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POLITICO

The Gates-Clinton axis

By: Ben Smith and Jen DiMascio and Laura Rozen

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The White House likes to release images of President Barack Obama at the head of the long Situation Room conference table, sober and experienced advisers lining either side.

But there is another meeting – with no cameras and no Obama – where the Cabinet's two most formidable figures seek to put their own stamp on the administration's national security agenda. It is the conversation Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton try to have each week when they're both in Washington, often in the company of National Security Adviser Jim Jones.

In an administration dominated by a powerful White House staff, Clinton and Gates have emerged as the giant exception and the only important center of gravity outside 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Their close relationship has been central to the unusual degree of agreement on critical issues, most notably the Afghan surge but also a range of other initiatives, from increasing the size of the State Department's foreign aid budget to imposing new sanctions on Iran.

"It's a phalanx," former Pentagon official Leslie Gelb said of the Clinton-Gates alliance. "I can't remember a really important issue where they have disagreed. They are both center-right; they have their four feet firmly planted on that ground. And that is, they are not going to open themselves up to serious attack from the right, whether it's Iraq or Afghanistan or Iran or you name it."

Gates, known inside the White House as "Yoda," is unquestionably the most powerful member of the Obama Cabinet — the only one with the muscle to push back. Clinton, meanwhile, is the most popular, her approval ratings cruising well above Obama's own. An alliance is good for each of them.

Clinton saves Gates from political isolation as a Republican in a Democratic administration

and has signed on to a policy agenda he has set, adding her voice to his demands for more troops and her department's civilian resources to the war in Afghanistan.

Gates, for his part, has saved Clinton from a different kind of marginalization by a powerful White House staff, which has a sometimes-rocky relationship with her own staff of loyalists, a residue of the bitter 2008 campaign. He's offered her a potent back channel to power and — some of her most political allies have told other Democrats — a path forward inside the administration.

Gates, who has long signaled an eagerness to retire, just launched what appears to be his final initiative, a tough push to scale back the Pentagon's gargantuan bureaucracy. Clinton, with her hawkish image and ties to Gates and to military brass, would be his most logical successor — and some of her most senior allies have begun quietly to float the notion.

The two meet regularly, though talk of weekly lunches was disrupted by the aggressive travel schedules both keep. They most recently lunched together April 26 at the State Department, a source said, but meet almost weekly, along with Jones, at the White House. The two are said to be personally compatible. Both, one source noted, are Midwestern United Methodists.

Connecticut Rep. John Larson, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said Gates and Clinton have briefed the caucus three times together and present a united front. "The overlap and the ease which they transition from point to point — very notable," he said. "We have all Cabinet members move through the caucus. It's not always so notable that they transition from point to point, seamlessly and are on the same page."

Such a close alliance between the two leading members of a modern president's Cabinet is hardly typical.

"A lot of presidents have had to spend quite a bit of time adjudicating disputes between the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom," said Strobe Talbott, a State Department official under President Bill Clinton.

More often, they're fighting their own wars. Some of the deepest intramural hatreds in American government have run across the Potomac, a tradition embodied most recently by Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell, secretaries of defense and state in the administration of President George W. Bush, who famously did not get along.

"My sense is that each of them understands the way in which the other one's function can help advance the cause," said Talbott. "Bob Gates totally understands the need for a very proactive and well-funded development policy in order to keep weak states from becoming failed states."

The relationship is, indeed, part of a pattern for Gates, one that's made him one of the most successful and enduring government officials of the past half-century. A career CIA analyst who served as deputy national security adviser under Brent Scowcroft in the George H.W. Bush White House before becoming the first career officer to lead the spy agency, Gates spent 13 years in academia before being named Rumsfeld's successor in 2006.

Still, those who know Gates worried that after Obama made the surprise decision to keep him on at the Pentagon, he would inevitably be an outlier in a Democratic administration. But the quick bond he formed with Hillary Clinton and others were part of a familiar strategy.

"He's by nature an alliance builder," said a senior official from the Bush and Clinton administrations.

Gates did not have a relationship with George W. Bush either when he took over from Rumsfeld in 2006. But he had worked with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Stephen Hadley, Rice's successor as national security adviser during Bush's administration. That helped him get along in the Cabinet, and he didn't stop there.

In contrast to Rumsfeld, who was dismissive of Capitol Hill, Gates courted key members of Congress, particularly Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. After Levin brought up concerns about confirming Marine Gen. Peter Pace for a second two-year term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gates pulled back on the nomination.

He has followed that pattern in the Obama administration. When Jones was taking knocks in the press for being less powerful than his top deputies, Gates called on Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, to defend Jones — a fellow supporter of the military and someone in his age bracket — as "the glue that holds this team together," a dexterous bit of politics that allowed him to do Jones a favor while simultaneously capitalizing on what's perceived as his bureaucratic weakness.

Some of Gates's admirers see the relationship with Hillary Clinton in a similar light and argue that he's been able to use her to achieve his policy goals — and not vice versa.

"The reality is that no one, including the White House, is willing to cross Gates because we desperately need him for political cover on everything, whether it be defense budget reform, arms control or [Afghanistan and Pakistan] and Iraq," a Democratic foreign policy official said, challenging a reporter to "name me one issue where [Clinton] had a strong viewpoint and then successfully maneuvered the administration in her direction."

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell dismissed the notion that Gates has used Clinton to his advantage as "complete nonsense."

"Is this a mutually beneficial relationship? Sure, everyone benefits when the secretaries of state and defense have a good working relationship. Are they using each other to advance personal agendas? Absolutely not," he said. "They happen to be very like-minded on many issues. She is, as he often says, very 'tough-minded' — and he respects that about her. I know it's not very juicy, but there's no secret alliance here. The fact is they simply see eye to eye more often than not."

Clinton, too, has experience in navigating the highest levels and of building unlikely alliances.

"This replicates one of her most effective moves in the Senate, which was to figure out who the power brokers were, study up on them and make sure she could work effectively with them," said Heather Hurlburt, executive director of the National Security Network, a

Democratic group.

And if Gates has been a behind-the-scenes architect of policy, Clinton's role is more public: She is "one of the articulators of the overall strategy that we adopted" on Iran and China, Jones recently told Newsweek.

Some critics of Obama's policy, though, see the two hawks as having pulled the president to the right. The two were particularly instrumental in making the case internally for an Afghan troop surge, and they were close enough to sell it jointly, appearing together on television to defend the plan.

Just last week, Clinton and Gates testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to validate the administration's commitment to modernize the nation's nuclear arsenal, and to preserve the ability to design new warhead components if needed.

The administration's stance was a victory for Gates, as the Pentagon appears to have fought hard to keep the nuclear capacity — reportedly over the objections of other members of the administration's inner circle, including Vice President Joe Biden.

Ironically, close observers say, the chief diplomat has emerged, if anything, as blunter and more hawkish than the diplomatic secretary of defense. After an attempted bombing in New York's Times Square appeared to have links to the Pakistani Taliban, Clinton publicly warned of "very severe consequences" should an attack be traced back to Pakistan.

Gates took a far milder line.

"It's their country," he said. "They remain in the driver's seat, and they have their foot on the accelerator."



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