



Demystifying China by Ralph A. Cossa

Demystification, not containment! This was the central theme of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's comments regarding China at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the Asia-Pacific region's largest unofficial gathering of defense officials and security specialists.

Unlike his speech at this annual International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) gathering last year, when comments on China (and the war on terrorism) dominated his formal remarks, only one short paragraph in a four-page prepared text referenced the PRC. Rumsfeld first praised China's "great potential" and its "strong economic growth" and "industrious workforce." "But," he cautioned, "there are aspects of China's actions that can complicate their [sic] relationships with other nations. The lack of transparency with respect to their military investments understandably causes concerns for some of its neighbors."

That was it! Beyond this, Rumsfeld largely stressed the positive: "in the past five years, in terms of defense and security cooperation, the United States has done more things, with more nations, in more constructive ways, than at any other time in our history." While some in America and overseas have questioned the U.S. involvement in and commitment to Asia, "the United States is and always will be a Pacific nation," Rumsfeld reminded the audience, "we must, and we will, lean forward and stay fully engaged in this part of the world."

Reinforcing the central theme of the Bush administration's 2006 *National Security Strategy*, Rumsfeld stressed the importance of promoting and preserving freedom and democracy, noting "paradoxically, more nations are freer than ever before, yet freedom is increasingly under assault." As expected, he warned against "violent extremism" in the region, while challenging North Korea to "choose a path which leads back to membership in the community of nations"; a relatively gentle (for the Defense Department) admonition. He also gave Russia a mixed review, stating on the one hand that "on the whole, our relationship is better than it has been for decades," while cautioning that "in other ways, Russia has been less helpful, as when they [sic] seek to constrain the independence and freedom of action of some neighboring countries."

If China was not a central theme in his prepared remarks, it remained the subject of over half the questions posed to Secretary Rumsfeld during the on-the-record Q&A session that followed his prepared remarks. While several questioners tried to draw him into a discussion of the Chinese threat, he was not about to go there, perhaps remembering the challenges he received last year when he questioned China's growing defense expenditures and expanding power projection forces.

Instead, he merely called for China to be more transparent about its military capabilities and doctrine. In a clear reference to China, he noted that "any country clearly has the right to make decisions as to how it wants to invest its resources. That's fair." But, he noted, "the rest of the world has the right, indeed on occasion the need, to try to develop a good understanding of exactly why they're doing that." It would be in Beijing's interest, Rumsfeld argued, if Beijing "demystified" what it was doing militarily. He predicted that China would eventually see the wisdom in doing just that.

Local press coverage missed the nuance. While its "Rumsfeld pledges that US will stay engaged in the region" headline captured the main message, the *Singapore Straits Times Sunday Times* sub-heading read "But Asia's future security depends on the behavior of China, North Korea, and other regional players." It also noted that Rumsfeld "expressed unease about Beijing's increased defense spending."

Actually, he did not. Having learned his lesson last year – when one analyst challenged him to identify what he thought the proper level of Chinese spending should be if he thought current levels were too much and another noted the irony of Washington calling anyone else's military spending too high, given that the Pentagon's budget exceeds the GNP of many countries – he was careful to stress that it was the lack of transparency, not the level of spending per se, that "causes concerns for some of their neighbors."

Even on the contentious issue of Taiwan, Rumsfeld merely observed that we should "take China at its word" when it says it seeks peaceful reunification as its first choice, noting that the U.S. and the people on Taiwan also want a peaceful resolution to the problem.

Rumsfeld also stressed that the term "responsible stakeholder," while coined by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, represented a "coordinated U.S. perspective" regarding China. The U.S. had no "grand design" in Asia, other than to "contribute to peace and stability," stressing again that the goal of U.S.-China military-to-military relations was "to demystify one another."

Rumsfeld was evasive, however, in addressing several questions (including one by this author) dealing with U.S. attitudes toward Asian multilateral initiatives that did not include Washington, such as ASEAN Plus Three (A+3, involving China, Japan, and South Korea), the East Asia Summit (A+3 plus three: India, Australia, New Zealand), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, involving China, Russia, and several Central Asian nations). While noting that "countries could join together as they wish," he stressed that most problems were global and thus lent themselves to multinational rather than single country or small

group solutions. He also unapologetically stood by his “mission defines the coalition, not vice-versa” mantra, citing the success of the Bush administration’s Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a “coalition of the willing” involving some 70 nations that share a commitment to prevent weapons of mass destruction from being transported to or from terrorists or rogue regimes.

He did, in response to a specific follow-up about the invitation to Iran to join the SCO, comment that he found it “passing strange” that an organization whose charter proclaims a commitment to combat terrorism would invite a known supporter of terrorism to join its ranks.

During the Q&A session, Rumsfeld also questioned whether institutions established at the onset of the Cold War were still relevant in the post-Cold War 21st-century environment. As Truman did back then, Rumsfeld argued, today’s leaders should think about initiating or fashioning new institutions, rather than thinking that those that existed 50+ years ago “are necessarily properly arranged for today,” adding, “I don’t think they are.”

Finally, Rumsfeld acknowledged that the U.S. had to be more sensitive to world public opinion and admitted that he was concerned about Washington’s image, noting that “every country would prefer to be loved and to be respected.” But he also argued that the facts showed that Washington had provided great support to Muslim people from Bosnia to Kosovo and that the Afghan people are now “using their soccer stadiums today for soccer instead of cutting peoples’ heads off and that’s an improvement.”

It would be too kind (and too out of character for me) to claim that Rumsfeld hit a home run in Singapore. But, if he struck out last year, this year he hit at least a double. His more nuanced views toward China – perhaps informed by his first visit to Beijing as defense secretary last October and by the adverse reaction to last year’s Shangri-La presentation – were much better received; the desire for increased Chinese transparency is widely held in Asia.

Unfortunately, the Chinese Defense Ministry and Peoples’ Liberation Army chose once again to boycott the gathering – China was represented by a relatively low-level foreign ministry official and the heads of several Chinese think tanks – thus missing an important opportunity to demonstrate China’s professed commitment to greater defense cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

In response to a question, Rumsfeld noted that “I tried and failed” to persuade China to send senior defense officials to the Shangri-La Dialogue, predicting that “over time we’ll find that they will participate here, to their benefit and to our benefit. That alone will contribute to demystifying some of the things that take place.”

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