

## DoD Background Briefing

Tuesday, March 7, 2000 - 3:37 p.m. (EST)

Subject: Secretary of Defense Trip to Asia

Presenter: Attributable to a Senior Defense Official

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Mr. Bacon: Hello. This is a very boisterous crowd. The crowd is getting smaller but more boisterous as the day goes on.

This briefing is on Secretary Cohen's trip to Asia. And it's on background, but you -- the briefer is well known to all of you.

Q: (Off mike, laughter.)

Mr. Bacon: Well, it depends which word you're looking at. (Laughs.)

And take it away.

You can attribute this to a Senior Defense Official.

If you like, you can just read Admiral Blair's remarks. He just left them here.

Sr. Defense Official: Okay. (Laughs.) That's all right. Thanks.

Good afternoon. Tomorrow the secretary of Defense leaves for another trip to Asia. This will be a trip to Hong Kong, to Vietnam -- and I'll speak a few minutes about Vietnam -- to Japan and Korea. This is -- the trip to Vietnam is going to be the highlight of the trip. It will be the first visit of a secretary of Defense to Vietnam, certainly since the war, and the first in about, I think it's 27 years, since about 1971. But do a little bit more research on that. We're doing our own, so -- we hope by the time we get on the airplane we'll know exactly the dates.

This is a process of normalizing, so to speak, our mil-to-mil relationship with Vietnam, a relationship that's gone very slowly. It is obviously important for both countries to handle this in a very sensitive way. The most important issue to both of our countries is the fullest possible accounting. And while Secretary Cohen is there, he will try to underscore to our Vietnamese hosts how important that continuing mission is, to build a modest mil-to-mil program in the future. While in Vietnam, he will have the opportunity to meet with virtually the entire range of senior leadership in the North, and we will also travel to Ho Chi Minh City in the South for meetings with business leaders and other officials there as well.

In Hong Kong, where we'll begin, the overall message here, of course, is that at the time of reversion the United States government made clear that it was in the United States interest to see Hong Kong maintain its uniqueness. And part of that process would be to continue high level visits to Hong Kong. And so the secretary of Defense, who had a long-standing association with Hong Kong when he was senator, will travel there to get a sense of how the city and the province is doing a few years after reversion.

Q: Is this the first visit there since the reversion?

Sr. Defense Official: The first visit of a secretary of Defense. I think there have been at least a couple of cabinet visits since.

Obviously, while we're there we'll want to review the status of issues that are important to us, such as the resumption of port calls. Those were suspended for some time after the tragic bombing. And now our relationship seems to be back on track. So we'll want to get a sense of how that process works and possible next steps with Hong Kong authorities. He'll meet with the chief executive and also key figures within the administration, the Hong Kong administration government.

In Japan and Korea, countries that we have traveled to many times in the past, he'll have a diverse range of goals that he'd liked to -- objectives he'd like to accomplish. I think in Japan in particular -- want to review the status of our diplomatic engagement in Asia as a whole, talk about the situation in China. We'll also -- review what's going on in Washington in relation to the PNTR (Permanent Normal Trading Relations) and other developments in terms of cross-straits relations.

He'll also talk about developments on the Korean peninsula. I think, as you know, the United States, Japan and South Korea have been involved in very intensive consultations as part of a diplomatic process of engaging North Korea. And we'll talk about a host of critical bilateral issues, such as the strong U.S. desire to see a successful conclusion of host-nation support negotiations, which are ongoing this year and which we see as a critical and indeed vital component of Japanese support for our alliance, which we see as the most important bilateral relationship in Asia, bar none.

We'll also talk about a few issues that I think continue to cause irritation in the relationship, particularly Atsugi incinerator, next to Atsugi Air Base. This is the -- Shinkmpo -- incinerator. And Secretary Cohen will be visiting Atsugi, not only to talk to the military members there, to the Navy base, but also get a status of the discussions with the Japanese government in order to try to stop the pollution and the harmful effects to service members and families that are stationed nearby.

I think finally, when it comes to Japan, we'll want to look at the preparations for the Okinawa summit. We in the United States view that summit as extremely important. We want to do everything possible to make that summit a success. We'll also of course talk about progress in the so-called Defense Guidelines and get an update from senior members of the Japanese government about the process of implementation of the Defense Guidelines.

In Japan, as always, he'll meet with the key figures, the prime minister on down, key Diet members and others, and opinion leaders, who shape our important relationship with Japan.

In Korea, an opportunity to interact with senior officials, President KDJ; talk about his continuing efforts to engage North Korea. He will go up to the border, review troops. He'll try to make the case that any hope for diplomacy rests on a reality of a very strong deterrent vis-a-vis North Korea. And we'll talk about various trilateral efforts, between the United States, Japan and South Korea, to work closely on common security challenges in the post-Cold War world.

I can tell you that we have worked for many, many months -- years in fact -- on the trip to Vietnam. We consider it very significant. And our hope of course here is to have a visit that blends a variety of different efforts, both addresses our past, the past that has been marked by tragedy; also look at some of the issues in the present and some possibilities for the future.

I think it's important to keep in context that the United States and Vietnam have very different systems, and our goal will be to move very, very cautiously in terms of potential areas of cooperation, humanitarian issues and the like, keeping at the very center the questions and

issues associated with the fullest possible accounting.

I can tell you that the secretary's very excited about this trip. We began talking about this literally in the first weeks when he came to the Pentagon, and now, almost four years later, the trip has finally come to fruition. I think he sees it as an important mark in the U.S. government relations to Vietnam. Virtually every other agency has sort of resumed high-level dialogue and discussion with Vietnam. This is basically the last chapter in full engagement between the United States and Vietnam.

With that, I'll be happy to take any questions.

Q: With regard to Vietnam, it's my understanding that the hunt for remains, remains the national priority, both at the State Department and here. As the relationship starts to develop, however slowly, is that likely to change as the priority; while it will remain, that other areas of the relationship will perhaps move to a more normal footing?

Sr. Defense Official: Difficult for me to speak about the future, and hard to know how our relationship will progress. I can tell you that the basis on which we hope to do anything in the current context is certainly progress on the fullest accounting. I think in addition to those issues, as you, I think rightly, underscore, we'll want to talk about regional security issues. I think both the United States and Vietnam share a very common interest in a good relationship with China. We'll want to talk about a sort of complex situation in Indonesia, and basically developments in ASEAN as a whole. Vietnam is a new partner in ASEAN, and so we'll want to get a sense of how they're adapting to life in ASEAN as a whole.

Q: On Vietnam also, how does the China factor figure in in terms of Vietnam's relationship with China and China's view of the U.S. getting closer to Vietnam?

Sr. Defense Official: Well, I think both countries, both the United States and Vietnam, have tried to make very clear that -- you know, Vietnam for years has seen itself or perceived itself as some sort of pawn in global strategies of bigger powers, right? And they've made very clear that their goal is to have good relations with everyone in the region, and particularly China. And indeed, in our bilateral discussions with Vietnam, they've made very clear that one of their highest priorities is to seek good relations between the United States and China.

And I think we anticipate hearing very clearly from Vietnamese officials their desire for good Sino-U.S. relations as a whole.

Q: I'm sorry, just to follow. Is there a factor of a Vietnamese concern that the Chinese would view negatively them getting closer to the United States?

Sr. Defense Official: You know, I don't think so, for the simple fact that the United States has such an active diplomatic engagement with so many other countries in the region. I mean, we have a very close relationship with almost every country in Asia. And in fact, one of the countries that we've worked the closest with, with mixed results, admittedly, over the last several years has been China.

And so we see this as not something to be a cause of concern to anyone. In fact, if anything, the country whose sort of security dialogue has lagged behind has been U.S.-Vietnam relations. So there's nothing to be of concern for anyone here in the region. Indeed, I think most ASEAN countries are pleased to see us put -- you know, you hear often from Asians that, you know, "Vietnam is not just a war, it's a country, and you must engage it as such."

Q: Yes, sir, do you expect that there will be discussions involving the ballistic defense -- missile defense, possible treaty, possible alliance with Japan, with North Korea, with Taiwan, for that matter? And then I have a brief follow-up for you.

Sr. Defense Official: Okay. Well, this will come as a shock to no one, but we actually already have an alliance with Japan. And I don't think -- I don't think we will -- I know, I just -- I don't think there is much prospect for a major agreement in NMD- or TMD- related issues, because I think, as you recall, last fall the United States and Japan signed an agreement to begin formal cooperation on TMD-related issues. And I think if anything, we will want to -- the secretary will want to review the status of those efforts in his meetings with Japanese counterparts.

Most of those discussions are about TMD. But I think it's also fair to say that Japan is increasingly asking questions about how the discussions are going with Russia as a whole and what American objectives are in relation to national missile defense. And as an ally, that's a very -- that an appropriate question and we'll do our best to answer this.

Q: And if I could, just briefly --

Sr. Defense Official: Sure.

Q: -- do you think -- do you feel yourself, as an expert in this matter, that the PRC is truly -- the government of China is truly angry at Taiwan, or is this an election ploy, or do you know?

Sr. Defense Official: Well, first of all, I'd take issue with the first part -- the suggestion that I'm expert on this. I'm probably an observer.

I think that -- I was on the so-called Talbott mission to China -- I think, as many of our officials have underscored, I think the publication of the White Paper came at an unusually bad time, and was provocative and undermined confidence as a whole.

I can't begin to read the minds of the senior Chinese leadership. I can only tell you that the most important thing in this context is for the United States to respond to any challenge with the firmest possible commitment to preserve peace and stability and I think that's exactly what we've done. I think you saw, of course, Mr. Slocombe -- we call him "Mr. Incalculable" now -- (laughter) -- Mr. Slocombe's statement and I think that speaks very clearly for our desire to maintain peace and stability.

And I just want to underscore that, you know we have had some success in this very complex dynamic between Taiwan and China over the last 25 years. They are in, I think, no small part, the most successful 25 years in the history of China and Taiwan, and we'd like to see that process continued in the future.

Q: And does the secretary plan on making a speech at all when he's in Hong Kong? And perhaps using Chinese soil as a kind of a bully pulpit to warn the Chinese and the Taiwanese to settle this thing peacefully?

Sr. Defense Official: Well, I mean, the secretary has been very clear and very outspoken about our desire to maintain peace and stability. And, you know, he wouldn't, I think, use that exact language, "to settle peacefully." I think what he would say was, you know, "Look, we as the United States have very strong interests in the preservation of peace and stability." He'll have a variety of opportunities basically in every stop -- Hong Kong, in Vietnam, in Korea and Japan -- to address both the public and specialist groups, and we're working with Ken's office to make

sure that you all have the opportunity to participate in all those sessions.

To be honest, I think in Hong Kong, as much as anything, he wants to be listening as much as talking. I think you all have focused on the fact that Hong Kong has gone through a very profound transformation; first, the reversion back to the PRC, to be hit almost immediately after by one of the most significant economic slumps in the region in many, many years.

And so I think one of the things -- as a senator, he's always been interested in the complex relationship between economics and security, understanding that, you know, you really can't have security unless you've got sort of robust economics, and vice versa. Okay. So without security, it's hard to imagine sort of economic growth.

But I think he's going to meet with a lot of the business leaders in Hong Kong, to get a sense of, you know, what's the attitude, what's sort of the sense of Hong Kong, now coming up on three years since reversion.

Yeah?

Q: It's the feeling of a lot of China-watchers that the situation -- the tensions between China and Taiwan are going to -- may only grow worse because China has a sense -- Chinese leaders have a sense that the window of opportunity for peaceful reunification of Taiwan is closing on them very rapidly, given the democratization that's going on there and kind of the generational change. Is that your judgment, too? Is it the judgment of the department that the Chinese leadership does sense that it's a question of -- that time may be running out for them to achieve what some people say is a matter of legitimacy for the future of the Chinese Communist Party?

Sr. Defense Official: Yeah, I've heard that analysis, and I've certainly seen reports to that effect. Again, I think one of the great games of Asia is trying to figure out whose side time is on, right? And I think you'll notice, over the last couple of years, you'll see a variety of assessments, you know, leaning one side to the other. And I think what's important for a country like the United States to do is try not to get too drawn into these questions of, you know, whether to be worried about the short-term, and rather to take fairly firm view about process issues.

And so, you know, fundamentally, I think the U.S. policy is and should be about not outcomes, right, because ultimately that's for the people of the PRC and Taiwan to determine for themselves. Our primary objective is to provide a peaceful context for any discussions to take place. And we believe, fundamentally, that that context should involve a clear understanding that maintaining peace and stability is at the heart of real progress.

Yeah?

Q: On host nation support with Japan, why do you make such a big issue out of Japan's planned reduction of the host nation support, when it's just a part of the overall budget reductions to deal with economic difficulties?

Sr. Defense Official: Well, first of all, I'm not sure I made a big deal about the issue the way you describe it. First of all, no senior Japanese official has come to the United States government and indicated that there will be an adjustment in host nation support. And what we try to always begin when we discuss these matters is to underscore how grateful the United States is for this support. However, we also believe it's not a gift, it's not a sympathy for the United States. It is, in fact, deeply and profoundly in the interests of Japan to maintain a healthy and smooth functioning alliance between the United States and Japan.

Clearly, it is up to the United States to demonstrate that we understand that it's important to be efficient and to show, at a time of significant strain in Japan, that we can be very sensitive to keeping costs down. But at the same time, the commitment of the government of Japan to strong host nation is seen not only in the U.S. Congress and in the U.S. administration, but in the region as a whole as a very clear reminder that Japan and the United States stand together in a very dynamic and changing Asia.

Q: Aren't you concerned with a backlash of the public opinion if you just keep on applying pressure like you are right now?

Sr. Defense Official: Well, can I suggest, our Japanese friends always like it if we talk directly and have good discussions between the United States and Japan. There are numerous issues on which Japan has come to the United States and asking for support, changes in our attitudes or the way we do business, and we think that's an appropriate use of the alliance. When Japan has issues, they come to us and we try to address them as best we can. Sometimes they do it in public, sometimes they do it in private.

Stating what we believe is in our interests and in the interests of the alliance should not be conceived or perceived as "pressure." If I come out and say that this is something that we think is important, the alliance has got to be strong enough to understand that that's a statement of our deep and profound views. When our Japanese friends come back with us with very specific issues associated with host nation support, we, of course, are ready to sit down.

And I tried to indicate that we are sensitive to the situation that Japan is in. But as a whole, we're very grateful, and we think it's important. I am completely committed, as is the government, to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion in which both sides feel good about this negotiation. So it's not my intention to put pressure on the government of Japan, it's my intention to state clearly how much we appreciate and how important it is.

I think -- I can take a couple more. Let me just -- I'm sorry. Yeah.

Q: May I ask a question? The mayor of Tokyo said in an interview that Japan let a U.S. carrier refuel during the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. Is this true, and does this mean that Japan and the U.S. don't share the same view or policy toward Taiwan Strait?

Sr. Defense Official: I do not know the answer to that specific operational question. I think at a strategic the United States and Japan share a very strong interest in the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits. And the United States and Japan try to consult on issues associated with the maintenance of that peace.

Yeah.

Q: In Hong Kong, does the secretary plan to try and meet with the leaders of the PLA garrison or the new liaison office there? And does he plan to take up the allegations in the Cox report about a transshipment of military technology through Hong Kong into China?

Sr. Defense Official: I don't think the secretary will have any formal meetings with the garrison. But it's possible that members of his delegation will have some interaction with them as a whole. We'll be primarily meeting with Hong Kong representatives.

And then, on the second question, I think we've had discussions with Hong Kong officials about how critically important it is for Hong Kong to maintain the highest possible standards when it

comes to one of the most dynamic borders and transshipment areas in the world. And I think the secretary in his meetings with senior Hong Kong officials will underscore our desire to maintain those.

Yes.

Q: Thank you. Coming out of a hearing last week Secretary Cohen was asked what type of -- or, how much progress might they look for on Futenma issues at the G-8 summit.

Sr. Defense Official: Yes.

Q: His response was, "Well, I'm sure that's something that will come that we'll talk about, but only in the context" -- or not "only" but in the context of very constructive discussions. Could you elaborate a little bit? What does he mean by "constructive discussions", and is he ruling out conversations on specific issues?

Sr. Defense Official: So that means I can't come back with, "Well, I am sure we'll talk about that when we go." (Laughter.) Do you think that -- do you think you need more than that?

Q: Yeah, a little bit more than that.

Sr. Defense Official: Look, I think everyone understands that the Okinawa Summit is a very important event, it's a very delicate event. And we acknowledge that there are very critical discussions going on between Tokyo and Okinawa about Futenma relocation. We have tried to be clear about our principles. And we have tried to make clear about -- you know, we'd like to see progress on that.

We don't have a timetable on that. But I will tell you that we have not had a meeting with Japanese officials in the last three years in which we haven't discussed this in great detail. So we will be discussing it. We would like to see progress. But we are also very sensitive to the timing and our desire to have a very, very productive summit on Okinawa.

Q: Well, just a really --

Sr. Defense Official: Sure.

Q: -- quick follow-up. The issue of -- (inaudible) -- Inamine's idea or proposal of having a time limit, is that something that you will be discussing again, or is that a nonissue?

Sr. Defense Official: I would imagine it would be an issue that we will go over again. Yeah. I think it has come up in a variety of meetings; I think it will come up this time again.

Q: Well, is there anything new on that issue?

Sr. Defense Official: I think it will -- I think if I recited the talking points, you'd recognize them. Okay? Thanks.

Q: Dr. Campbell's report is next month. The U.S. and Taiwan will have its annual meeting on arms sales. There have been several stories to the effect that Taiwan has requested the Aegis destroyers. The administration has been conducting an interagency deliberation process about the request.

So my question to you, sir: Is the administration pretty close to a decision on what to approve

and what not to approve?

Sr. Defense Official: You know, one of the great things about this job is that they teach you about four mantras that you can use at almost any time, and this is one of those times.

(Laughter.) And so -- I mean, do you want me to go through the points that I -- I mean, you know them probably better than I do. Actually, yours sounded much better, like the good answer, so I should probably ask you the question now. (Laughter.)

Look, I would just say obviously, you know, there are very few issues that are more sensitive within the U.S. government than our responsibility under the law to maintain a robust defensive capability in Taiwan. And we acknowledge that, without it, I think Taiwan does not feel confident or secure to engage in productive discussions across the Taiwan Straits.

The substance of those discussions, both internally and with Taiwan, we have sought to keep relatively private.

And we are in the midst of discussions internally right now, and I think it would be imprudent for me to say anything more than that at this juncture.

Yeah?

Q: Is there much prospect of progress on the accounting issue in Vietnam? Is there something immediate, or is this longer-term discussions?

Sr. Defense Official: You're going to be on the trip with us. We going to have extensive briefings on the accounting logarithms and procedures associated with that. And rather than stray into a world in which the precision is absolutely required, what I will do is promise on the first leg of the trip to have one of our best guys sit down and go through exactly, you know, the different accounts and what we might anticipate.

I will say -- and I forgot to mention this -- we will be going to a site in Vietnam, and all the press is invited, where there has been a dig going on for the last several months in an attempt to locate both wreckage and remains from the crash of an aircraft in the late 1960s.

Okay, I can take one last one.

Q: Given China's sensibilities about its periphery, and given the limits that you now have, or the limited mil-to-mil relationship we have with Vietnam, what do you think we could actually go to in that relationship should everything work out and you get the basis of an accounting?

Sr. Defense Official: It's a good question. Let me just say -- let me give you an example. In the late 1980s, early 1990s, we had an extremely robust anti-mining program with Cambodia. And I think as you know, that some of this territory is the most heavily mined area in the world, sometimes with as many 10 mines per person in certain areas. And our goal would be, if at all possible, to establish a modest, perhaps even a pilot program between the United States and Vietnam, in which we could, you know, assist them in demining.

There are also some -- the Vietnamese, interestingly enough, have made great progress in treating certain tropical diseases, and you can imagine sort of a humanitarian exchange on medical issues in the future. They also suffer from tremendous flooding and other kinds of natural disasters. You can imagine an exchange on natural disasters and sort of the role of civil engineers. That's just to give you a flavor. I mean, I don't think -- you know, we're not going to be talking about combat arms or other direct military issues, but you could imagine a situation



where they are more actively participating in Asia-Pacific efforts in Hawaii, with Admiral Blair, some multilateral exercises.

But again, much of the military-to-military is a reflection of a larger political environment in Vietnam. And, you know, we have to be, you know, sensitive to the fact that the United States and Vietnam have very different systems, very different systems.

Q: Just a real quick follow-up. Beyond the obvious limitations on the military-to-military relationship, how much does an expansion of that relationship depend on a resolution of the economic and the diplomatic problems that exist between the two?

Sr. Defense Official: Yeah. Again, that's another very good question.

I would just say that as a general, philosophical matter -- this is my own view -- that it is always imprudent to take a mil-to-mil relationship out of the larger context of the relationship. If the mil-to-mil relationship is seen to lead a relationship, right, that's generally a recipe for problems. The mil-to-mil has to be part of sort of the broad engagement -- economic, political, cultural, you know, philosophical. If anything lags slightly behind because of -- those issues are sensitive, and so of course you look at a mil-to-mil engagement in a larger context. And I think that's just prudent, and it makes good sense.

Okay.

Q: Thank you.

Sr. Defense Official: Thanks, you guys.

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