

Cohen: U.S.-Vietnamese Ties Enhance Regional Security

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American Forces Press Service

HANOI, Vietnam, March 14, 2000 -- "The United States has resolved to move forward with Vietnam in a manner that serves our mutual interests in regional stability, security and prosperity," Defense Secretary William S. Cohen said here March 14.

Speaking to about 28 staff and faculty members at the Vietnamese defense academy, Cohen expressed U.S. intentions to restore military-to-military ties. "In cautious, but certain steps, our two nations can work together where common purpose allows to create a better future for both of our peoples," he told the Vietnamese officers.

During a two-day visit to Hanoi, Cohen met with Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong and with the defense and foreign affairs ministers. He also visited an air base, where he toured an aviation museum.

"The United States believes that the security of both our nations can be enhanced by working together," Cohen concluded. "Together, and in partnership with the other nations of this region, we can write a new history of peace and prosperity."

Cohen said three principles will guide U.S. policy in developing its security relationship with Vietnam:

- o Security ties will be developed in tandem with overall diplomatic and trade relations.
- o Military relations will remain transparent so that no nation misunderstands the other's intentions.
- o Accounting for Americans still missing in action will remain the highest priority.

Joint recovery efforts have already enhanced cooperation and led to broader contacts between U.S. and Vietnamese armed forces, Cohen said. "By helping the families of the missing, we have helped to establish our working ties."

Vietnamese officials told Cohen they are also looking to the future. They want to solve issues through peaceful means with respect to international law and practice, according to Maj. Gen. Nguyen The Tri, superintendent of the academy.

"The security of every nation nowadays is inseparable from the security of the region," he said through an interpreter. "Therefore, Vietnam has been actively contributing to preserving peace and stability in Southeast Asia."

Cohen noted that the United States is pleased to see Vietnam participate in the Asia Pacific Center in Hawaii and in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Regional forum. "Our mutual prosperity depends on a Pacific region in which regional issues are resolved, not by confrontation, but by cooperation," he said.

Recognizing the Pacific region's strategic significance, the United States will remain forward deployed and actively engaged across Asia, Cohen declared. This also means maintaining strong relationships with regional allies and friends. U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea, for example, remain critical to security in the region.

The United States is also working to build upon a 1994 agreed framework with North Korea to stop all nuclear activities and long-range missile programs. "If North Korea verifiably gives up its missile programs," Cohen said, "it will lead to a normalized relationship with the United States, to the benefit of

the entire region."

The U.S.-Australia alliance helps ensure the U.S. presence is flexible and able to adapt to such evolving challenges as the recent mission to East Timor, he said. U.S. military ties with the Philippines are improving with combined exercises training and ship visits. Relations with Thailand are an essential part of the U.S. strategy for confronting drug trafficking and other transitional threats, he said.

China, Cohen said, represents America's greatest challenge and opportunity. "There is simply no substitute for constructive, clear-headed American engagement with China," he said.

"We cannot fully address the great challenges in Asia -- strengthening the region's economic recovery, maintaining a peaceful, stable, nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, or reduce recent tensions across the Taiwan Strait without the largest Asian nation," Cohen said. China will play a larger role internationally; the questions are when and what that role will be, he said.

U.S. officials encourage China to join the United States and its regional allies and friends, who believe they serve their common interests best by forging a stable environment promoting mutual security and prosperity, Cohen concluded.