

Pentagon report calls Asia a "core security concern"

James Brookfield
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A report issued in late November by the Pentagon indicates that US military strategists expect the financial meltdown in Asia to unleash further social upheavals and regional conflicts. The report, titled: 'US Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region 1998,' cites the Asian financial crisis as a 'core security concern,' one that has 'shaken the region's assumptions about uninterrupted economic development and is testing regional economic cooperation, globalization, and the livelihood of two billion Asians.'

This report is the fourth produced by the Pentagon on East Asia. The first two, published in 1990 and 1992, suggested that US forces in the region would be reduced in number. A third, issued in 1995, reversed this position, noting, in the words of the present report, that 'continuing areas of uncertainty and tension would require an affirmation of [US] security commitments to the region,' i.e., the ongoing maintenance of 100,000 US troops there.

The 1998 report adds, 'While our policies since the 1995 EASR [East Asian Strategy Report] have confirmed US commitment to the region and strengthened bilateral relationships, areas of uncertainty remain and new challenges have emerged.' According to the report, these 'challenges' include the nuclear missile testing by India and Pakistan earlier this year and US disputes with North Korea over its nuclear energy and satellite programs. These are, however, not the only potential sources of conflict.

'Indonesia's economic and political difficulties will pose challenges to the established order both internally and in the region. In Cambodia and Burma, domestic crises threaten the region's progress toward stable political cooperation. Historical mistrust and territorial disputes, including those in the South China Sea and elsewhere, remain unresolved, providing potential

flashpoints over issues of sovereignty and nationalism. Crises outside the region, particularly in the Arabian Gulf, increasingly affect regional security, as Asia becomes more dependent on oil supplies for economic growth,' the report states.

The publication of the 1998 EASR follows a series of public disputes between the US government and several Asian countries over trade questions exacerbated by the economic crisis and US efforts to gain greater access to regional markets. At last month's Asian Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) meeting, rancor erupted as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir denounced currency speculators and the international monetary system while US Vice President Gore attacked Mahathir for the arrest and trial of his former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and for the 'cronyism' of the regime in Kuala Lumpur. This was followed by Clinton's trip to Tokyo where he insisted to Japanese officials that they carry out measures to further open the economy to US goods.

In these conflicts military might serves to bolster the position of US economic interests. 'US engagement in Asia,' the report notes euphemistically, 'provides an opportunity to help shape the region's future, prevent conflict and provide the stability and access that allows us to conduct approximately \$500 billion a year in trans-Pacific trade,' The report later cites the \$150 billion in US investment in Asia in a similar vein.

A number of passages suggest that the report is a document published for the purpose of intimidating US rivals. It summarizes, for example, the development of new US military technology as follows: 'Advances in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance will combine with the introduction of new weapons systems to revolutionize US ability to respond rapidly to any

conflict and dominate any battlefield situation.'

A related statement, 'Joint Vision 2010,' prepared in 1997 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and mentioned in this report, notes that the introduction of new weapons technology 'will provide an order of magnitude improvement in lethality.' In a section on 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' the 1998 EASR declares: 'The United States will retain the capacity to respond to who might contemplate the use of WMD and to prevail in any conflict in which these weapons are used, so that the costs of using WMD will be seen as outweighing any possible gains.' It does not explain how a military strike following an opponent's 'contemplation' of using a weapon can be properly defined as a 'response.'

The Pentagon foresees conflicts with China, though the report takes a somewhat careful tone in light of the growth of US business interest in the country. 'Many of China's neighbors,' one paragraph states obliquely, 'are closely monitoring China's growing defense expenditures and modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including development and acquisition of advanced fighter aircraft; programs to develop mobile ballistic systems, land-attack and projection platforms.' It adds later, 'The United States is concerned about the activities of Chinese entities in the missile and chemical fields.'

North Korea, on the other hand, is singled out in the report for its 'considerable inventory of chemical and biological weapons' and the 'threat posed by [its] nuclear program.' The report cites the August 1998 North Korean rocket and satellite testing as 'a threat not only on the [Korean] Peninsula but to common regional security.' It adds that a 1994 agreement between the US and North Korea, which halted the construction of nuclear energy plants at Yongbyon and Taechon, 'defused a critical source of tension and deflected what could have been a military confrontation with North Korea.'

Political instability, social upheavals, growing antagonisms with other powers in the region, and other unspecified threats to 'US interests,' all of which may demand a brutal and rapid military response: this is the Pentagon's anticipation of events that will be ushered in by the Asian economic crisis.

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