



Force Restructuring Anxiety by Ralph A. Cossa

SINGAPORE - There was a time when the Pentagon saw "relieving regional anxiety" as one of its primary alliance maintenance tasks in East Asia. Today, it seems more adept at creating this anxiety, rather than providing the reassurance that lies at the heart of sustaining America's critical alliance relationships in East Asia. I'm talking about the now infamous (and frequently misquoted) Los Angeles Times story about U.S. military force restructuring in East Asia, built around an on-the-record interview with U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith. In it, he is quoted as saying that "Everything is going to move everywhere . . . There is not going to be a place in the world where it's going to be the same as it used to be . . . We're going to rationalize our posture everywhere in Korea, in Japan, everywhere." The Los Angeles Times article also cites other (unnamed) senior Pentagon officials as stating that plans were "on the table" to move the bulk of Marine forces currently based in Okinawa to Australia, and that Washington was "seeking agreements to base Navy ships in Vietnamese waters and ground troops in the Philippines." Malaysia was also mentioned as one of the places where Washington wanted to establish a "network of small bases," which would reportedly serve as "launching pads for moving U.S. forces quickly and clandestinely to future areas of conflict." A reduction in Korea-based forces "is probably in the cards" as well, according to these unnamed sources, although plans have not yet been made "for fear of sending a signal of lack of resolve to North Korea." This is an important consideration, given the current nuclear crisis on the Peninsula, but one wishes that the Pentagon spent more time worrying about the signals it was sending to South Korea as well. Of course, it is possible that these officials are in fact trying to send a signal to the South. There seems to be an attitude among some in the Pentagon that Seoul needs to be "taken to the woodshed" and punished for its anti-American attitudes during the last election. This simplistic view overlooks the fact that ROK President Roh Moo-hyun has demonstrated great political courage since his election by strongly supporting the alliance and U.S. troop presence (not to mention the Bush administration's tougher approach toward Pyongyang), despite intense criticism from his own core supporters. Feeding ROK suspicions about U.S. intentions undermines this effort and diminishes President Bush's pledge to President Roh to closely coordinate with the ROK on any force reductions or relocations. As regards other projected movements, defense establishments in most of the countries named have been quick to point out that they have agreed to no such thing. This is not surprising. Largely overlooked in much of the frantic reporting on this story has been its very last sentence - "Pentagon officials say such options are still being discussed and stress that no final decisions have been made" - a point reinforced by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz during a press conference in Singapore, in

which he singled out reports about troop movements to Australia and the Philippines in particular as being inaccurate. "Many studies have been done and many ideas have been presented," Wolfowitz acknowledged, "but no decisions have yet been made" and none would be made without close consultation with Congress and with "affected friends and allies in the region." But if this is so, then why is Feith talking about "everything moving everywhere"? More important, why do officials below him feel compelled to fill in the details Feith deliberately left blank, immediately before their boss began a high-profile trip to East Asia presumably aimed at conducting such consultations? To his credit, Secretary Wolfowitz, in his prepared remarks to many of his counterparts at the Asia Security Conference in Singapore, tried to lay out the broader rationale behind Washington's "fundamental look at our military posture worldwide" while addressing the issue of "how best to sustain the American commitment to this region in the face of the global demands on our defense resources." Yes, changes in force structure were inevitable, he seemed to be saying, but they would not be made at the expense of the region's security: Washington would still maintain "the same basic commitment to stability and deterrence in this region that we have had all along." Unfortunately, this was page two news. The front pages of the region's newspapers were filled with reports of the (real and imagined) restructuring plans, forcing Wolfowitz on the defensive from the moment he arrived in Asia. I am not suggesting that Mr. Feith was trying to undercut his boss, although some of the unnamed officials leaking details were no doubt playing the time-honored Washington game of "death by leak" - trying to improve the prospects of their preferred options by prematurely leaking or distorting those preferred by others. But, even if everyone's intentions were honorable, the comments reveal a glaring lack of sensitivity to growing regional concerns about American unilateralism. The story lends added credence to the regional definition of "consultations," American-style; i.e., "Americans come in and tell us what they are going to do and we are expected to agree." The truth about the story is that there is really less there than meets the eye. Troop consolidation in Korea has been talked about for some time and the effort to move U.S. forces out of the middle of Seoul is 10 years old. So too is the idea about placing more focus on access and mobility: remember "places not bases," the old Pacific Command strategy? What is new and potentially significant, but largely overlooked, is the reported change in attitude toward China. In the past, most statements coming from the Pentagon seemed to focus on the need to counter a potential peer competitor. If it is true that "in the post-Sept. 11 world, the threat from China is believed by Bush administration policymakers to pale beside that posed by unstable countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that are viewed as breeding grounds for terrorists," this would bring the Pentagon more in line with the

point of view that has prevailed in the State Department and was embedded in last fall's National Security Strategy, which stresses cooperation rather than competition with China and the other great powers.

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