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DEFENSE ISSUES

In the wake of the Cold War, many observers doubted America's determination to remain a Pacific power. Their fears are unfounded. The United States is more actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific region than ever before.

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America's Asia-Pacific Security Strategy

Prepared remarks by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Singapore, Jan. 15, 1998.

Will Durant wrote that, "Human history is a brief spot in space and its first lesson is modesty." I hope to occupy but a brief spot in your space and contribute a few modest thoughts that I hope will prove illuminating.

I am sometimes accused of being unable to discuss policy without somehow conveying it in the form of poetry. So to escape that stereotype, I would like to switch artistic media and bring to your attention what I am told is an outstanding exhibit of works by Toko Shinoda showing through the weekend at the Tolman Collection here in Singapore. Those of you familiar with Toko Shinoda know that she is often referred to as a visual poet, and indeed the Tolman exhibit is entitled "Poetry in Motion," so I still feel on terra firma.

Toko Shinoda's works are characteristically monochromatic and defined by spare lines, often single bold strokes. She is renowned for what has been termed "a seamless union of traditional and modern techniques" that might combine in a single print material from the Song Dynasty nearly a millennium ago with 20th century lithography.

Perhaps seeking inspiration from the work of Toko Shinoda, far too many defense commentators and analysts today paint a portrait of the Asian security landscape in spare monochromes that, unfortunately, are less than inspired or inspiring. It might be either a dull gray bemoaning that "little has changed since the end of the Cold War." Or an intense red asserting that "the new security architecture arising in Asia is fundamentally different from what has come before." Or a solitary stroke narrowly focused on a single factor, such as the development of China.

A more accurate portrait requires a complete palette and an ability to capture on our conceptual canvas both light and shadow -- one that reflects Asia's complex, but enduring features, while also conveying the dynamism of the region; one inspired not by Toko Shinoda's monochromes, but by her fusion of old and new. Because in the security realm, it is critical to understand the interplay between what is fixed and what is in flux if we are to successfully anticipate and manage change, and thereby ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for ourselves, our children and generations that follow.

This is truly the great challenge as we leave the post-Cold War transition period and enter, and indeed create, a new era. And it is a challenge that demands of us even greater cooperation than we have successfully shown in the past.

What are the enduring features of the Asian security landscape? First and foremost are the high stakes involved, as great as anywhere on the planet. Asia remains a concentration of powerful states with sizable militaries, some nuclear armed. It is a region of great global economic importance and significant regional interdependence. And it is an area with numerous navigational choke points, sea lanes that are the economic arteries carrying the lifeblood of many of our economies.

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These high stakes make stability crucial for all countries of the region. Yet the region remains a tinderbox, with potential flash points from Korea to the Taiwan Straits and beyond, that, if ignited, would have scorching effects on the security and economies in Asia, North America and around the globe.

These high stakes lead directly to the second constant we must recognize: the integral role of American military power as a stabilizing force in the region.

Half a century ago, Paul Nitze and other American strategists crafted a plan, National Security Council Directive 68, that became America's blueprint for the Cold War. It warned of "trends [that] could lead to the progressive withdrawal of the United States from most of its commitments in Europe and Asia ... under pressure ... from allies who will seek other 'solutions' unless they have confidence in [American] determination."

America proved her determination during the Cold War. But in the wake of that long conflict, many doubted America's determination to remain a Pacific power. They saw the departure of our forces from the Philippines as the beginning of a progressive withdrawal under pressure.

Those fears and forebodings proved unfounded. Indeed, the United States has become more actively engaged with more countries in the region than ever before. We have sustained and enhanced our engagement because we recognize it is in our national interest. Our regional partners have responded because they recognize it is in their national and collective interests.

One of my first efforts as secretary of defense was to direct a comprehensive review of American defense strategy and military posture. While the resulting strategy was new, at its core was a strategic decision that has remained and will remain constant -- America's commitment to protecting and promoting our interests in Asia by remaining forward-deployed in the region.

This was not simply inertia. Because this was a fundamental review of our policy, we explicitly considered options to reduce our forward-deployed military capability, and we explicitly rejected such options. This comprehensive review also made hard choices to ensure that we will have the resources necessary to maintain and modernize our forces and to ensure that their capabilities remain pre-eminent.

The third enduring feature that defines the regional security landscape is the crucial role of strong bilateral relationships, not only those the United States maintains, but increasingly, those between Korea and Japan, Japan and China, Russia and Japan.

America's alliances with Japan, Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines and many of our other bilateral relationships were forged in the Cold War to protect against a specific threat, but today they are not reactive, they are proactive -- standing not against anyone, but standing for shared objectives and serving as the primary means for our security engagement and for promoting the stability that undergirds the region's peace and prosperity.

We have worked hard to strengthen these bilateral relationships and to orient them to the requirements of a new era and a new century. The U.S.-Japan security alliance, for example, will be as important to Asia's future as it has been to its past. The stability it has created has propelled an economic tide that lifted peoples throughout Asia.

The revised guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation that we completed in September were last amended in 1978 by a different generation facing different challenges with a different strategy. The revised guidelines ensure that we are prepared for challenges from peacekeeping and humanitarian relief to responding to regional crises that affect Japan's security. What these guidelines do not do is seek to isolate any nation in the region. On the contrary, they are designed to expand stability for the benefit of all nations.

Among the most enduring of our bilateral relationships is the American-South Korean alliance, which for five decades has keep a constant vigil against imminent danger. Today, the Korean peninsula remains

one of the most dangerous places on Earth, a true hot spot where large forces remain on hair-trigger alert. That is why America's commitment to the security and sovereignty of the Republic of Korea remains unshakable. And why that commitment will remain constant as we look to the long-term future of the U.S.-Korean alliance.

We have also updated our alliance with Australia by focusing on common regional security challenges and pursuing new areas of cooperation. Our revitalized alliance, reoriented to the needs of the 21st century, is helping sustain a robust forward presence in the region for the long-term.

Here in Southeast Asia, we have excellent bilateral security relationships, far better than many realize, with many ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] states. Recognizing the growing importance of the ASEAN countries, we have been expanding our military-to-military cooperation, enhancing interoperability and access opportunities, and developing dialogues on regional issues with defense officials.

Against these enduring features of Asia's security landscape -- the high stakes, American engagement and presence, and the strong system of bilateral alliances -- we see several patterns of change.

Unlike the cataclysmic changes in Europe at the end of the Cold War, change in Asia has been evolutionary. Thus far, the region has anticipated and adapted well to these changes in the security environment. Yet these remain turbulent times. Our greatest challenge thus remains to anticipate and manage change.

The first of these changes is the emergence of multilateral frameworks for discussion and cooperation, which in a few short years have become an important and permanent feature of the regional security structure. The United States is actively engaged in a variety of overlapping multilateral channels such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the so-called ARF; the sub-regional confidence-building efforts, such as the trilateral dialogues between the U.S., China and Japan, and the U.S., South Korea and Japan; and the conferences on practical security cooperation and groups formed to address specific problems from Cambodia to the four-party talks on the Korean peninsula.

Some would like to see multilateral security dialogues and cooperation replace bilateral relationships as the primary feature of regional stability in the coming era.

The United States views these multilateral mechanisms as important, and having a greater role to play in the future. But we also believe that they will be successful only if they are built upon the foundation of solid bilateral relationships and a continued U.S. forward presence in the region. That is why the United States will not support efforts that intentionally or otherwise constrain our military posture or operational flexibility efforts that would only undermine, rather than contribute, to the region's security.

Given the high stakes involved, security architectures, even more than financial architectures, must be built on a solid foundation, not shifting sands, if they are to provide protection when the gale winds blow and tremors strike.

A second element of change is the growing importance of Southeast Asia. Over the last 30 years, ASEAN has developed into a multifaceted power center in its own right, one that is integral to the entire Asia-Pacific. ASEAN has also distinguished itself by tackling such issues as Cambodia and the South China Sea, facilitating regionwide dialogue through the ARF and by serving as a powerful example for the region and the world. Indeed, three decades of solving problems, reducing tensions and working cooperatively for mutual benefit bodes well as ASEAN confronts the challenges of today.

Given our shared interests, we look forward to Southeast Asia as an increasingly important partner and facilitator of the U.S. forward presence through such activities as port calls, repair, training and logistics support. Much has been achieved in recent years to enhance our access, and we look forward to building on this cooperation in the future.

Of course, the most anticipated change in Asia has been the emergence of China. In many respects,

China has already emerged. Today, China is an Asian power, and rightfully so. The United States does not fear this, nor do we view China as an adversary. Rather, we seek to encourage China to step forward as a responsible and cooperative great nation; a nation that preserves its unique identity, but is more open on security matters and more respectful of the rule of law; a nation that adheres to international norms, including peaceful resolution of disputes, the control of weapons of mass destruction and freedom of the seas; and a nation that joins us in rejecting a zero-sum attitude toward security by recognizing the common interests we all share in a stable environment that ensures security and promotes prosperity. Indeed, no nation has benefited more than China from the stabilizing effect of America's security engagement in Asia.

So the United States seeks to deepen our engagement with China. The October summit between Presidents Clinton and Jiang [Zemin] gave great hope that our two nations can work together towards our common goals of stability, security and prosperity.

In the security realm, our two nations have already taken several steps to increase mutual confidence and decrease miscalculation. Exchanging military personnel, and conducting reciprocal ship visits. Adopting procedures for U.S. Navy ships to continue to call in Hong Kong ports. And last month at the first-ever Sino-American defense talks, signing an agreement to share information on humanitarian exercises.

Later this week in Beijing, we will take the additional step of signing a military maritime consultative agreement which will both help avoid incidents at sea and create a venue for dialogue between operational naval officers. Such engagement gives hope that China is willing to work with us to our mutual benefit and the benefit of the entire region.

A fourth element of change on the security landscape is in Northeast Asia. We cannot say when and we cannot say how, but change will come to the Korean peninsula. We are working on several fronts to enable change there to be peaceful and orderly. From promoting dialogue on the peninsula in the four-party talks that for the first time brought together North and South Korea, the United States and China, to continuing implementation of the 1994 Nuclear Agreed Framework. While the United States and the Republic of Korea will continue to work side-by-side on these matters, every Asian country has a stake in the outcome and must play a role by providing political support, supporting KEDO [Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization] and other measures.

Even after the immediate threat to stability has receded on the peninsula, the alliance will serve to keep the peace and stability in Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. Following in-depth dialogue, our governments agreed last month on the need to maintain our bilateral security alliance for the long-term, while adapting it to changing circumstances.

A fifth change in the Asia-Pacific is the enlargement of the region. As a geographic entity the region has become more elastic. India is a growing actor, Russia is a potential player, and Europe is increasingly linked to the region through a variety of dialogues and entities.

Anticipating and managing this sea of change will continue to require the stable anchor of American forces that provide certainty and confidence. This has been summarized in our continued commitment to maintain approximately 100,000 U.S. personnel forward-deployed in the Asia-Pacific, although we all recognize this is shorthand for a panoply of measures of our security engagement and military capability in the region.

We seek to enhance both, the former through deepened cooperation and the latter through new technologies, operational concepts and organizational structures that will transform our forces in the coming decade and beyond.

Managing change also requires us to have more open and candid strategic dialogue, particularly with our defense colleagues in the region, to enhance transparency, confidence and understanding of shared security interests. We will work to encourage appropriate mechanisms for such dialogue.

In closing, let me, as one who was an elected U.S. official for the past quarter century, recount some

recent history that seems pertinent to the primary issue of the day. It was not that long ago that American strategic thinkers were debating the decline of America.

[Former President] Ronald Reagan persuaded the American people in 1984 that it was morning in America, but by the late 1980s quite serious and thoughtful people argued that America's day in the sun was ending and that the sun was rising on a new global power. America was in decline, we were told, as part of an historically inevitable rise and fall of nations. And even many who do not adhere to historical determinism looked at $200 billion U.S. federal government deficits as far as the eye could see and declared defeat in the face of trends that were undermining our economy.

This "declinist" school among intelligentsia was accompanied by [an] understandably disgruntled portion of our population whose livelihoods were destroyed or endangered by corporate downsizing. Key industries were seemingly being hollowed out, leaving some regions of America so economically desperate that comparisons with the Great Depression were commonplace. At both ends of our political spectrum, economic populists and nationalists emerged and, while they offered cures worse than the disease, they gained considerable support. And friends and allies around the world beseeched us to get our house in order.

Just a few years later, this picture has been turned on its head. American industry is vibrant. U.S. unemployment is at its lowest level in over two decades. Our federal budget is about to be in surplus for the first time in three decades, and recent reports suggest there will be large surpluses as far as the eye can see -- a string of surpluses not seen since the 1920s. And few speak of an America in decline.

What accounts for the dramatic reversal? One factor undoubtedly is the human tendency to view things more starkly than they really are, both the hard times and the good times. But more fundamentally, we took the advice of our friends around the world to get our house in order. Our people have adapted to the discipline imposed by markets, despite the difficulty involved at the time and the ongoing anxiety that affects many. And despite significant pressure at times, political factors have not overridden economic and business factors as restructuring has occurred.

Will Durant reminded us that, "The present is the past rolled up for action, and the past is the present unrolled for understanding."

It is not hard to find some lessons in this history, as well as a perspective that can justify the statement that we have confidence in the future of Asia notwithstanding the present difficulties. The energy, creativity and discipline of our Asian partners and allies continue undiminished. And with continued self-confidence in these strengths and a determination to pursue the economically sound path, our partners and allies in Asia can emerge from the crucible of current crisis fundamentally stronger.

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