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Rumsfeld visits Vietnam to boost military ties

Sun Jun 4, 2006 6:19 AM ET

By Paul Eckert, Asia Correspondent

HANOI (Reuters) - Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Vietnam on Sunday for a visit aimed at boosting security ties with a former foe which now shares American wariness about China's rising military might.

Rumsfeld's Pentagon has built close ties to Asian countries ranging from Vietnam to Mongolia and modernized its alliances with Japan and South Korea to reflect post-Cold War demands for smaller, nimbler forces to cope with regional contingencies.

U.S. military ties with Hanoi, 31 years after the end of the Vietnam war and 11 years after the normalization of diplomatic ties, have warmed gradually with ship visits and modest medical and educational exchanges.

Asked on Sunday if he had set any blueprints for military cooperation, Rumsfeld told traveling reporters: "I don't have a wish list and I don't have a set of things we are trying to achieve."

He added: "What we want to see is a relationship between our country and Vietnam evolve in a way that is comfortable to them and comfortable to us."

Rumsfeld was to hold talks in Hanoi on Monday with his Vietnamese counterpart and other top officials.

"Both sides are being very deliberate and it's making advances at a pace that both sides are comfortable with," said a senior Pentagon official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"They have China next door to them and they're careful to keep good relations with China and they want a balance in relations with us and relations with China," said the official.

U.S. ties with Beijing likewise mix robust trade flows and cooperation on anti-terrorism and nuclear proliferation troublespots like Iran and North Korea with a wariness about China's military that Rumsfeld has highlighted on his Asian tour.

CHINA SHOULD "DEMYSTIFY"

On Saturday, Rumsfeld told the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual forum of defense experts and officials in Singapore, that China should "demystify" its military spending and strategic intentions to ease fears among neighbors.

Asian defense officials seldom publicly echo or endorse Rumsfeld's stern views on China, but Pentagon officials say they hear counterparts voice similar concern in private.

"All these countries want constructive relations with China but are a little uneasy about the points exactly as we've described them: a modernization, a lack of transparency," said the senior Pentagon official.

"It isn't just the U.S. that has these concerns," he added.

Rumsfeld said another U.S. Navy ship will visit Vietnam this summer. Other programs include plans to bring Vietnamese pilots to the United States for advanced English-language training.

He said the United States was not seeking access to military facilities in Vietnam.

"We do have an evolving military-to-military relationship. Vietnam is an important country and they're a country that we value our relationship with, but it certainly isn't anything that involves military basing," he told reporters in Singapore.

Experts say the cautious pace at which security ties are growing belie the long-term regional significance.

"In the short term, renewed military ties are part of the complete package of normal relations between two friendly countries," said Asia security expert Dana Dillon at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank.

"In the long term, as Vietnam develops economically and politically, Vietnam will play an important role in ASEAN and a strong and friendly Southeast Asia will prevent the region from becoming a cockpit of super power competition," he said.

Vietnam, a member of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations, will play host to President Bush at this year's annual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, a key economic grouping.

Last week, U.S. and Vietnamese officials signed a pact that paves the way for Hanoi to join the World Trade Organization by year-end. The deal requires Vietnam to cut tariffs and other barriers on a host of American goods and services.

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