS

MAY 27, 2015

Build Bridges, Not Walls: An Admiral's Perspective on Global Security

By Rob Elson

If we are to strengthen global security, retired U.S. Navy Admiral James G. Stavridis says, we cannot continue to build walls—we must build bridges instead.

It's a simple idea, but no easy task, as Stavridis explained in the closing session of ICI's 57th annual General Membership Meeting, held May 6–8 in Washington, DC. Building walls is ingrained across the world as a security tactic, he said, and history is rife with security failures because of it.

The failure of the strategy reaches back centuries, with the Maginot Line, the Iron Curtain, the Bamboo Curtain, and the Berlin Wall all having failed in the last hundred years alone. Even in this century, “guarded by the strongest military on Earth in the capital of the richest country on the planet,” Stavridis said, the Pentagon's walls could not protect against the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Challenges Across the World

So, why do nations continue trying to build walls today, despite the strategy's long history of failure? In Stavridis's eyes, a range of daunting global challenges have made isolationism more attractive. It's tempting to “try to shut out the world.”

The challenges are many and multifaceted. First, Stavridis said, the world is dealing with “terrorism, violent extremism, Islamic radicalism—however you choose to characterize it”—from the Islamic State, which is “different and more dangerous than any other terrorist group.” From slavery, to extortion and robbery, to selling hydrocarbons on the black market, “it does a better job of raising funds than any other terrorist group,” and is “terrific at branding, advertising, and proselytizing.”

Meanwhile, dangerous regimes—in Iran, North Korea, Syria, Ukraine, and more—are posing their own challenges. “We need to think of Iran not as a midsize country pursuing a nuclear weapon, but as an empire state,” Stavridis warned. It is “leading the Shia wing of Islam into combat in the Sunni world. That conflict will be with us regardless of whether the nuclear deal gets done.” And North Korea, Stavridis said, is even more dangerous than Iran. With a young, untested leader, the country already has nuclear weapons —“probably 10, with a goal of probably 20”—and the ability to deliver those weapons “at range.”

Of all our global challenges, Stavridis finds cyber threats to be the most worrisome—and just as much a concern for private security as they are for national security. “Sixty million credit cards have been compromised in the United States,” Stavridis explained. Most of the cybercrime is coming from six nations—Nigeria, Brazil, China, Ukraine, Russia, and Vietnam—with large financial institutions increasingly among the targets. Quoting a colleague, Stavridis said, “There are only two kinds of companies: those that have been successfully hacked, and those that don't know it yet.”

How We Must Build

The first step in combating these challenges—in building bridges, not walls—is to “listen more,” Stavridis told the audience. “Just as we are doing at this conference, we must listen, learn, exchange ideas, and build intellectual capital.”

Another way to build bridges is through reading, Stavridis said, stressing that this should not be limited to news or academic texts. “A very effective way to add capability and intellectual capital to your diet is reading fiction,” he explained, telling the audience about several novels he had recently read as well as some of the ideas he'd taken from them. “As we try to build bridges and try to understand ‘the other,’ reading fiction can be an important part of that.”

Geopolitically, Stavridis said, the United States plays a major role in building bridges—despite opinions to the contrary. “Some have a ‘declinist’ view of where we are,” he said. “I am not a triumphalist, but I do think we retain very great capabilities.... We must be a leader” in our global partnerships.

The leadership extends to our military—but not in the way one might readily think. “In Afghanistan, we aren’t just teaching police and soldiers how to fight,” Stavridis said. “We’re also teaching them how to read, and that is the most profound bridge you can offer anybody—the bridge to civilization.”

Though Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have been among our most important global partners in recent years, Stavridis predicted that our most promising partner in the near future will be India. Because of its democratic government, youth, energy, and connection with the English language, Stavridis explained, India’s ascent will likely become more strategically important than China’s has been.

The Sum of Security

How best to bolster security as we look toward the future? American ideas—democracy, liberty, and gender and racial equality—are the right ones, but “we execute those ideas imperfectly.” Our opponents, meanwhile, “have a very different set of ideas, and are crushing us on social networks.”

Stavridis said that the answer rests in sharing knowledge, especially on social networks. Creating and maintaining the world’s strongest military will never be enough for the United States to create and maintain lasting security. “We can launch missiles extremely well,” Stavridis said, “but we need to get better at launching ideas.”

That combination of hard and soft power, along with a commitment to working collectively, Stavridis said, is what will enable us to create “the sum of security” in the 21st century.

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Rob Elson is senior writer/editor at ICI.