

Chinese Military Students, Family Member Query Cohen

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BEIJING, July 14, 2000 -- U.S. and Chinese service members may one day find themselves working side by side in peacekeeping missions, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen told students July 13 at the People's Liberation Army National Defense University here.

Cohen addressed about 200 Chinese service members and guests. When he finished his formal remarks, three Chinese officers and an army general's wife eagerly pitched him questions.

The first officer asked for "sure initiatives for enhancing bilateral military ties." The secretary noted the environmental protection agreement China and the United States had signed the previous day. He also pointed out plans for reciprocal naval ship visits and reciprocal visits by senior defense officials.

Cohen said Gen. Chi Haotian, China's national defense minister, had agreed to send some of the army's top officers to the Asia Pacific Security Center in Honolulu for an exchange of ideals, interests, policies and strategies. That was "a welcome step forward," the secretary remarked.

He also said he had recommended that the U.S. and Chinese militaries explore ways to cooperate on humanitarian disasters -- "perhaps talking about ways in which we might one day share in peacekeeping missions."

"We are building a foundation for greater and greater cooperation," Cohen told the audience. "I would hope we would find ways in which China could be more open and transparent as far as its military strategies and doctrines, so we can talk about this in an open dialogue. That would do a great deal to build more mutual confidence for the future."

A second student then asked Cohen for an evaluation of policy development in Russia under its new president -- would relations with the West go toward more cooperation or more confrontation?

Cohen replied the answer's not clear. Russian President Vladimir Putin, he said, "brings great new vigor to the position.

"It's unclear exactly how his policies will unfold and materialize. On the one hand, he looks toward the West for economic support and, at the same time, seems to be trying to strengthen Russia itself internally," Cohen said.

"The question remains whether he will be reaching out to be much more expansive and embrace the international community, or turn inward to deal with his domestic difficulties." Cohen told the student Putin is scheduled to visit Beijing soon. "I hope you will have a chance to ask that question."

A third student asked why the United States is pursuing a national missile defense system considering the current positive relations between North and South Korea.

"It is difficult for us to accept the notion that North Korea continues to pose missile threats to the West," the NDU student said. In light of the failed fifth U.S. missile interceptor test July 8 and the project's steep cost, he said, does the United States still consider an NMD

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system viable and necessary?

Despite the recent summit between North and South, Cohen said, North Korea still maintains "one of the largest armies in the world along the Demilitarized Zone, not more than 26 miles from downtown Seoul. Plus, he said, North Korea continues to develop its missile program.

Further, he said, the U.S. national missile system under development is intended to defend against threats not only from North Korea, but several other countries that have or are developing long-range missile capability.

Regarding NMD technology, Cohen agreed it's complicated and expensive and said he has about a month to review all the technical aspects of the program and decide whether to recommend to the president that the United States go ahead with deployment.

The final question of the morning session unexpectedly came from the general's wife, who took exception to remarks Cohen had made about Chinese news media. In his address, the secretary said the Chinese media often untruthfully portray the United States as hegemonic -- bent on world domination. He said such mischaracterization provokes negative reactions in the United States.

"We have an absolute obligation to deal with you directly, honestly, and candidly," he said. "That is precisely why I want to come to you today, to discuss this in this forum, so that we could raise the issues without any filters of either hyperbole, criticism, or negativity that too often characterizes the nature of the U.S. position and policies."

The general's wife told Cohen U.S. news media do the same thing to China. "I often read publications about China's human rights and now, government measures opposing Falun Gong and others," she said. Falun Gong is a religious group that claims 100 million followers in China.

Cohen replied the United States has a free media and acknowledged some mischaracterize China. He then turned and indicated the U.S.-based journalists in the audience who had accompanied him.

"We hope they will take every opportunity to talk to you to see what is taking place in Beijing, Shanghai and throughout China, so they can communicate what they have seen of the remarkable transformation that has occurred here since the last two decades when I first came (to China)," he said.

Open communication and visits such as his will help build understanding and help remove mischaracterizations that "too often have caused tension between our two countries," Cohen said.

The woman also expressed her hope that the United States would make "positive contributions" to the reunification process and "not provide concrete military technological assistance to Taiwan."

The United States is looking for ways to help bring about a peaceful reunification between Taiwan and China, Cohen said, but such an undertaking would require "flexibility on both sides."

"We are determined that it not be achieved through military action, but through dialogue and through peaceful diplomacy," he said. "We will contribute everything we can to help achieve that goal."