

Cohen to Visit Vietnam, Asian Allies

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WASHINGTON, March 8, 2000 -- Ever since Defense Secretary William S. Cohen took office nearly four years ago, he's been waiting for the day he'd visit Vietnam. That day has finally arrived.

Cohen set out March 8 on a 10-day trip to Asia that includes two stops in Vietnam and others in Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea. His visit to Vietnam will be the first by a U.S. defense secretary since the war that claimed more than 58,000 American service members' lives.

The situation between Taiwan and China will almost surely be a topic of conversation throughout the trip, a senior U.S. defense official said. "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," the official said. "And we acknowledge that, without it, Taiwan does not feel confident or secure to engage in productive discussions across the Taiwan Straits."

Since other U.S. government agencies have already restored high-level dialogue with Vietnam, he said, Cohen's visit represents the last chapter in full engagement between the United States and Vietnam. U.S. military officials have worked slowly and steadily to restore ties with Vietnam, he explained, but efforts have been hindered by the lack of a full accounting of the Americans lost in the war.

"It is obviously important for both countries to handle this in a very sensitive way," the official told Pentagon reporters. "The most important issue to both of our countries is the fullest possible accounting."

During meetings with Vietnamese officials in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Cohen intends to underscore to his hosts how important the accounting is to building a military-to-military program, he said. He is slated to visit a site where officials are attempting to locate wreckage and remains from the crash* of a U.S. aircraft in the late 1960s.

In Hong Kong, Cohen plans to see how well the province has maintained its uniqueness since its reversion to Chinese control. The official noted Hong Kong has gone through profound changes -- first, the People's Republic of China took control, and second, its rocketing economy sputtered.

Cohen, long interested in the complex relationship between economics and security, plans to meet with many Hong Kong business leaders, the official said. He also will confer with local government officials to review issues important to the United States, particularly the resumption of port calls suspended after U.S. planes accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, last year during Operation Allied Force.

In Japan, Cohen will emphasize the U.S. desire for successful host-nation support negotiations. U.S. officials underscore America's gratitude for Japan's support of U.S. forces stationed there, but at the same time, they say it is in Japan's best interest to maintain a healthy and smooth-functioning alliance with the United States.

Cohen also will meet with U.S. military officials in Japan to discuss efforts to stop pollution from an incinerator near Naval Air Facility Atsugi that is affecting service members and their families. Cohen's agenda will also include discussion of the U.S.- Japan defense guidelines and the upcoming Okinawa summit that will include talks on the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

The secretary is scheduled to confer with senior South Korean officials on continuing efforts to engage North Korea and on various trilateral efforts involving the United States, Japan and South Korea. While

visiting U.S. troops at the border between the North and South, the official said, Cohen is expected to stress that any hope for diplomacy rests on a reality of a very strong deterrent.