

Singapore security forum points to US-China tensions

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Public jousting between US Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Chinese general Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of the general staff, during the Asia Security Summit in Singapore on May 30-June 1, points to rising tensions and rivalries in the Asia-Pacific region.

The annual forum of the region's defence ministers and top security officials has become something of a barometer of US-China relations in recent years. Gates's predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld, used the meetings as a platform to berate China for its secretive military build-up. By contrast, Gates last year struck a more conciliatory note during his first appearance, speaking of building "trust over time" between the two countries.

This year, however, in a carefully crafted speech that avoided direct references to China, Gates nevertheless delivered a pointed warning to Beijing. He declared that the US remained engaged in Asia and dispelled any notion that Washington was lessening its role because of its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The United States remains a nation with strong and enduring interests in this region," he said, "interests that will endure no matter which political party occupies the White House next."

Gates declared: "Our continued presence in this part of the world has been an essential element enabling its rise—opening doors, protecting and preserving common spaces on the high seas... I want to stress that we stand for openness, and against exclusivity." Returning to the theme later, he said: "In my Asian travels, I hear my hosts worry about the security implications of rising demands for resources, and about coercive diplomacy and other pressures that can lead disruptive competition."

While the language may have been diplomatic, the point was clear to everyone present. Gates was firing a shot across China's bow in support of allies such as Japan. The two countries have rival territorial claims over islets and their surrounding seabed resources in the East China Sea. Gates referred in particular to the South China Sea where China, Vietnam and the Philippines are contesting various areas and energy resources. "All of us in Asia must ensure that our actions are not seen as pressure tactics, even when they coexist beside outward displays of cooperation," he said.

Gates also challenged China's efforts to use its growing economic muscle to establish closer relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the formation of a regional East Asian bloc to the exclusion of the US. He acknowledged that there were stirrings of "a new regionalism" and "new security architecture" in Asia, but warned against a "zero-

sum game" approach that kept out others. "It can only succeed if we treat the region as a single entity [that is, including the US]," he said, "There is little room for a separate 'East Asian order'."

For all of Gates's talks of "openness", American strategists have based their plans on the control of key naval chokepoints, such as the Malacca Strait, that would enable the US to quickly cut off access to Middle East oil for any potential Asian rival. The concern about the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea is that China might seek in the future to block key sea routes to the US navy. Thus Gates emphasised the "time-tested principles of strategic access, freedom of commerce and navigation and freedom from domination by any hegemonic force or coalition".

China needs huge and growing supplies of oil from the Middle East and Africa. To counter US strategic planning, China has increasingly turned to building "blue water" navy and port facilities in countries such as Burma, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as a means of defending its energy lifelines. Beijing has also been developing alternative land routes for shipping oil from the Indian Ocean via Burma to south-western China, in order to avoid the Malacca Strait.

Beijing's claims in the South China Sea are motivated by the same strategic considerations. In April, a British intelligence briefing for *Jane's Defence Weekly* revealed that China has built a major naval base at Sanya on Hainan Island that can hold a large surface fleet and 20 submarines. Analysts pointed out that the base demonstrated China's ambition was not just to counter the small Vietnamese or Filipino naval forces in the South China Sea, but ultimately to match the US navy.

Gates took two more jabs at China without mentioning it by name. He repeated Washington's standard demand for "transparency" in military spending, warning that otherwise there would be "outright suspicion" of its "strategic intentions". He reiterated that the US had been "open" in informing countries about its decision to shoot down a defunct satellite in February—the unstated contrast being to Beijing's unannounced anti-satellite experiment in 2007.

China's representative at the meeting, Lieutenant General Ma, responded in kind. Without naming the US, Ma warned there were powers seeking the "expansion of military alliances" and "the development and expansion of missile defence systems," which have been "undercutting the equilibrium of regional powers".

For the past eight years, the Bush administration has been seeking to establish a strategic encirclement of China through

alliances and bases stretching from Japan and South Korea to most South East Asian countries and Australia as well as India. This is not to mention the US military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Moreover, the US has begun to deploy anti-ballistic missile systems in Eastern Europe and Japan to reinforce its nuclear predominance, particularly over Russia and China.

A sharp exchange took place after Ma acknowledged that China had been developing its international ballistic missiles (ICBMs), but only for “defensive” purposes. Gates snapped back that the “[US] missile defence is exactly what it says. It’s a defence... And it is hard to see a limited capability such as we have and will have in the future undermining the offensive capabilities of either Russia or China.” He then added: “It’s hard to see an intercontinental ballistic missile as a defensive weapon.”

While neither side spelled out their rationale, China and Russia are concerned that the Bush administration has been shifting away from its Cold War strategy of “Mutually Assured Destruction” or MAD toward achieving “nuclear primacy”. MAD was based on ability of both sides to retain enough of their nuclear arsenal from a first strike to unleash a devastating assault on the attacker. Nuclear primacy assumes the ability to completely destroy an opponent’s arsenal. Within that context, anti-ballistic missiles would play a significant role in countering any remaining missiles that survived a first strike.

China and Russia have bitterly opposed the US deployment of anti-ballistic missiles on countries near their borders. US claims that these systems are purely defensive and directed at so-called rogue states such as Iran and North Korea do not hold water. Quite apart from the fact that neither country has a functioning inter-continental ballistic missile or a nuclear warhead, Tehran and Pyongyang are both well aware that the US is capable of levelling their countries in retaliation.

Russia and China are both responding to the new US anti-ballistic systems by developing more sophisticated missiles and strengthening their nuclear arsenal. Moscow pointedly resumed its strategic bomber flights last year to demonstrate its capacity to respond to a US first strike. Last month, Russia and China issued a joint statement denouncing the US missile shield plans during a visit by newly-elected Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to Beijing.

At the Singapore forum, Gates appealed for dialogue with China, so that both sides would “avoid unnecessary military expenditures” and an arms race. His comments, however, are little more than an appeal for maintenance of the status quo—that is, an overwhelming US military superiority. Washington is clearly concerned that China’s rapid economic growth will be translated into the military sphere.

Ma argued that China’s defence budget was “low” compared to developed countries, but that is only true in per capita terms. China’s official defence expenditure reached \$60 billion this year, up 17.6 percent from 2007. The military budget is now the world’s fourth largest—ahead of Germany, Japan and Russia. According to the Pentagon, the actual figure was as high as \$139 billion last year.

The US is also concerned that China’s economic clout is turning East Asia into a de facto regional economic bloc dominated by

Beijing. As the world’s largest low-cost manufacturing hub, China imports substantial quantities of components, parts, capital goods and raw materials from a range of countries including Japan, South Korea, South East Asia and Australia. China has displaced the US as the biggest trade partner for most of these countries.

Beijing’s Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN will take effect from 2010. China is also creating an “economic corridor” in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GSM). The project involves water transport along the Lancang/Mekong River into Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam as well as rail links and roads connecting China to Singapore via Thailand. China has footed much of the bill through concessions and development projects.

In his speech, Gates lashed out at the Burmese junta’s refusal to let US, French and British military personnel and aid officials into the country to assist cyclone victims. The Bush administration’s hostility to the Burmese regime is primarily directed at its close economic and military ties with China, which has established port facilities in Burma. The country is a significant gap in US efforts to encircle China’s borders.

Gates’s emphasis on the US as “a resident power” in Asia is as much to reassure allies as to warn China. He was asked directly by a Singapore diplomat whether the US could maintain its huge military presence in Asia amid US economic troubles, growing budget pressure and the costly war in Iraq. “We ought to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time,” Gates replied. But the glib response convinced nobody as the cautious reactions indicated.

Indian Defence Minister Pallam Raju insisted that while New Delhi was committed to new close ties with the US, it would not act as a US proxy against China. Australian Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon stressed that the new Rudd government “has not turned its mind to any decision about a quadrilateral relationship [with US, Japan and India]”. While not stated, the US-proposed relationship is clearly aimed at China, on which Australia’s mining boom is heavily dependent.

Japanese Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba echoed Gates’s criticism of China, but said “Japan does not subscribe to purposely overstating China as a threat.” Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda had been trying to patch up his country’s relationship with China, which is vital to Japanese business.

French Defence Minister Hervé Morin also put in a bid, telling the conference that “France and Europe are not intending to remain secondary partners in Asia” in issues of security. As Asia became economically more central to the world over the next 25 years, France would seek a greater role, especially in South East Asia—as “a major strategic stake”.

Despite the diplomatic language, the Singapore conference provided a glimpse into the growing tensions as all the major and regional powers jostle for position amid a scramble for resources, cheap labour and strategic position in the increasingly important Asia-Pacific region.



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