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The meaning of U.S. Asian commitments

By Philip Ewing

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A lot of people in Washington nodded and smiled when former Secretary Gates made his farewell address to NATO.

You Euro-bums need to get in gear, he said, because we may not always be there to back you up. We can't write blank checks anymore. The SecDefs (and presidents) of the future won't have the same fond memories of standing with you against the threat of the Soviet steamroller, Gates warned — the U.S. leaders of tomorrow may wake up one day and ask, "Why are we subsidizing European security again?"

Still, if the speech made Gates feel better, it apparently didn't switch on a lightbulb over the head of the Alliance. And with Europe near the brink of financial apocalypse nearly every day since then, it has had more immediate problems than figuring out its long-term security situation. But the U.S. also has not heeded Gates' warnings, argues Justin Logan in Foreign Policy, because it's now committing itself to the same kind of security dependence in Asia.

Wrote Logan:

[T]he problem is that the most critical U.S. allies in the region are not paying their share of the bill. Japan spends a paltry 1 percent of its GDP on defense, and South Korea spends less than 3 percent, despite its much closer proximity to both China and North Korea. Taiwan, which faces one of the worst threat environments on Earth, also spends less than 3 percent of its GDP on defense. Absent the assumption of U.S. protection, these countries would be doing much more for themselves.

Instead, the United States, with the benefit of geographic isolation and a massive nuclear arsenal, spends nearly 5 percent of its national income on its military. Unless one believes that robust economic growth, sizable cuts in Medicare and Social Security, or large tax increases are right around the corner, the country's fiscal dilemma — and with it, pressure to cut military spending — will only continue to grow.

Washington policymakers in both parties seem to think that reassuring America's Asian allies is the best way to defend U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific. But instead of seeking to assuage their partners' anxiety, America ought to sow doubt about its commitment to their security. Only then will they be forced to take up their share of the burden of hedging against Chinese expansionism. Otherwise, U.S. defense secretaries may soon be complaining that their Asian partners, like the Europeans before them, won't get off the dole.

This assumes long-term unease with China but no big balloon going up — all right, that's a reasonable scenario. And to be sure, Gates did send a message like the one Logan calls for when he said any future SecDef who advises sending a big army into Asia or the Middle East “should have his head examined.” But Gates and Secretary Panetta both have given broad assurances to U.S. Asian allies that the American presence in the neighborhood is not going away — Panetta even gave a sneak preview of DoD's ongoing “review” when he said he already knew the U.S. was committed to remaining a “Pacific nation.”

So does this mean that a future secretary will fly to Tokyo in 10 years and wag his finger at the Asian allies for leaning so heavily on American taxpayers? Maybe. The difference is that China, as a rising power, also is a growing potential threat. Gates lost his patience with NATO in large part because its Soviet arch-nemesis was 20 years gone, and yet it continued to hang on as a haven for bureaucrats with silly mustaches. If China actually becomes the regional or even global bully that some people fear, tomorrow's SecDef may not have to say anything to spur the Asian countries to get serious about their arsenals.