



Gates "Reassures" Asia by Ralph A. Cossa

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The United States is a "resident" power in Asia that has been and will remain fully engaged in the region and both supportive of and involved in the development of any regional security architecture. This was the central message delivered by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore this past weekend. Press coverage has focused on his "subtle warnings" to China and blunt comments about Burma (a.k.a. Myanmar) but the real message was one of reassurance of continued U.S. commitment to the region.

This was clearly underscored by Gates' three main points: the U.S. is "a Pacific nation with an enduring role in Asia"; Washington stands "for openness, against exclusivity"; and that the future policy of any new U.S. administration will remain "grounded in the fact that the United States remains a nation with strong and enduring interests in the region." As one would expect, he pointed to Washington's five alliances with Australia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand as "the foundation of our security presence," adding that they were "enabled and strengthened by our relationships with partners and friends." He stressed the important role of America's military presence, in Guam and in the region, as a signal of continued commitment and the ability "to respond quickly to a number of contingencies."

Unlike the speeches of his predecessor, Gates barely mentioned China by name and when he did, it was generally in complementary or sympathetic terms. He praised Beijing's "valued cooperation" on Korean Peninsula denuclearization and noted the increased level of engagement (including inauguration of a Defense Telephone Link) between the two militaries, while extending condolences over the tragic loss of life during the Sichuan earthquake.

More obliquely (but with China clearly in mind), he acknowledged regional worries about rising demand for resources and about "coercive diplomacy" and called for "more military openness in military modernization in Asia." He cited the advanced notification and open manner in which the U.S. shot down a defunct satellite in February as an example of U.S. military transparency; the comparison with China's anti-satellite test last year was obvious, even if left unsaid.

Lt. Gen. Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of staff of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) was a bit less subtle. He did not mention the U.S. at all (other than including Hurricane Katrina in the list of recent natural disasters), but did identify "expansion of military alliance" and "development and expansion of missile defense system" among the major

security challenges the region faces. While Gates saw alliances as a positive factor, Ma saw them as "ensuring security of some countries at the expense of others" several questions from the floor asking for further clarification on this point were left unanswered. Missile defense, according to Ma, was "not helpful in strategic balance," although he failed to explain why the massive build-up of offensive missiles opposite Taiwan was any less helpful.

Nonetheless, Ma's central message was also one of reassurance: "China is a peace-loving country," Ma assured the audience, that would always adopt "a defensive defense policy," would not engage in an arms race, would never seek hegemony or expansion, and would be a "military threat to no other country." He also noted the "positive developments" and "good momentum" in the cross-Strait situation, albeit while still noting that "the mission of opposing and curbing secessionist activities remains strenuous." Ma shared the podium with Japanese Defense Minister Ishiba Shigeru who, along with Ma, underscored the improved nature of China-Japan relations. Ishiba more specifically called on Beijing to increase its military transparency, even while noting that "Japan does not subscribe to purposely overstating China as a threat."

The toughest questions from the floor were directed toward and largely unanswered or evaded by MGEN Aye Myint, Burmese deputy minister of defense, who wanted the audience to believe that Cyclone Nargis rescue and recovery operations were proceeding smoothly, while assuring his colleagues that all outside aid was welcome "as long as there were no strings attached." It was refreshing to hear an ASEAN senior statesman press his Burmese colleague on the issue of "responsibility to protect," even if there was no follow through. One senses the genuine sense of embarrassment in ASEAN over Rangoon's actions in the wake of the natural disaster. Whether this takes the form of policy-related actions or decisions remains to be seen, however. The one thing that virtually all present, specifically including Secretary Gates, seemed to agree on was that there would be no forced distribution of aid.

The toughest response to a question came from Secretary Gates. In his prepared remarks, Gates had been factual and largely neutral in discussing Burma, merely noting the U.S. willingness to help, despite obstructions, and welcoming ASEAN's leadership in searching for a mechanism to help get aid to those most in need. When asked by a former Singapore diplomat why Washington was not prepared to change its "failed policy of isolationism" against Rangoon, however, Gates forcefully pointed out that "We have reached out; they have kept their hands in their pockets," adding that to date ASEAN's engagement policy likewise seems to have had "zero influence" on Rangoon. The problem here is not

Washington's (or ASEAN's) policies; it's the ruling junta in Burma!

Unlike speeches by his predecessors at earlier Shangri-La Dialogues, Gates essentially avoided talking about the Middle East or global issues in general, other than to acknowledge regional concerns that U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan were distracting Washington from focusing on Asia, a notion he hoped his speech would serve to disabuse. Refreshingly, nowhere in Gates' speech was there any reference to the global war on terrorism, indicating that the Pentagon has clearly gotten the message that Washington's constant hectoring on this topic is counterproductive and sends the wrong message about U.S. priorities in Asia.

What defense establishments in Asia wanted and needed to hear was the reassurance that, despite commitments and distractions elsewhere, Washington remained aware of the region's growing importance and would remain engaged today and into the foreseeable future, regardless of who the next U.S. president might be.