

ACTIONS BY CHINA, NORTH KOREA FOCUS ATTENTION ON EAST ASIAN MISSILE DEFENSES

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The United States Asia Pacific Council (USAPC) at East-West Center Washington recently conducted a wide-ranging interview with Admiral Dennis C. Blair who served as U.S. Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) from 1999 to 2002. The following is a transcript of that interview.

USAPC: On January 11, the Chinese military used a ground-based ballistic missile to destroy one of its aging satellites. Washington and other governments expressed concern that China's test violated a spirit of cooperation concerning use of space. Was the test cause for alarm? Did it have strategic significance?

Blair: Let me answer first from the military point of view. The Chinese have observed closely how Western nations, particularly the United States, have developed capabilities to use space. They have come to realize that there are real advantages to using satellites in modern warfare. China's military modernization program has been aimed at making the leap from relatively backward ground-based forces to very modern forces using the latest technology. Thus, the Chinese now are considering how to use outer space for their own military purposes. They also are working on the means to deny the use of space to others.

In recent years, the Chinese have launched various satellites -- reconnaissance satellites, communications satellites, and geo-location satellites. The ASAT [anti-satellite] missile test demonstrated that the Chinese also are developing capabilities to knock satellites out of action. However, as the Chinese enter this area of warfare, they will find -- what those countries that have been in space for quite a while have found -- that this capability provides both advantages and vulnerabilities.

The United States, of course, has huge advantages in both civilian and military uses of space. We have been working at this a long time. There certainly is no cause to think that the China's ASAT test represents some entirely new, menacing development that will completely upset military balances. The test is best viewed as part of China's overall modernization of its armed forces.

The Chinese will find that a nation has to work very hard to protect its space assets from its adversaries. It needs to develop the capability to protect its own satellites as well as to degrade its adversaries' space assets. The Chinese effectively are entering into competition with the United States -- and they are quite far behind. All of this to say, from a military point of view I am not as concerned about the strategic implications of China's ASAT test as some observers.

USAPC: Has the ASAT test set back U.S. efforts to realize greater transparency in Chinese military planning? Beijing evidently gave Washington very short notice about the test.

Blair: The Chinese have been weak for so long that they have adopted the traditional tactic of the weak -- hide what you are doing so you don't expose weakness and others may think you are stronger than you are. Now that China is the second- or third-largest military power in Asia, depending on how you measure military power, the leadership must realize that their nation is not weak anymore. It is not to China's advantage to hide its capabilities. In fact, the Chinese are scaring people by hiding their capabilities. China's neighbors and some in the United States suspect that it has aggressive, very powerful military designs.

If the Chinese are going to live up to their rhetoric -- which depicts their military modernization as part of a "peaceful rise" that does not threaten the interests of others -- then they simply must become more open. The Chinese must be willing to show their neighbors and the United States that their military program makes sense from a point of view of defending the nation's interests. They must be willing to make clear that their military program it is not designed to give China a capability for aggression toward its neighbors.

What we observed in China's handling of the ASAT test was a lot of learned, old behavior. The Chinese have been pretty secretive about their space program in general. So they must mature. But if they continue to be secretive about their military programs, then the United States and other countries have a right to be suspicious and to take measures aimed at offsetting what they think China might be doing.

USAPC: What do you think of the charge that the Chinese used the ASAT test as a way of forcing the United States into negotiations aimed governing the use of space for military purposes?

Blair: Given the choice between a clever, well-coordinated plan on the one hand, and bureaucratic bumbling on the other, I think the latter offers a better explanation for China's decision to conduct the ASAT test. I would conjecture that Chinese engineers had been working on an anti-satellite capability, it was time to conduct a test, so they tested the missile. The missile test was driven by program imperatives, rather than by some clever political strategy.

Chinese government officials have been trying to score propaganda points by officially opposing the weaponization of space at the same time that all evidence points to their strong efforts to develop both offensive and defensive military uses of space. So I think it more likely that lack of bureaucratic coordination was behind the test rather than some very careful signal China was trying to send the United States.

The Chinese authorities need to make decisions to match their military actions to their diplomatic words. If China indeed poses no threat to the interests of others, then Chinese military programs need to be governed by that principle, and they need to be open to outside observers

USAPC: What do you see happening region-wide in ballistic missile defense?

Blair: Things are very dynamic. In terms of military developments in Asia, it has been in the area of missiles and missile defenses that we have seen the most activity in recent years. In Northeast Asia, for example, China is developing many more missile systems of all types of mobility and ranges. North Korea has been putting considerable effort into its missile development program. You will recall the "fireworks display" last July 4 when Pyongyang tested a long-range ballistic missile and several shorter range missiles.

Meanwhile, the United States has been putting tremendous effort and resources into developing a missile system for Asia. Recently, we successfully tested a very capable ground-based missile defense system called THAAD, or Theater High Altitude Air Defense, by intercepting a challenging test target over the Pacific. Japan, too, has been cooperating more with the United States on missile defense, especially on the development of the Standard sea-based missile, and in deploying tracking radars aimed at North Korea.

USAPC: North Korea appears determined to show off its missile prowess, but does this pose an actual military threat to South Korea or Japan?

Blair: North Korea certainly could do damage to South Korea, Japan, and China with its short- and medium-range missiles. But if you look at the use of bombing in warfare through the years -- whether it be the German V-1s and V-2s in World War II or the Iraqi Scuds that were fired at Saudi Arabia and Israel during the Persian Gulf War -- history has shown that missile attacks create a certain psychological terror in the early stages, but then people in the targeted countries learn to endure them. So North Korea's missile threat certainly has a psychological effect on Japan, but less so on South Korea because the South Koreans have lived with the artillery threat from North Korea for generations what with Seoul being within 20 miles of the DMZ (de-militarized zone).

In addition, from a military point of view, missiles do not cause much serious military damage because defenses can be erected against them in the form of movement and concealment, thicker concrete, and sandbags. For fixed sites, I think North Korea's missile program has been primarily for use as weapons of terror or bargaining chips. The missiles themselves would not have a serious military effect.

There is a tremendous difference, however, if there is a nuclear warhead on one of the missiles. The North Koreans must consider the retaliatory capability of the United States in any calculation involving deployment of a nuclear weapon. In fact, we know from North Korean defectors that North Korean officials are aware that if they would be rash or stupid enough to fire a nuclear weapon at Japan, South Korea, U.S. forces, or the United States, they would be subject to such terrible retaliation that Kim Jong-Il's regime and a large part of North Korea would be wiped off the map.

So I don't think North Korea's nuclear test in October 2006 fundamentally has changed the military facts on the ground. Nonetheless, the nuclear test represents the kind of North Korean brinkmanship that causes problems if you are trying to achieve a sensible, peaceful solution that would make the lives of people better in that part of the world. That is what is so troubling about the Kim regime. It has no objectives other than its own survival. It starves and kills many of its own people. It terrorizes and tries to get advantages from its neighbors.

USAPC: Earlier you mentioned that the United States and Japan have been cooperating in missile defense. Please bring us up to date.

Blair: Typically, Japan examines the U.S. missile defense program and then decides to join specific research and development. Two years ago, for example, Japan participated in a small program relating to warheads on one of the sea-based systems. Since then, the Japanese have expanded the extent of their participation across the board, both in terms of financial resources and joint research on both ground-based and sea-based missile defenses. This amounts to more than a 10-fold increase in the resources Japan is contributing to the joint missile defense program. Japan is heavily engaged in joint projects with the United States on the kinds of defensive systems that would defend it against a potential North Korean missile strike.

Specifically, Japan has purchased Patriot missiles, the original series used in the Persian Gulf War, which were moderately successful. Currently, there is a third generation Patriot, or PAC-3 series, which is far more effective in killing Scuds than the predecessor generations. I believe Japan has purchased some of those as well.

In addition, there are successor sea-based systems, such as the so-called Standard Missile 3 program, which goes on the Aegis ships that are part of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force. Japan also is cooperating on deployment of the THAAD system.

The THAAD is a very effective ground-based system. In fact, at the time of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests last year, the THAAD detection radar, which operates in the X frequency band, was deployed to northern Japan. It enables the United States and Japan to keep closer watch on North Korea and provide better targeting information for the Patriot missiles and for the sea-based missiles that could shoot down any North Korean missiles bound for Japan. Finally, the U.S. cruisers and destroyers stationed in Japan further bolster its defenses.

USAPC: So that while North Korea's short- and medium-range missiles may cause psychological terror, at the end of the day, it sounds like Japan could defend itself very well from a possible strike.

Blair: Yes. Once these systems mature and are fielded in large numbers, Japan will have a defensive system capable of handling a great number of missiles that North Korea could shoot. Even if one or two North Korean missiles get through defensive system, the Japanese people would know that most of the missiles are being intercepted and they are not defenseless. That is very important. North Korea's missiles then become less of a psychological as well as less of an actual threat to the Japanese.

The strength of Japan's anti-missile defense capability also should make the North Korean leadership realize that its use of military brinkmanship is not a winner in the long term. With their weak industrial base, the North Koreans cannot come anywhere near matching the military capabilities of their neighbors.

USAPC: How about China's missile program? Is it approaching a stage where it could affect deterrence with respect to Taiwan?

Blair: No, I don't think China's missile program has reached the stage where it undermines deterrence with respect to Taiwan. According to recent figures, China has 800 missiles that could reach Taiwan. But in comparison, Hezbollah fired about 14,000 rockets into Israel, and Israel didn't buckle. Admittedly, rockets are much smaller than missiles. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that a missile is still a very expensive way of delivering a warhead onto a country.

Even advanced countries, like the United States, that have bombers capable of delivering huge loads of warheads have found that they have limited ability to bomb a country into submission. We learned that with the U.S. air campaigns against Serbian military and government targets in the 1990s when we dropped thousands of warheads.

China's missile program has not yet reached the point where it could have a decisive political effect on Taiwan. As we discussed earlier, these missiles certainly can cause terror. In fact, Taiwan has been expanding its own missile defense capabilities. Like Japan, it has purchased PAC-3s from the United States. Taiwan just has completed a large, heavily fortified radar system, which would provide a much clearer picture of missiles fired at it. In addition, the Taiwanese are hardening and dispersing their forces so that they will not be disarmed by a potential missile attack. So Taiwan is not standing still.

China certainly is increasing its ability to cause damage to Taiwan. But in terms of being able to being able to disarm Taiwan with a missile strike and then walk in and take over the country, China is no where close to that capability.

USAPC: Have U.S. military commitments in the Middle East and Afghanistan weakened U.S. deterrent capabilities in Asia?

Blair: No. The United States draws primarily on maritime and air power to support its interests in Asia. In the Middle East and Afghanistan, we have committed primarily ground power. The U.S. air and naval forces deployed in the Pacific are strong enough to provide effective deterrence. In fact, the deployment patterns of our forces have changed quite a bit since I was CINCPAC [Commander in Chief Pacific] about five years ago.

Back then, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force were bearing the brunt of our deployments to the Middle East. We had two operations called Southern Watch and Northern Watch, which patrolled no-fly zones over southern

and northern Iraq. We used to send many of our aircraft carriers and quite a few U.S. Air Force aircraft into the Middle East to fulfill that mission. That is where they were occupied most of the time. Now, they're not. Pacific naval and air forces spend most of their time in the Pacific. There currently is a much lower level of Navy and Air Force deployment to the Middle East.

USAPC: You recently attributed the relative stability of the Asia Pacific region to the fact that underlying military relationships among regional actors are stable. Please elaborate.

Blair: The stability can be attributed to a combination of relationship-building, geography, and military forces on the ground. China is at the center of the East Asia ground balances. It has pursued methodically settlement of border disputes with its neighbors. The only dispute it has yet to resolve is with India over the area it captured in 1962. Meanwhile, China has modernized its forces. But nearly all of China's neighbors – India, Russia, North Korea – possess nuclear weapons or nuclear capabilities. So the nuclear capabilities of these nations effectively hold in check ground warfare. That creates stability.

In terms of maritime power, America's naval superiority serves to protect Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines. Although China is developing its naval forces, it still has a long way to go to compete with the United States, especially if you add in the maritime capabilities of Japan. This also creates a stable military balance.

Military-to-military relations among the nations of Asia countries further promote stability. Joint peacekeeping exercises and search-and-rescue exercises are on the rise. All of these elements create a fairly solid situation in Asia that will not change quickly. We're not on a hair-trigger there.

USAPC: The Malacca Strait serves as an economic lifeline for many Asia Pacific nations. What are the littoral states [Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia] doing to safeguard transit through the strait, particularly in recent years as threats from piracy and terrorism have increased substantially? To what extent do the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard work with these nations to help secure the strait?

Blair: The vast area from the southern Philippines – the Sulu Sea - to the Burma coast of the Malay Peninsula in many cases is completely ungoverned. Refugees flow back and forth. For example, there are huge numbers of Filipinos and Indonesians who live in Malaysia undocumented and have been doing so for generations. Of course, a huge portion of the world's oil flows through the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Singapore. This is an area of islands, shallow seas, and international waterways with very uneven enforcement of national rule and boundaries.

The fundamental responsibility for law and governance of this area goes to the host countries – Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia. The trouble is capacity, particularly for Indonesia and the Philippines. Their economic problems prevent them from maintaining navies and coast guards to patrol the huge areas for which they are responsible. So the other Asian nations, including the United States, try to help them because it is in everyone's interests to minimize disruptions through these crucial sea lanes and to ensure that the seas are used for legal and peaceful purposes.

USAPC: How do the Southeast Asian navies and coast guards coordinate their activities and deal with possible overlapping jurisdictions?

Blair: Different countries are organized differently. For instance, in Indonesia, there is not a separate coast guard. The navy carries out what in other countries might be regarded as a coast guard mission. The Philippines also uses its navy for coast guard-like missions. Singapore, however, has a maritime police, which works closely with its coast guard.

Of course, anytime you have different organizational approaches, there is a possibility for breakdowns. That being said, the nations in the vicinity of the Malacca Strait and Singapore Strait operate fairly well together to patrol these waterways.

Even before 9/11 and the upsurge in terrorism, these nations cooperated closely in combating piracy and smuggling and addressing immigration issues. But 9/11 really boosted cooperation, particularly among the littoral states. There are certain concerns about sovereignty; countries naturally do not want other navies to enter their territorial waters without permission. But if approached in the right way under properly crafted agreements, I believe that Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia would welcome maritime security assistance. Indonesia, itself, has 17,000 islands, which stretch over a distance the equivalent of New York to San Francisco. For a country with a small gross domestic product, that is a lot of area to protect.

The aim is not to catch every drug smuggler or illegal reef fisherman. But countries that would be hurt by disruptions in the Southeast Asian sea lanes, such as Japan, China, and India, want to help protect the straits from pirates and terrorists, regulate immigration flows, and help protect the important environmental resources in these areas. I think the littoral states would welcome help would if it is offered in a constructive way.

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