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Pre-eminence, Partnerships Define U.S. Policy in Pacific

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WASHINGTON, July 16, 2008 – The top U.S. commander in the Pacific has two buzzwords for U.S. military policy in the region: pre-eminence and partnerships.

Navy Adm. Timothy J. Keating, who heads U.S. Pacific Command, said today at the Heritage Foundation here that he stresses these two concepts wherever he goes in his area of operations, which covers more than half the world's surface and includes half its population and its five largest armies.

Keating said he wants everyone – friends, allies and potential foes alike – to understand that the United States is the big dog on the block.

“We are the pre-eminent force in the theater, and we will so remain for the near, mid and long term,” he said. “So that is an issue with which they need concern themselves.”

But while emphasizing U.S. power, Keating said, he emphasizes the importance of partnerships in keeping the Asia-Pacific region secure.

“We do not want to project the image of going it alone in the Pacific,” he said. “Quite the contrary. We want to take advantage of the very strong bilateral relationships we enjoy and expand those to multilateral relationships.”

As he travels the region, Keating said, he is struck by the vast changes in the past two decades from the days when he “carried bags” as the aide to then-Pacific Command chief Navy Adm. William J. Crowe. The boundaries of the region haven't changed, but Keating said nearly everything else has.

“The countries in it, our strategies, our policies, our posture, our position -- those have changed dramatically,” he said.

He said he's struck by the sense among Asia-Pacific countries that the United States has become “the indispensable element” they depend on to ensure regional stability. “It wasn't necessarily that way when I was going to meetings listening to Admiral Crowe,” he said.

Whether through formal alliances or partnerships, regional nations recognize the value of their relationships not just with the United States, but also with each other, he said.

That recognition is evident in the growth of military exercise and military-to-military exchanges. The Rim of the Pacific exercise currently under way -- with more than 40 ships, six submarines, 150 aircraft and servicemembers from 10 nations -- holds the title as the world's largest military exercise, Keating said. Five countries and observers from 10 others took part in the recent Cobra Gold exercise in Thailand that focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The recent Malabar exercise in the Bay of Bengal brought together navies from five countries – the United States, Japan, Australia, Singapore and India – for training Keating called “unprecedented in scope and scale and technical challenge.”

Keating said he's impressed to see countries in the region forming their own security relationships, with striking results. With training, radar systems and the technology used to integrate them, four countries are working together to enhance maritime security in the strategic Strait of Malacca, he noted. They operate with little direct day-to-day assistance from the United States, and have been able to bring down the incidence of maritime piracy in the region, he said.

“Across the entire region, we are emphasizing partnership,” he said. “We are trying to put some teeth in it by encouraging those countries that might not be so anxious to deal with one another to join with us, and we will provide the umbrella under which we all operate.”

Keating announced today that he and Chinese Lt. Gen. Zhang Qinsheng, commander of China’s Guangzhou Military Region, agreed last night to explore ways to exercise their forces together in a disaster relief scenario.

He expressed hope that China will engage with more countries in the region rather than feel threatened by their partnerships.

“We are not looking to surround you,” Keating said he told Chinese senior leaders. “We want to draw you out and not fence you in.”