

Rumsfeld Hits a Buzzsaw in Singapore

by Mike Billington

If U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld believed that his trip to Asia in early June would provide some relief, from the escalating exposure and condemnation of his role in the Iraq fiasco, and in instigating the systematic torture of military detainees around the world, he was sorely mistaken. Speaking to representatives from 21 Asian nations, and others from Europe and the United States attending the third annual Asia Security Conference in Singapore, sponsored by the United Kingdom's International Institute for Strategic Studies, Rumsfeld was confronted with blunt accusations even from America's closest allies, that U.S. policies were directly responsible for the great crisis confronting the world—including the terrorist crisis itself.

Rumsfeld tried to deny the accusations, but did not give any sign that he would ease up on the imperial designs which he and Vice President Dick Cheney are promoting in Southeast and Southwest Asia.

The Conference opened on June 4 with a keynote by the host, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore, one of the world's strongest supporters of the Blair/Cheney pre-emptive war doctrine in Iraq. The Prime Minister repeated that support in his speech. But, much to everyone's surprise, he included the following rebuke: "The Middle East is also where U.S. friends and allies are most disquieted by America's seemingly unconditional support for Israel. I know this is a delicate issue . . . but this is too important an issue to dress in diplomatic niceties. The U.S. is essential to the solution, but is also part of the problem. A more balanced and nuanced approach towards the Israeli-Palestine conflict—an approach that recognizes that there are equities and inequities on both sides—must become a central pillar of the global war against terrorism."

Rumsfeld was treated to an even more direct hit from Singapore's Coordinating Minister for Defense and Security, Tony Tan, who told the gathered flag officers, military experts, and Defense Ministers that the United States' approach to the Israeli-Palestine issue "must contribute as a propaganda tool to the sense of outrage, to the sense of resentment. It inspires suicide bombers not only in the Middle East but also throughout the world."

This notion, that the Cheney pre-emptive war doctrine was itself responsible for the spread of terrorism worldwide,

was clearly not what Rumsfeld had in mind when he told the Conference that "despite a lot of progress, the reality is that today we remain closer to the beginning of this struggle than to its end."

Allies Say U.S. Spreading Terrorism

The most devastating attack came from the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister, Najib Tun Razak. Responding to U.S. suggestions that American troops be deployed in Southeast Asia to "fight terrorism," Razak addressed the failure in Iraq: "What we should avoid is the presence of foreign forces in Southeast Asia to help us deal with this threat. Not because we distrust those outside the region, but because foreign military presence will set us back in our ideological battle against extremism and militancy. The lessons of Iraq should be clear to us: *Ill-prepared liberators do make mistakes and the failure of good intentions can cause great damage to social and political stability.*" [emphasis added]

Rumsfeld's own speech to the Conference on June 5 showed the Bush Administration's intention to establish "forward defense" bases across the region, and around the world, as part of Rumsfeld's "transformation in military affairs." The Pentagon plans to replace large U.S. military concentrations overseas (in Germany and South Korea in particular) with multiple "lily pad" defense platforms in strategic locations, to enforce the expanding imperial presence envisioned by the Cheney gang. "Future dangers will less likely be from battles between great powers," Rumsfeld said, "and more likely from enemeies that work in small cells, that are fluid and can strike without warning anywhere, at any time." He described several "concepts we think should guide American security presence in this new world," including: "focusing on more rapidly deployable capabilities and power, rather than simply static presence and mass; and . . . breaking down artificial barriers between regions in our planning."

The greatest concern in the region is that Rumsfeld considers these nations' national sovereignty to be such an "artificial barrier." Before the Conference began, Rumsfeld held a meeting with sailors and marines on the amphibious assault ship *U.S.S. Essex*, where he was asked, "When are we going to start hunting some terrorists in this theater?" Rumsfeld replied: "Well, I would hope pretty soon."

This did not sit well with the Asian leaders. Already, Indonesia and Malaysia have issued strong objections to an idea floated earlier this year, for U.S. marines to deploy on speed boats into the strategic Straits of Malacca—which are entirely within the sovereign control of these two nations—to combat terrorism and piracy. Malaysian Defense Minister Najib noted that "the reality in Southeast Asia is that we have been waging our own campaign against terror for a long time. . . . These conflicts all predate America's own experience of terror in their midst."

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiy-



Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld heard the “unthinkable” from America’s staunch allies in Asia: the U.S. war on terror is spreading terrorism. Rumsfeld spoke on June 4 in Singapore; plans for U.S. deployments in the Malacca Straits were especially unpopular.

udh also responded to Rumsfeld’s stated intention to send in the marines. “There is no reason for the U.S. to deploy troops,” Chavalit said in Bangkok on June 8. “It’s usual for the U.S. to comment on such things, but we can manage the situation.” The Thais are dealing with a severe outbreak of separatist and terrorist violence in the southern, largely Islamic region of the country. There is concern that any U.S. involvement would follow the pattern in the southern Philippines province of Mindanao, where American military operations training Philippine Army troops in counter-terrorism have devolved into an effectively permanent U.S. military presence, although called by another name.

The U.S. Commander of the Pacific Fleet, Adm. Walter Doran, tried some damage control on Rumsfeld’s blustering, in a discussion with press on the sidelines of the Conference. “It will not be U.S. forces that do that,” said Admiral Doran. “It will not be U.S. forces coming down unnecessarily and doing anything aggressive.” He added that there were also no plans for “bases, or standing forces. Nothing like that. There will be governments who will each decide how much participation and at what level. It will not be U.S. forces leading it. But it will be nice if we have a regime by which we can share information on things moving in the oceans.”

Rumsfeld also tried to calm the waters, in his own inimitable way, by describing his plan for a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) as “something that is in its infancy. The concept would not take place without the full cooperation of relevant countries.” Some media reports

about the RMSI’s infringement of territorial waters, were “unfortunate nonsense—maybe even mischievous nonsense,” Rumsfeld said.

Asked about American policies in Afghanistan and Iraq, Rumsfeld incredibly attacked those who called the U.S. policy “unilateralist: I think, frankly, it’s a bum rap, a myth, and a mantra that people use.”

A Base in Australia

Other developments made it clear that Rumsfeld is forging ahead with his “transformation” plans. In a joint press conference with Australian Defense Minister Robert Hill, the Iraq war-partners announced that the two nations will be setting up a joint military center in northern Australia. The likely location will be at the Tindal Air Base, south of Darwin, a location that is closer to Singapore than to Sydney. Acknowledging that there will be opposition both within

Australia and in Southeast Asia, Hill said that the facility would not be “called” a U.S. base (!), adding: “I think the confusion in Australia has been that people have assumed that the Americans would want to be basing forces in Australia, but we’re not actually very conveniently located for any potential theater”—a characterization unlikely to be reassuring to Malaysia and Indonesia.

At the same time, the United States informed the South Korean Government June 6 that they will withdraw 12,500 troops from that country by the end of 2005—about one-third of the 37,000 troops there today. This is a significant increase over the 3,600 troops previously scheduled to be moved from Korea to Iraq. However, there was no indication of the destination of this large number of U.S. forces, other than the existing facilities in Guam and Hawaii. It is not discounted, however, that they will move to yet-to-be-determined new locations in the region.

The *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in Seoul quoted an “anonymous high Administration official” in Washington suggesting that some troops may be returned to Korea after the Iraq deployment, but would become part of a “Northeast Asian mobile military” force, to be used for operations outside Korea—i.e., another “lily pad” forward defense base—raising understandable concerns in China.

The strategic reality of an American Administration which considers itself to be above international law will no longer be kept politely off the agenda, even in formal diplomatic settings, as demonstrated in Singapore this past week.