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[Military struggles to track Afghans' weapons](#)

Google News – February 11

The U.S. has been shoveling weapons into the hands of Afghan troops but doesn't have a firm system in place or enough personnel to ensure they don't wind up in the hands of Taliban fighters, according to an independent study.

The report, obtained by The Associated Press, comes as Kabul recovers from a devastating attack Wednesday by heavily armed militants. The fighters stormed three government buildings of the heavily fortified capital, killing 20 people and wounding 57 others.

Afghanistan officials said the eight attackers — armed with Kalashnikov rifles, grenades and explosive vests — died in the assault, bringing the death toll to 28.

In a study to be released on Thursday, the Government Accountability Office found that the U.S. shipped some 242,000 weapons to Afghanistan during a nearly four year period before June 2008. The weapons included rifles, pistols, machine guns, mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Despite policies to the contrary, the Defense Department did not maintain a complete inventory on more than a third of those weapons, according to the GAO.

Many weapons could not be linked to serial numbers, making it nearly impossible to verify receipt. And of the 41,000 with serial numbers, none could be tied to records confirming their location. The military also would forgo routine inventory checks because of staffing shortages and a lack of direction, GAO concluded.

Similar findings accompanied a review of some 135,000 weapons provided by foreign donors and managed by the U.S. military.

"Lapses in accountability occurred throughout the supply chain," according to the report. Weapons provided by the U.S. military to Afghanistan security forces "are at serious risk of theft or loss."

Rep. John Tierney, who will chair a House hearing Thursday on the issue, called the findings disturbing.

Weapons accountability "serves as an important — and tangible — harbinger of how we've been doing so far with U.S. and international efforts to train-and-equip the Afghan police," Tierney said in his prepared remarks.

Tierney said the findings will help determine whether Congress should try to legislate weapons handling in Afghanistan.

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"The challenges here are immense, but this is just too important not to get it right," he said.

In response to the report, the Defense Department said it agreed that it needed more people. The Pentagon also said it has taken steps to try to address the problem, including registering serial numbers of small arms and monitoring the location of a weapon.

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[India warns of danger from resurgent Taliban](#)

Channel News Asia – February 18

India has warned of the "danger to humanity" posed by the Taliban, days after Pakistan struck a deal with Islamic militants allowing Taliban-style sharia law in a region bordering Afghanistan.

When asked to comment late Tuesday on Islamabad's pact with pro-Taliban militants in Pakistan's Swat region, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee insisted the Taliban was nothing short of a "terrorist organisation". "Taliban believes in nothing but destruction and violence. In my assessment, Taliban is a danger to humanity and civilisation."

The controversial accord on Monday, widely seen as a Pakistani concession to militants, followed talks between ministers in the troubled North West Frontier Province and a local militant leader, Soofi Mohammad, on formalising the implementation of Islamic law.

The agreement will cover Pakistan's Malakand area, which includes the Swat valley and is home to around three million of the estimated 20 million people who live in the northwest province.

The Islamists, who have waged a nearly two-year campaign for sharia law in the region, have vowed to disarm once Islamic justice was established.

Pakistan however has denied making concessions to the militants, who have beheaded opponents, bombed schools and outlawed entertainment in Swat, formerly a ski resort popular with Westerners.

Washington, which puts Pakistan on the frontline of the "war on terror", has branded extremists in northwest Pakistan as a direct threat to Afghanistan, where US-led forces toppled a Taliban regime seven years ago, following the September 11 attacks of 2001.

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[Japan likely to take part in U.S. Afghanistan policy review](#)

Japan Today – February 22

Japan is likely to take part in a U.S. review of its strategy on Afghanistan as part of global efforts to stabilize the war-torn country, sources close to Japan-U.S. relations said Saturday. The United States asked for Japan's participation when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Japanese Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone in Tokyo on Tuesday, with Tokyo starting to discuss the request in a forward-looking manner, the sources said.

A major donor for Afghanistan, Japan is preparing to convene in Tokyo in late March an international donor conference on Pakistan, which holds the key to the stability of Afghanistan. In addition to Japan, Afghanistan, neighboring Pakistan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization member states that have sent troops to Afghanistan are likely to take part in the review of Washington's Afghanistan policy, the sources said.

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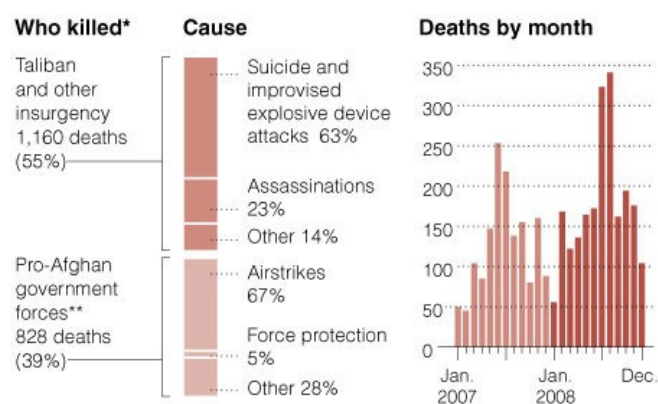
[Afghan Civilian Deaths Rose 40 Percent in 2008](#)

The New York Times – February 23

The number of civilians killed in Afghanistan leapt by nearly 40 percent last year, according to a survey released Tuesday by the United Nations, the latest measure of how the intensifying violence between the Taliban and American-led forces is ravaging that country.

Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan

A United Nations report counted 2,118 civilian deaths last year — a 39 percent increase from the 1,523 recorded in 2007.



*The remaining 130 casualties (6%) could not be attributed to any of the conflicting parties because, for example, some civilians died as a result of cross-fire. **Includes Afghan government forces, U.S. and NATO forces.

Source: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The death toll — 2,118 civilians killed in 2008, compared with 1,523 in 2007 — is the highest since the Taliban government was ousted in November 2001, at the outset of a war with no quick end in sight.

Just one day after the United Nations report was issued, The Associated Press said on Wednesday it obtained photographs showing the body of a young boy at the site of an American strike in western Afghanistan. The American military had said up to 15 militants were killed in the attack. The A.P. reported that an American general had traveled to the area to investigate claims by Afghan officials that six women and two children were among the dead.

Civilian deaths have become a political flash point in Afghanistan, eroding public support for the war and inflaming tensions with President Hamid Karzai, who has bitterly condemned the American-led coalition for the rising toll. President Obama's decision to deploy more troops to Afghanistan raises the prospect of even more casualties.

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The United Nations report found that the Taliban and other insurgents caused the majority of the civilian deaths, primarily through suicide bombers and roadside bombs, many aimed at killing as many civilians as possible.

Taliban fighters routinely attacked American and other pro-government forces in densely populated areas, the report said, apparently in the hope of provoking a response that would kill even more civilians. But the report also found that Afghan government forces and those of the American-led coalition killed 828 people last year, up sharply from the previous year. Most of those were killed in airstrikes and raids on villages, which are often conducted at night.

One day this month, an old man who called himself Syed Mohammed sat on the floor of his mud-brick hut in the eastern Kabul neighborhood of Hotkheil and recounted how most of his son's family was wiped out in an American-led raid last September.

Mr. Mohammed said he was awakened in the early morning to the sound of gunfire and explosions. Such sounds were not uncommon; Hotkheil is a Pashtun-dominated area, where sympathies for the Taliban run strong. In a flash, Mr. Mohammed said, several American and Afghan soldiers kicked open the door of his home. The Americans, he said, had beards, an almost certain sign that they belonged to a unit of the Special Forces, which permits uniformed soldiers to grow facial hair. "Who are you?" Mr. Mohammed recalled asking the intruders. "Shut up," came the reply from one of the Afghan soldiers. "We are the government." Mr. Mohammed said he was taken to a nearby base, interrogated for several hours and let go as sunrise neared.

When he returned home, Mr. Mohammed said, he went next door to his son's house, only to find that most of his family had been killed: the son, Nurallah, and his pregnant wife and two of his sons, Abdul Basit, age 1, and Mohammed, 2. Only Mr. Mohammed's 4-year-old grandson, Zarqawi, survived. "The soldiers had a right to search our house," Mr. Mohammed said. "But they didn't have a right to do this." Bullet holes still pockmarked Nurallah's home more than four months after the attack, and the infant's cradle still hung from the ceiling. The day after the attack, a senior Afghan official came to the door and handed Mr. Mohammed \$800. "If you spent some time here, you would see that we are not the kind of people who would get involved with the Taliban," Mr. Mohammed said. "Anyway, what was the fault of the babies?"

American military spokesmen in Kabul, Washington and Tampa, Fla., the headquarters of Central Command, did not respond to requests for comment about the civilian deaths.

The newly released United Nations report singled out Special Forces and other military units operating outside the normal chains of command, which, the survey said, frequently could not be held accountable for their actions. Special Forces groups like Navy Seals and paramilitary units operated by the C.I.A. often conduct raids in Afghanistan, and often at night. Such groups typically operate outside the normal

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chains of command, which means that their presence and movements are not always known by regular field commanders. The report also said the airstrikes that went awry were often those called in by troops under attack. Under such circumstances, some of the normal rules may not apply. Mr. Karzai has been especially critical of airstrikes, saying they are eroding public support for his government and for the effort to defeat the Taliban.

An American attack in the western Afghan village of Azizabad last August highlighted these tensions. An American AC-130 gunship struck a suspected Taliban compound, killing more than 90 people. American commanders initially insisted that only five to seven civilians had been killed. But reporters visiting the scene saw evidence of a higher death toll, and a United Nations investigation concluded that about 90 civilians had been killed, about 75 of them women and children. The American military appointed a Pentagon-based general to re-examine the episode, and he concluded that more than 30 civilians had died.

In the aftermath of the Azizabad episode, American and other allied commanders tightened the rules for delivering airstrikes. The United Nations survey said it was unclear whether those new rules would have a lasting effect on reducing civilian deaths. For all the civilians killed at the hands of the Afghan government and American-led forces, the Afghan people have more to fear from the insurgents, the report said. Not only did Taliban fighters kill more civilians, but they also tried repeatedly to kill as many as they could.

Mohammed Amin Kadimi, a 45-year-old laborer in Kabul, survived such a Taliban attack. One day in late 2006, Mr. Kadimi was pushing his wheelbarrow down a city street, looking for people who might hire him. Sure enough, a young man approached and handed him a large paper bag. It weighed about 10 pounds, Mr. Kadimi recalled. The young man asked Mr. Kadimi to carry the bag to Pul-e-Khesthi, a neighborhood a few blocks away. The young man said he would follow.

So Mr. Kadimi set off with his wheelbarrow. After a while, he noticed the young man was no longer behind him. Then the bag exploded. "I flew away," Mr. Kadimi said. Mr. Kadimi lost his left leg. The right one is mangled so horribly that it is a wonder he has it at all. These days, Mr. Kadimi sits in a wooden chair on Kart-e-Char Street, selling cellphone cards. He is a father of six. Occasionally, he wonders why the young man chose him, and what his purpose was. "It's just anarchy," he said.

The United Nations report also described a Taliban campaign of assassination to intimidate anyone who associates with the Afghan government. One grisly example comes from the southern city of Kandahar, where 24 clerics who joined a government-backed council have been killed in recent months, many of them in the downtown. Some 271 Afghan officials and others who cooperated with the government were assassinated last year, the report said. The survey also documented the Taliban's campaign to intimidate children, and particularly girls, from going to school. More than 640 schools have ceased to function, the survey said, depriving some 230,000 children of education

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[Taliban Accepts Pakistan Cease-Fire](#)

The New York Times – February 24

The leader of the Taliban of the Swat region announced a long-term cease-fire on Tuesday, handing the Pakistani military a respite from fighting, and raising tenuous hopes for peace. The army, which has been battling militants in Swat off and on for more than a year, said Monday that it had returned to barracks.

The cease-fire was announced by the spokesman for Maulana Fazlullah, a hard-line cleric in Swat, who has led a terrorism campaign against civilians, including the burning of girls' schools and public executions. The spokesman, Muslim Khan, told reporters that the cease-fire would be for an "indefinite period." The well-armed Taliban have gained control of about 70 percent of the Swat Valley, 100 miles north of the capital, Islamabad, by using brutal guerrilla tactics against an army unaccustomed to insurgency warfare.

There was considerable skepticism about the durability of the cease-fire. There was no word from the government or the militants on whether there was a specific agreement that dealt with the top demands of the militants, including the introduction of Islamic courts and amnesty for their fighters.

The national government has said it agrees to the introduction of Islamic courts, but will not sign off on putting them into effect until there is peace in Swat.

On Monday, Mualana Sufi Mohammed, who is the father-in-law of Mr. Fazlullah, and with whom the government initially arranged a cease-fire a week ago, said that Islamic law was now in practice in Swat.

Some politicians said Tuesday that the cessation of hostilities would give the militants a pause to gather strength and bring more recruits from the tribal belt, where the Taliban keep fighters in reserve.

The government of the North-West Frontier Province announced that schools were open on Monday, but only a few children attended. Property owners who fled Swat months ago, for fear of being singled out by the Taliban, said it was too early to return.

The seriousness of the militants was in question after they captured a newly appointed senior government official, the district coordination officer, Khushhal Khan, and his aides on Sunday. They were released after six hours.

The cease-fire announcement by Mr. Fazlullah followed a statement by militants on Monday night in nearby Bajaur, in the tribal belt, that they would observe a cease-fire with government troops there.

The Frontier Corps, a Pakistani paramilitary force that has been fighting in Bajaur, said over the weekend that soldiers had captured two crucial militant strongholds.

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[Pakistan Needs Billions in Security Aid, U.S. Policy Leaders Say](#)

Global Security Newswire – February 25

Between \$4 billion and \$5 billion in immediate Western security assistance is needed to ensure stability in nuclear-armed Pakistan, two respected U.S. foreign policy leaders were set to tell lawmakers today.

An Atlantic Council report calling for the funds was unveiled today by Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) and former Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), now the organization's chairman. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which Kerry chairs, was expected to discuss the report during a hearing today.

If the Europe and the United States fail to stabilize Pakistan, Kerry said in a statement, "we face a truly frightening prospect: Terrorist sanctuary, economic meltdown, and spiraling radicalism, all in a nation with 170 million inhabitants and a full arsenal of nuclear weapons".

"Pakistan is ... a nuclear weapons state," the report says. "While senior American officials are more confident about the security of those weapons, many Americans -- especially in Congress -- instinctively worry that, within an increasingly unstable environment, the controls may not be sufficient and want reassurance if not proof of their safe storage. There are also concerns about the transport of stored nuclear waste and enriched uranium that could be used for 'dirty' bombs"

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[Mass Grave Found After Bangladesh Mutiny](#)

The New York Times – February 26

A day after disgruntled border guards in Bangladesh ended their two-day mutiny, the police on Friday discovered a mass grave containing 38 bodies, some of them already beyond recognition.

The bodies were believed to be those of officers seized as hostages, said a Bangladeshi police official, who requested anonymity under police rules. The mutiny took place at the headquarters of the border force, known as the Bangladesh Rifles, in the capital, Dhaka.

The body of the force's commander, a Bangladeshi Army officer named Shakil Ahmed, was also found in the mass grave. Three others were discovered inside manholes in the compound, as the death toll rose to at least 62.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who promised amnesty to the mutineers earlier this week, told reporters Friday that those responsible for the killings would be punished under the law.

A top general, Brig. Abu Naim Shahidullah, told the local NTV television station that all the victims appeared to be officers and were wearing combat fatigues.

Security forces rounded up hundreds of fugitive border guards on Thursday and Friday after the mutiny crumbled in the face of a government show of force, according to news reports. The ordeal ended Thursday evening after army tanks surrounded the guards' headquarters, averting the prospect of a clash between the civilian and military leadership.

Army officers were quoted Friday as saying that security forces had set up roadblocks and arrested almost 300 border guards, many of whom shed their uniforms and fled after the mutiny fizzled. The guards had been demanding improved pay and working conditions.

Security forces searched buses and ferries for more fugitives, the reports said.

The mutiny was the first major test for Mrs. Hasina, who was elected last December after two years of military rule.

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[With Pledges to Troops and Iraqis, Obama Details Pullout](#)

The New York Times – February 27

President Obama declared the beginning of the end of one of the longest and most divisive wars in American history on Friday as he announced that he would withdraw combat forces from Iraq by August 2010 and all remaining troops by December 2011.

The decision, outlined before thousands of camouflage-clad Marines here, underscored the transformation in national priorities a month after Mr. Obama took office as he prepared to shift resources and troops from increasingly stable Iraq to increasingly volatile Afghanistan.

But it also marked a sharp change in America's attitude about Iraq after years of wrenching debate over war and peace. Despite some grumbling on the left and right, Mr. Obama's pullout plan generated support across party lines on Friday, including from his rival in last year's election and advisers to his predecessor, indicating an emerging consensus behind a gradual but firm exit from Iraq.

The plan will withdraw most of the 142,000 troops now in Iraq by the summer of next year, leaving 35,000 to 50,000 to train and advise Iraqi security forces, hunt terrorist cells and protect American civilian and military personnel. Those "transitional forces" will leave by 2011 in accordance with a strategic agreement negotiated by President George W. Bush before he left office.

"Let me say this as plainly as I can," Mr. Obama said. "By August 31, 2010, our combat mission in Iraq will end."

He added: "I intend to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. We will complete this transition to Iraqi responsibility, and we will bring our troops home with the honor that they have earned."

Mr. Obama presented his plan at the same base where, in April 2003, with American forces nearing Baghdad, Mr. Bush declared that "we will accept nothing less than complete and final victory."

Nearly six years, more than 4,200 military deaths, tens of thousands of civilian deaths and \$657 billion later, the definition of victory has evolved. If the uneasy but relatively democratic Iraq that is emerging counts as a victory of sorts, it proved to be longer, bloodier and more damaging to America's reputation than anticipated.

At the same time, the consensus behind Mr. Obama's plan may stem in part from the subsiding violence since Mr. Bush changed strategies and sent more troops in January 2007, a shift that the new president, who opposed it, did not directly address in his speech. The urgency on the left to pull out faster has eased as casualties have fallen, while the imperative on the right to stay has waned with the successes of the last two years.

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Republicans who backed Mr. Obama on the issue said he owed his ability to pull out to the troop buildup. “The dramatic success of the surge strategy has enabled us to move from a discussion about whether the United States could bear the catastrophic consequences of failure in Iraq, to planning the way in which to consolidate success there,” Senator John McCain of Arizona said.

Mr. McCain, the former Republican presidential candidate who clashed sharply with Mr. Obama over the future of Iraq during the campaign last year, called the withdrawal “reasonable” and said he was “cautiously optimistic that the plan as laid out by the president can lead to success.”

Former Bush aides called it the logical next step after his agreement to pull out by 2011. “The specific timing is only slightly different but consistent with the goal of helping Iraq become self-sufficient in providing its own security,” said Gordon D. Johndroe, Mr. Bush’s last national security spokesman. “This is possible because of the success of the surge.”

In his speech, Mr. Obama noted the “renewed cause for hope in Iraq” and praised troops who “got the job done.” He cited three architects of the surge strategy, calling Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker an “unsung hero” and David H. Petraeus and Ray Odierno the “finest generals.”

In a separate interview with PBS, Mr. Obama said the security progress of the last two years still left much undone in political reconciliation, citing a long-awaited law distributing oil revenues that has yet to pass. “Frankly, we have not made the kind of progress over the last year to two years, despite the surge,” he said.

Mr. Obama called Mr. Bush moments before the announcement as a courtesy, aides said. But then during his speech, Mr. Obama implicitly rebuked Mr. Bush for getting into Iraq in the first place, noting that Iraq taught painful lessons about how and when America should go to war. Mr. Obama said America must go only “with clearly defined goals” after weighing “the costs of action” and building support at home and abroad. To that end, he vowed intensive diplomacy in the region, including outreach to Iran and Syria.

“Every nation and every group must know, whether you wish America good or ill, that the end of the war in Iraq will enable a new era of American leadership and engagement in the Middle East,” Mr. Obama said. “And that era has just begun.”

The president’s venue underscored the shift in emphasis. About 8,000 Marines stationed here will ship out soon to Afghanistan, part of the 17,000-troop buildup he ordered. The Marines applauded when he promised to bring troops home from Iraq.

Some Democrats had complained that too many troops would remain after August 2010 but tempered their criticism after the speech. Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Senate majority leader, who on

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Thursday called a 50,000-member residual force too big, on Friday called Mr. Obama's plan "sound and measured," while urging him to keep "only those forces necessary for the security of our remaining troops and the Iraqi people."

Nancy Pelosi of California, the House speaker who also criticized the residual force this week, said Friday that it should be "as small as possible" but praised the withdrawal plan as "good news because it signals that the war is coming to an end."

Mr. Obama called Iraq's prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki from Air Force One en route here to brief him, and called Mr. Bush from the base just before addressing the troops. Yassen Majeed, an adviser to Mr. Maliki, said the prime minister was "very comfortable with the plan."

"I think we're ready to take over the responsibilities from the Americans," Mr. Majeed said. "Our forces will be up to it, and we are even ready right now."

But others were cautious, including Sunni lawmakers worried about their influence in the Shiite-dominated government. "All Iraqis want the Americans to withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible," said Adnan al-Dulaimi, a senior Sunni politician. "We're just afraid of the vacuum that this withdrawal may cause."

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[Tamil Rebels Offer Conditional Truce](#)

The New York Times – February 23

With their guerrilla fighters pinned down by Sri Lankan troops in a small patch of jungle, ethnic Tamil separatists announced Monday that they were willing to accept an internationally brokered cease-fire, although they said they would not surrender their weapons as part of any truce.

The government quickly rejected the offer.

The entreaty was made in a letter sent to the United Nations, the European Commission and several world leaders by Balasingham Nadesan, the political chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The message was posted on a pro-rebel Web site, www.tamilnet.com.

“The L.T.T.E. is ready to accept the calls for a cease-fire issued by the international community with the good intention of ending the human suffering,” the letter said, adding that the group wanted “this effort for a cease-fire to grow further into peace talks to seek a political solution to the ethnic conflict.”

Mr. Nadesan rejected calls for his forces to disarm, saying the Tamils of northern Sri Lanka were facing “the worst genocide of the 21st century” at the hands of the government.

“It is painful to see the world maintaining silence on this immense human suffering, as if it is amused by what is going on,” Mr. Nadesan said.

Keheliya Rambukwella, a cabinet minister and defense spokesman, dismissed the rebels’ offer. “They have given guarantees and pledges for the past 30 years,” he told Reuters in an interview Monday. “If they are really concerned, then let them lay down their arms.”

President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the defense minister, have rejected previous truce offers.

In January 2008, the government pulled out of a cease-fire agreement that had been brokered by Norway in 2002, saying the rebels had used the period of the truce to rearm and regroup. Government leaders vowed to crush the rebels within the year.

Government troops have cornered the principal group of rebel fighters in a small strip of land on the country’s northeastern coast. The government says the Tamil Tigers, fighting from their last remaining enclave, now control less than about 33 square miles.

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Earlier this month, the United States, the European Union, Japan and Norway called on the Tamil Tigers to consider surrendering. They urged the rebels to disarm, accept a governmental amnesty and reformulate themselves as a political party.

Trapped along with the fighters are an estimated 250,000 civilians who have been caught in the cross-fire. Human rights groups, the U.N. and the International Committee of the Red Cross have called on both sides — to little effect — to allow the civilians to escape the war zone.

A report last week by Human Rights Watch said 2,000 civilians have been killed and 5,000 injured in the past six weeks. In criticizing the government and the rebels alike, Human Rights Watch said both sides “appear to be engaged in a perverse competition to demonstrate the greatest disregard for the civilian population.”

On Friday night, two Tamil Tiger aircraft were shot down while apparently trying to suicide-bomb the capital, Colombo. Two people were killed and more than 50 injured when one of the planes crashed into a government building.

The attack seemed to be an indication that the Tamil Tigers were far from finished as a fighting force. The government had announced weeks ago that the last rebel air bases had been destroyed.

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[Abu Sayyaf remains defiant, ignores government demand](#)

The Manila Times –February 21

Abu Sayyaf terrorists holding hostage three Red Cross workers remain defiant and rejected government demands to free all the hostages without ransom on the island of Sulu. The Abu Sayyaf is holding Swiss Andreas Notter, Italian Eugenio Vagni and Filipino Mary Jean Lacaba since January 15 in the hinterlands of Indanan town. Albader Parad, one of several terrorist leaders holding the three, demanded the pull out of government troops that have surrounded their lair. Parad, a former Moro National Liberation Front (MILF) rebel, said they would not negotiate with the government unless the military pulls out thousands of soldiers in the town.

The governor of Sulu, Sakur Tan, who heads the task force negotiating the safe release of the hostages, rejected the terrorists demand and said the hostages must be freed without any condition. “We will not allow terrorists to dictate upon the government. The terrorists should free all the hostages without any conditions,” he said. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said the hostages made contact with the aid agency this week.

Alain Aeschlimann, the ICRC’s head of operations for East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific, said the hostages claimed they are doing OK, despite the difficult conditions in which they are living. “We were very relieved to hear that they remain unharmed and are still together. Over the past five weeks, we’ve spoken to them many times and we are always grateful to hear their voices.”

“We’re doing everything we can to find a positive outcome to this situation as quickly as possible. We continue to call for the swift and safe release of Eugenio, Mary Jean and Andreas and we remain hopeful that they will soon be home with their families,” he said. Aeschlimann said the safety of the hostages is important.

“It is paramount that they should remain out of harm’s way and that any efforts to free them should in no way endanger their safety. There are many people who are working very hard to resolve this situation and we appreciate these efforts.”

“My colleagues in the Philippines are obviously deeply affected by this situation. They hope, as we all do at the ICRC, that Mary Jean, Andreas and Eugenio are safe and that they know how much they are missed.”

Nur Misuari, chieftain of the Moro National Liberation Front, also volunteered to negotiate for the release of the hostages, but the Abu Sayyaf showed no interest in talking with the former rebel leader. Misuari previously was asking for government permission to negotiate with the Abu Sayyaf after a mayor in Sulu, Isnaji Alvarez of Indanan town, was charged last year with kidnapping when he helped negotiate the release of television reporter Ces Drilon and her two cameramen, including their guide.

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The Abu Sayyaf whom they sought to interview clandestinely in Sulu island held Drilon. They were freed weeks later after private negotiators allegedly paid P20-million ransom. It was unknown whether the Abu Sayyaf is willing to negotiate with Misuari. But the terrorist group previously rejected Misuari, who was tapped in 2001 by Manila to negotiate for the release of 21 Asian and European holidaymakers kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf from the Malaysian resort island of Sipadan and brought by boat to Sulu. The Abu Sayyaf freed the Sipadan hostages after the government allegedly allowed the payment of \$20 million ransoms by Libyan negotiators. The Abu Sayyaf holding the Red Cross workers was reportedly demanding \$10-million ransom

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[Strikes Worsen Qaeda Threat, Pakistan Says](#)

The New York Times – February 27

American missile strikes have reduced Al Qaeda's global reach but heightened the threat to Pakistan as the group disperses its cells here and fights to maintain its sanctuaries, Pakistani intelligence officials said.

The officials acknowledge that the strikes and raids by the Pakistani military are proving effective, having killed as many as 80 Qaeda fighters in the past year. But they express growing alarm that the drone strikes in particular are having an increasingly destabilizing effect on their country.

They also voiced fears that the expected arrival of 17,000 American troops in Afghanistan this spring and summer would add to the stresses by pushing more Taliban fighters into Pakistan.

The assessment was provided during a two-hour briefing by senior analysts and officials of Pakistan's main spy service, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, who spoke on the condition of anonymity in keeping with the agency's policy.

The analysis reflected the increasing public pressure on the Pakistani government to oppose the drone attacks, which are deeply unpopular here for the civilian casualties they have inflicted.

But it also underscored ominous signs of Al Qaeda's resilience and pointed to new and unintended dangers for American policy in the region — a rapidly destabilized, nuclear-armed Pakistan, a state with a weak civilian government and a military struggling to fight an expanding insurgency.

The sobering Pakistani assessment was in contrast to the optimism voiced earlier this month by the new American director of national intelligence, Dennis C. Blair.

While the Pakistani analysis agreed with Mr. Blair's conclusion that Al Qaeda's ability to conduct large-scale attacks against the United States was most likely degraded, it also signaled no cessation to the attacks by Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban aimed at undermining Pakistan's government.

The Pakistani officials suggested that Al Qaeda was replenishing killed fighters and midlevel leaders with less experienced but more hard-core militants, who are considered more dangerous because they have fewer allegiances to local Pakistani tribes.

Al Qaeda was using sophisticated Web sites and sleeper cells across the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia to enlist young fighters who were less patient or inclined to plan and carry out far-reaching global attacks and who had instead redirected their energies on more immediate targets and on fomenting insurgency in Pakistan, the officials said.

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Qaeda leaders have also increased their financing and logistical support for the Taliban and other militant groups, having come to see the survival of Qaeda sanctuaries as dependent on the ability of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan to hold territory. "It's morphing into a monster and growing uglier," said one senior Pakistani intelligence official.

The chief of the Pakistani Army, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has indicated that the impact on Pakistan of more American troops in Afghanistan will be among the most important topics at his meetings in Washington this week, Pakistani officials say.

Pakistani intelligence and military officials say there is no argument that Qaeda fighters must be hunted down; they provide targeting information to the C.I.A., which remotely pilots the drones. But they complain that the missile strikes cause too many civilian casualties and that they hand the militants a propaganda windfall.

American officials defended the strikes, although they acknowledge that the attacks alone will not rout Al Qaeda and the Taliban from the safe havens. "Al-Qaeda and its allies are resilient," said a United States counterterrorism official. "But there's real value in keeping them off balance in the tribal areas. They come to doubt their security, their hosts, even each other."

Pakistan says it has captured some 630 Qaeda fighters and senior leaders since 2001. But the assessment underscored the difficulties still faced by Pakistan's security forces; in that time, nearly 1,600 of its troops were killed and more than 3,700 were wounded.

The Pakistani intelligence assessment found that Al Qaeda had adapted to the blows to its command structure by shifting "to conduct decentralized operations under small but well-organized regional groups" within Pakistan and Afghanistan.

American counterterrorism officials have long complained that Pakistan protects some militant groups like the Taliban as a proxy force, a charge that Pakistani officials say is no longer true.

American officials say the longstanding ties are coming back to haunt Pakistan. "In Pakistan, the jihadist Frankenstein monster that was created by the Pakistani Army and the Pakistani intelligence service is now increasingly turning on its creators," Bruce O. Riedel, a former C.I.A. analyst, said in an interview on the Council on Foreign Relations' Web site on Jan. 28, two weeks before he was named a chairman of President Obama's strategic review of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There are other signs that Al Qaeda is under stress but adapting. Al Qaeda has given up training sites and shifted to mobile training teams, which Pakistani intelligence officials say are still effective. They often consist of just a few bomb-making or tactical experts schooling a handful of fighters in a private house, according to a mid-level ISI agent who works in the tribal belt.

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The flow of new recruits comes largely from countries like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia and Uzbekistan, Pakistani intelligence officials said. They often travel through Iran, enter Pakistan through Baluchistan Province and then move onto Waziristan for training, the agent said.

The impact of the new Qaeda emphasis on operations inside Pakistan was on full view in Swat, an area about 100 miles north of the capital, Islamabad, where the Pakistani Army agreed to a truce last week with the Pakistani Taliban, who control 70 percent of the territory, the agent said.

Uzbeks affiliated with Al Qaeda carried out the brunt of the militants' operations against civilians and the army in Swat, the agent and Pakistani military analysts said. The Uzbeks, who were driven across the border from Afghanistan with the Taliban and Qaeda after 2001, have been particularly ruthless as they helped their allies secure sanctuary in the tribal areas. They have now been unleashed on Pakistani soldiers in Swat, the agent said. In addition, Maulana Fazlullah, the leader of the Taliban in Swat, was backed by about a half-dozen Arab fighters from Al Qaeda who served as the "main motivators," the agent said.

The Arabs who traveled from the Qaeda bases in Waziristan across the tribal belt to Swat are held in high esteem by Pakistani Taliban fighters, the agent said. "The Arabs motivate the local guys, who see them as people who have forsaken all their money for jihad," the agent said.

The missile attacks by the American drones that have killed senior Qaeda figures had disrupted the lives of militants in North and South Waziristan, according to a fighter who goes by the name of Abdullah and who was interviewed in Peshawar, the capital of the North-West Frontier Province.

"We now often sleep in the river beds or under the eucalyptus trees," he said, adding that people were constantly on alert for the sound of the aircraft. There was little doubt that the killing of Usama al-Kini, a Qaeda operative who was the senior commander for operations inside Pakistan, represented a setback to morale and operations, the fighter said. "He was very popular and very sociable with the ordinary people," the fighter said.

Mr. Kini, a Kenyan, was killed in January near Wana, the capital of South Waziristan. He was described by Pakistani law enforcement officials as the mastermind of the terrorist attack against the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad last year.

But the Arab leaders of Al Qaeda were intent on promoting their fighters up through the ranks to overcome the loss of leaders like Mr. Kini, the fighter said.

"The Arabs have a strategy to elevate people to a higher position," he said. "If someone is killed there is always a replacement. The training goes on."

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[E.U. seeks new space rules after satellites collide](#)

Reuters – 12 February

Leading nations should adopt a code of conduct for civil and military activities in space, the European Union said on Thursday, hours after news emerged that U.S. and Russian satellites collided in orbit over the Arctic.

Such efforts could help prevent environmental emergencies and clashes that may lead to space becoming a site of conflict, the EU said in the proposed voluntary pact, presented to the Conference on Disarmament.

All those sending objects into outer space should "take appropriate steps to minimise the risk of collision", the EU said. "States conducting outer space activities should also refrain from any intentional action which will or might bring about ... the damage or destruction of outer space objects," the Czech EU Presidency told the United Nations forum.

A privately owned U.S. communications spacecraft collided on Tuesday with a defunct Russian military satellite, according to the U.S. Strategic Command, which made it public on Wednesday. The collision -- which was not believed to be intentional -- occurred in a polar orbit not far from that of a defunct Chinese weather satellite that was shot apart by a ground-based ballistic missile in a Chinese weapons test in January 2007.

NO AGREEMENT

Outer space is one of the many issues that has stymied the Conference on Disarmament in the past decade. It has failed to agree to launch negotiations on any major issue since clinching global pacts banning chemical weapons and underground nuclear blasts in the 1990s.

The United States has strongly backed a new fissile material cutoff treaty to ban production of plutonium and highly enriched uranium used for making nuclear bombs. But others -- notably China and Russia -- have long argued that parallel progress is needed on other questions, including preventing weapons being deployed in space.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said last month that the Conference on Disarmament should act quickly to tackle issues. "At a time of global economic and financial crisis, advancing the disarmament agenda could produce a tangible peace dividend when the world needs it most," Ban told the forum on Jan. 20.

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The EU's intended code of conduct, prepared in Brussels in December, would cover scientific, commercial and security work and specify reporting and notification rules to ensure safe, secure and transparent operations.

The Czech Republic said the draft text could form the basis for an eventual agreement at the Geneva forum, whose 65 members include the United States, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Israel. "Such prevention contributes to the strengthening of international security and promotes international cooperation in the field of free exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes for all states," it said.

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[Angela Merkel advocates a new strategy for NATO](#)

Egov Monitor –February 16

The Munich Security Conference is recognised today as a top event on the defence and security policy agenda. Thirteen heads of state and government and almost 50 ministers attended. Discussions so far have made it quite clear that NATO faces changes. Chancellor Angela Merkel presented a list of ideas for a new strategy. One central component was the concept of networked security.

The Chancellor shared the stage with the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. This was the central part of the conference, and a highly symbolic one. France, Poland and Germany have not always lived in peace.

Angela Merkel listed all the opportunities posed by 2009 – a new US administration takes office; in September Germany commemorates the outbreak of the Second World War seventy years ago; NATO turns 60 in April, and twenty years ago the Berlin Wall fell.

On the other hand the world is in the grips of a severe economic crisis. The war in Gaza is still not ended, and the nuclear dispute with Iran continues, while in Afghanistan the international community has still not achieved what it set out to do.

This makes 2009 a test year, which will show "whether not we can cope together with globalisation in practice," said Angela Merkel.

The publisher Ewald von Kleist founded the Munich Security Conference in 1962. He had learned from his experiences during the Second World War that the security-policy discussion between Europe and the USA is critically important for peace. Today the conference is considered to be one of the most important meeting points for personalities from the realms of politics, academia and the media. Since it is a non-governmental meeting, no official resolutions are passed. This leaves participants free to argue publicly and internally about critical issues, without the pressure of having to agree on a closing document.

New strategic concept for NATO

NATO has proved its worth as a defence alliance, which is why Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (which lays out the right to individual and collective self-defence) should in the Chancellor's view continue to embody the substance of NATO. In future its main responsibility should continue to be to ensure the defence of member states. But today we face new threats and new conflicts.

In April NATO will be celebrating its 60th anniversary. The anniversary summit will straddle the Franco-German border, and be held in both Strasbourg on the French side of the border and Kehl on the

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German side. It is time to reflect on a new strategy, declared Angela Merkel.

What must the new strategy assure?

The strategy must be based on the concept of networked security. International conflicts can no longer be resolved by any one country, but only together. "That is what I expect and what a great many Europeans expect of the United States of America," declared the Chancellor.

Networked security must embrace both civilian and military means. Crisis prevention is every bit as important a part of security policy as crisis transformation. "NATO must become a forum for political discussion," advocated Angela Merkel.

The EU and NATO must establish a new form of cooperation. To date a strategic partnership is agreed. Because of persisting differences of opinion between individual member states, however, such as Cyprus and Turkey, this has failed to live up to expectations. Now the European Security and Defence Policy is to be more closely integrated into NATO. One thing is quite clear - NATO and the European Security and Defence Policy are not competitors.

A regional approach is part of the new strategy, because no conflict is unique to any one country. The situation in Afghanistan is a good example. Most of the Taliban have pulled back across the border into Pakistan. Without involving Pakistan there can be no solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

Significant progress is needed on monitoring and disarmament. We must decide how to proceed with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Sixteen members of NATO and six Warsaw Pact states signed the Treaty in 1990. In 2007 Russia suspended the treaty unilaterally because of unresolved conflicts with NATO.

The new strategy must make it clear how Russia can be included in the security agency. Angela Merkel considers that the NATO-Russia Council would be the right body, but there should also be closer cooperation between the European Security and Defence Policy and Russia.

Next year will see a conference to review the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In the long term Angela Merkel visualises a "world without nuclear weapons". Now, however, the focus must be on reducing the vast arsenals that currently exist.

We must also prevent Iran developing nuclear weapons at all costs. Germany still believes that a diplomatic solution is possible, but it is also willing to "consider harsher sanctions" if no progress is made on the nuclear dispute.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty bans the proliferation of nuclear weapons and obliges signatory

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states to move in the direction of disarmament. At the same time it admits the right to make peaceful use of nuclear energy. The five nuclear powers (USA, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and China) and 184 states which do not have nuclear weapons have now signed the treaty. Only four states have currently failed to do so: India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan.

In the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the signatory states without nuclear weapons agree not to obtain nuclear weapons. The five official nuclear powers undertake in return, "to pursue negotiations in good faith ... on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." The International Atomic Energy Agency monitors compliance with this treaty.

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[Hu says African visit produces new consensus](#)

China Daily – February 16

Chinese President Hu Jintao on Sunday said he reached new consensus with African leaders during his ongoing visit to the continent. "During my African visit, I had in-depth discussions with leaders of related countries on bilateral relations and issues of common concern, and we reached a number of new and important consensus," Hu said while giving an interview to Tanzanian State Television and Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV.

This is the president's sixth visit to Africa and his second since the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2006.

The four-country African tour has taken Hu to Mali and Senegal. After his stay in Tanzania. Hu will travel on to Mauritius before flying back home on Tuesday. "The visit is aimed at cementing friendship, deepening cooperation, dealing with challenges and seeking common development," Hu said.

As a sincere friend of Africa, China will actively support African countries in developing their economies, and improving livelihood and strengthening cooperation, he said. "China will fully and punctually implement measures agreed at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, seek China-Africa pragmatic relations and promote the further development of our new strategic partnership," Hu said.

Eight measures announced at the landmark summit included massive tariff cuts, debt exemptions, and doubling aid to Africa over a three-year period among others. Hu said he was satisfied with the development of China-Tanzania ties.

Noting Tanzania is an old and good friend of China, Hu said the bilateral relationship has moved forward in a sound and smooth way and yielded fruitful cooperation in various fields since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties in 1964. "It can be viewed as an exemplary relationship of sincerity, solidarity and cooperation between the two developing countries," Hu said.

In 2008, bilateral trade hit an all-time high, reaching more than 1 billion U.S. dollars, Hu said. He held talks with Tanzanian President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete and met Zanzibar President Amani Abeid Karume earlier on Sunday.

Hu said they reviewed the growth of China-Tanzania relations and set a direction for bilateral relations to develop in a new era. The two sides agreed on cementing traditional friendship, deepening pragmatic cooperation and taking the relations to a new high, Hu said. "With joint efforts, I am convinced that bilateral relations will have a promising future and benefit the two nations," Hu said.

Before the interview, Hu attended the completion ceremony of Tanzania's state stadium and paid tribute to a cemetery for Chinese experts who worked and died in Tanzania.

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[US looks at naval pact with China](#)

Financial times – February 18

Washington and Beijing are considering a bilateral code of conduct to avoid an accidental sea confrontation, according to the US commander in the Pacific.

Asked at a media briefing in Hong Kong whether the US would consider a deal on the avoidance of incidents at sea, along the lines of one that Washington agreed with Moscow during the cold war, Admiral Timothy J. Keating said: "There are efforts under way to address that issue. They are preliminary, very preliminary."

His comments underline the seriousness with which the US takes China's military development.

Tim Huxley, executive director in Asia for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said: "Given the Asia-Pacific could become a more dangerous place as China's power expands and the US and others remain significant players there, an agreement along those lines, which would replicate what was in place during the cold war, could be a useful contribution.

"One side's defensive capability can be seen from the other side as offensive. This is a perennial problem when a developing country is modernising its armed forces."

Admiral Keating's comments show that bilateral military dialogue was not seriously disrupted after China suspended some contacts last October over US weapons sales to Taiwan. The dialogue is to resume this month after the first visit by Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, to Beijing.

Admiral Keating said China's military development was going well beyond what Beijing stated in its Defence White Paper. "There are areas that China is pursuing where their stated intentions don't appear to us to align with the developments that we see," he said.

He highlighted China's submarine programme, which has allowed Beijing to deploy about 65 of the 200 submarines operating in his Pacific region of command. "We want to understand why the Chinese feel compelled to develop underwater capability to the extent that they are," he said.

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[New treaty needed to 'reboot' Euro-Atlantic security, Russia says](#)

The Earth Times –February 18

Russia's proposal for a new security treaty was needed to "reboot" Euro-Atlantic security, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister said Wednesday in Vienna, as he called on countries to join the negotiations. Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Groushko presented the plan by Russian president Dmitry Medvedev at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Critics say it is aimed at checking the United States' power in Central and Eastern Europe.

Although Russia did not plan to replace existing treaties, Groushko said, "previous commitments were only selectively or impartially implemented," leading to an erosion of existing security mechanisms. US representative Kyle Scott asked Groushko why Russia was proposing a new treaty instead of adhering to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), according to a diplomat attending the OSCE meeting.

In 2007, Russia unilaterally suspended the CFE, which limits armament levels in Europe. Groushko made also clear in Vienna that his country did not want human rights, economics or environmental issues to be included in the treaty.

Russia's proposal calls for clearly defined criteria for peaceful conflict resolution and for laying down principles of arms control, while making sure that no single military alliance dominates Europe.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in a commentary for the French daily *Le Monde* earlier this month that they were ready to discuss these issues, but that they stayed committed to current European security and arms control standards.

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[Asia Pacific intelligence chiefs meet in Singapore](#)

Asia News One –February 18

The second Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference (APICC) was officially opened at the Sheraton Towers this morning. Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean officiated at the opening ceremony.

APICC is an informal forum for military intelligence chiefs from the Asia-Pacific region to discuss and exchange perspectives on common intelligence challenges and opportunities as well as other issues of mutual interest. Military intelligence representatives from more than 20 countries are attending the conference this year

Mr Teo said that by sharing different perspectives and experiences, such interactions help to build understanding and "lay the foundation for our countries and armed forces to work together in response to any future crises".

This year's APICC, which ends on 20 Feb, aims to enhance information-sharing among the Asia-Pacific nations on counter-terrorism, maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Over the next two days, intelligence representatives from Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and the United Kingdom will address these issues in various plenary sessions.

APICC is co-hosted by the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the United States Pacific Command (US PACOM). The first conference was held in 2007 in Kuala Lumpur.

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[Spratlys issue not on Asean agenda](#)

The Manila Times –February 21

President Gloria Arroyo does not plan to bring up at the forthcoming Asean summit the recently approved baselines bill that has triggered a protest from China against the Philippines, a Palace official said Friday. At the heart of the issue is the Spratlys, a group of about 100 islands and reefs in the South China Sea that is being claimed in whole or in part by China, Taiwan and several Asean countries—the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. The Philippines is claiming just seven of the islands—the Kalayaan Island Group. “That’s not part of the agenda,” Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said, referring to the baselines bill issue. “In first place China is not part of Asean, maybe a dialogue partner. It’s not part of the President’s agenda, and there will be proper time for these matters to be discussed.”

Asean is Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional bloc of 10 countries that includes the Philippines. Remonde said the baselines bill—a Senate bill that outlines the Philippine territory—was crafted in pursuit of national interest, but mindful of concerns of other countries in the region. The Philippines needs the baselines bill to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which the country is one of the signatories, Remonde explained.

The Philippines should not worry about China’s protest, since the bill is consistent with the country’s commitments under the Asean-China declaration, the secretary added. “The Philippines is prepared to undertake consultations with partners before the UN, because precisely UNCLOS was passed to address international jurisdiction and conflict.”

The Philippine baselines bill, which just needs President Arroyo’s signature to become law, clarifies its maritime jurisdiction. The bill also refers to Kalayaan as a “regime of islands.”

The regime of islands principle exempts water and below-water areas, as well as rocks that cannot sustain human or economic life of their own, from having any exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.

Reaction understandable

Beijing’s reaction to the baselines bill is understandable, and the Philippines would have probably reacted in a similar way if it reversed roles with China, an official from the Department of Foreign Affairs told *The Manila Times*.

The source asked not to be named, so as not to preempt future talks with China about the Spratlys, which is believed to be rich in oil, gas and other mineral deposits.

“Of course when we hear about Spratlys and [the] baselines bills of other claimant countries, we will be interested. It will call our attention,” the source said.

Earlier Thursday, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi said in a statement that their government reiterates that Huangyan Island and Nansha Islands, which are affected by the Philippine

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baselines bill, have always been a part of China's territory. And on Wednesday, China's state-owned Xinhua news agency reported that Vice Foreign Minister Wang Guangya had summoned the charge d'affaires of the Philippine Embassy in Beijing to lodge a "stern protest" over the baselines bill. The Chinese Embassy in the Philippines confirmed the meeting took place.

The unnamed source at the Department of Foreign Affairs said the Philippine government does not intend to summon the Chinese envoy to Manila in response. The source added that the Philippines is in fact willing to sit down with China to discuss the baselines issue. But the source explained that wanting to talk does not mean that the Philippines would change its mind over the baselines bill. "We are willing to hear their concerns, but at the end of the day, we will still go by our baselines bill. There's no reason to take it back, because it is compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean)-China Declaration of the Conduct of Parties."

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[China-U.S. ready to resume military exchanges](#)

Honolulu Advertiser – February 22

The symbolism was clear even if a bit muted. The commander of U.S. forces in Asia, Adm. Timothy Keating, came to this doorway to China last week to persuade leaders of the People's Liberation Army to revive military exchanges with the United States.

To give the Chinese a little extra nudge, the admiral had the 97,000-ton U.S. aircraft carrier USS John Stennis, among the most powerful warships afloat, anchor in Hong Kong's harbor as he met informally with senior Chinese officers in garrison here. Hong Kong, after a century of British colonial rule, was turned over to Beijing in 1997 and became nominally an autonomous region within the People's Republic of China.

In a roundtable session with news correspondents, Keating said he had reason to believe Beijing was ready to renew those exchanges. Pressed to explain why he thought so, Keating was reluctant to provide details but noted there had been "indirect but unmistakable forms of communication" through third parties, including visitors to his headquarters in Hawai'i, that the Chinese were open to negotiation.

Further, the admiral disclosed that an initiative was under way to forge an agreement intended to prevent hostile incidents between U.S. and Chinese warships at sea. The U.S. and the Soviet Union had an agreement during the Cold War that neither navy would train its guns on the other's warships or fly fighters over the other's ships. Keating said the new effort was in its earliest stages.

Sino-U.S. military exchanges, which had been expanding in fits and starts for more than a decade, were abruptly broken off by the Chinese in October after the U.S. announced it would sell \$6.5 billion worth of arms to Taiwan, the self-governing island over which Beijing claims sovereignty. The U.S. is obliged, under the Taiwan Relations Act, to provide Taiwan with weapons to defend itself.

The impasse appeared to have been broken when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said on the eve of her current trip to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China that the U.S. and China "will resume midlevel military-to-military discussions later this month." She was scheduled to be in Beijing today. Clinton's disclosure caused mild surprise in the Pentagon and at the Pacific Command in Hawai'i, where defense officials wondered why such an announcement had not come from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates or from Adm. Keating, who is responsible for military exchanges with the Chinese. One official shrugged it off as a "rookie mistake" from an administration still getting its feet on the ground.

In any event, the admiral argued vigorously for a resumption of military dialogue with China, asserting that it would be "very much in our mutual benefit" and would lessen the chances of a confrontation degenerating into a crisis or even into armed conflict.

Keating, on a journey through Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, recalled that a Chinese officer had once suggested that the U.S. and China divide the Pacific Ocean, with China responsible for

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keeping the peace west of Hawai'i and the U.S. confined to waters east of Hawai'i. "I said," Keating reported, "no thanks."

Instead, the admiral asserted, the U.S. and China "should work more together." He noted that three Chinese warships had been patrolling in the Gulf of Aden against pirates who preyed on Chinese merchant vessels. He said Chinese ship captains often communicated with the commander of a U.S. naval task force in that region. On the other hand, Keating said, the U.S. and China had a "hot line" for communication and he had used it when the U.S. was delivering relief supplies to China after a devastating earthquake. But, he said, "I don't have a phone number yet" so that he could call a Chinese officer directly.

Responding to fresh reports that China sought to build four aircraft carriers, two with conventional power and two with nuclear power, over the next quarter century, Keating was skeptical. "It's not as easy as it looks," said the naval aviator with 5,000 hours of flight time and 1,200 landings aboard aircraft carriers. "Operating an aircraft carrier is a very demanding discipline. "It will take them a long time," he contended, "and it will be harder than they think."

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[What message has Hillary sent to Asia?: View from China](#)

People's Daily Online – February 23

Obama administration has begun to distinguish itself in its Asia policy with the conclusion of new Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton's Feb 15-22 Asia trip, which took her to Japan, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea (or South Korea) and China. From her just-ended Asia trip, it is not hard to tell of the Obama administration's trio hallmarks on the Asia issue, namely, attaching even greater importance to its allies, to China and to the use of its overall "hard power".

The United States has all along taken ties with its allies as the basis of its external relationships, and the Obama administration is no exception. In her trip to Japan and South Korea, Hillary Clinton strove sedulously to demonstrate America's alliance ties with Japan and South Korea in an attempt to ram or solidify the strategic trust with Tokyo and Seoul.

Discerning people know quite clearly that Hillary's visit to Japan and South Korea coincides precisely with the time when rifts in its relations with Japan and South Korea are enlarging. In the later period of Bush administration, Japan felt the U.S. spurring the dialogue with North Korea on the denuclearization issue to the neglect of its concern, so that the U.S.-Japan rift expanded. Meanwhile, the present South Korean government has turned deeply wary of the U.S.'s increasing approaches to North Korea.

So, at the moment, the U.S. has announced Stephen Bosworth, a former senior State Department official, who had served US ambassador to South Korea from 1997 to 2000, as the US special envoy to North Korea, meanwhile terming its partnership with South Korea as the U.S.-South Korea strategic alliance. Thus, Hillary Clinton opened the East Asia chess game for Obama.

Given the extension of security connotation and scope of cooperation in the present era of increasingly mutually-reliant globalization, the U.S. attaches importance to more extensive national interests and coordinates more with non-allied countries. In fact, the humanity has to join hands to cope with new, non-traditional security threats in face of range alternatives imposed by such new issues as the global financial crisis, energy conservation, greenhouse gas reduction, and large-scale epidemic diseases.

Like the Bill Clinton government preceding George W. Bush's administration, Obama administration is most likely to take a rigorous, pragmatic approach and to cooperate most efficiently with concerted efforts of new-emerged economies, particularly with China in an all-round way. During her current trip, Hillary reaffirmed efforts to raise the levels of US strategic and economic dialogues with China, agreed to coordinate closely with it on response to global financial crisis and work for positive outcome of the G-20 London financial summit to be held in April.

People have noticed that Hillary Clinton thanked China for its continued confidence in US Treasury bond. "I appreciate China's continued confidence in US Treasuries," she told reporters last Saturday, Feb. 20

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after meeting Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. And the U.S. also looks forward to the large-scale cooperation with China in the sphere of environmental protection.

Moreover, Mrs. Clinton tried to apply the concept of "soft power" to the Asia diplomacy, not only abandoning former President George Bush's unilateralism but seeking to extend American interests via wide-ranging contacts or engagements with Asian cultural and economic circles.

Beyond any doubt, Hillary's itinerary includes Indonesia for the first time. She capitalized on sentimental factors to get in with Indonesia where President Obama spent part of his childhood, so as to help forge still closer cooperation with this big Muslim nation. Furthermore, the United States attempts to improve its ties with the entire Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and raise or upgrade its image in the Muslim world while going on with its continuous, meritorious services in the global war on terror.

Hillary Clinton has come to visit East Asia at the time when the U.S is currently beset with difficulties both at home and overseas, and her polite gesture during the trip has been well received wherever she went. Nevertheless, the U.S. currently feels it not easy to accomplish several things as it does not have a fresh spurt of energy as it did before. The remarks on the North Korea nuclear issue she gave in Seoul does not have any new, fresh ideas and, its intended agreement of denuclearization for peace with North Korea alone is hard to attract Pyongyang. Hence, people have come to see that it is a normalcy for the U.S. to seek international cooperation, since it finds itself difficult today to resolve numerous thorny issues alone.

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[14th ASEAN summit kicks off in Thai town](#)

Philippine Daily Inquirer –February 25

The 14th ASEAN Summit kicks Thursday in the Thai coastal town of Cha-Am in Petchaburi province with regional integration, the global financial crisis, human rights, food and energy security, labor and trade issues expected to dominate discussions. This year's theme of the ASEAN summit is "ASEAN Charter for ASEAN Peoples." Topping the agenda of the summit, which will last until March 1, is the signing by leaders of the 10-member regional bloc of the Declaration on the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015. The declaration sets out the guidelines for the creation of a single free trade area for the region of 800 million people by 2015.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is expected to arrive on February 28 at the Hua Hin International Airport on board a chartered Philippine Airlines flight from Manila. She will be accompanied by members of her Cabinet and Congress.

She will be met at the airport by Thai Deputy Prime Minister Sanan Kachornprasat and Philippine Ambassador to Thailand Antonio Rodriguez, among others.

The President and members of the Philippine delegation will be billeted at the Hilton Hua Hin, a short distance from the main summit venue at the Dusit Thani Hua Hin Hotel in Cha-Am, about 200 km from Bangkok. Upon her arrival, President Arroyo is expected to attend the 5th Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) summit scheduled at 10:15 a.m. on Saturday. At least 23 agreements, declarations and statements will be signed or adopted by ASEAN leaders, foreign ministers and economic ministers during the four-day summit which will formally open on February 28.

The agreements will cover issues relating to ASEAN community-building, food and energy security as well as economic cooperation.

ASEAN leaders will also adopt five documents. These include the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, the Second Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan, the Joint Declaration on the Attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in ASEAN and a Statement on Food Security in the ASEAN Region.

ASEAN economic ministers are expected to sign on Thursday afternoon various agreements aimed at boosting trade, investment and employment in the region.

Among the trade agreements to be signed by the Philippines are the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (Atiga), the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) and the ASEAN-Australia New Zealand Free Trade Area (Aanfta). The trade agreements come at a crucial time when the region's exports are plunging due to weak demand from the US and Europe, which have slipped into recession. By progressively reducing tariffs and eliminating other trade barriers, ASEAN-member countries hope to boost trade within the region.

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ASEAN foreign ministers will also sign the Petroleum Security Agreement, the Draft Terms of Reference of an ASEAN Human Rights Body and the Recommendations of the High Level Legal Experts' Group on Follow-Up to the ASEAN Charter. After the summit's formal opening ceremony on February 28, ASEAN leaders and their spouses will have a royal audience with King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit at the Klai Kangwol Palace, the royal seaside retreat in Hua Hin.

Being held parallel to the summit is the 2008 ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (ASEAN-Bis) from February 25 to 27 in Bangkok. The business summit is annually organized by the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (Abac) to coincide with the ASEAN Summit. ASEAN-Bis brings together private and public sector organizations, government representatives and the business community from within and outside ASEAN for dialogue and networking

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[Iran building seven more satellites](#)

International Herald Tribune – February 12

Iran is building seven more satellites, the telecommunications minister was quoted as saying on Thursday, less than two weeks after the country sent its first domestically produced satellite into space.

Iran launched a research and telecoms satellite called Omid on February 3, a step that worried Western powers who fear the Islamic Republic is seeking to build a nuclear bomb and missile delivery systems.

Iran, the world's fourth-largest oil producer, says its nuclear work is to generate electricity, and the satellite launch was for peaceful purposes. The long-range ballistic technology used to put satellites into orbit could also be used to launch warheads. Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Soleimani told reporters Iranian scientists were manufacturing seven more satellites, the semi-official Fars News Agency said, without giving details on when they might be launched. "Of these satellites, four are for use in low altitudes and weigh under 100 kg (220 lb) ... Three other satellites capable of operating just below 36,000 km (22,370 miles) are also being built by Iranian scientists," he said.

The same minister was last week quoted as saying Iran was building four more satellites but it was not immediately clear whether he was then only referring to those to be sent into a low orbit. Fars News Agency also quoted him as saying that Omid, which means Hope in Persian, was performing its mission successfully. State media had earlier said Omid would return to earth with data after orbiting for one to three months. "The Omid satellite is currently carrying out its mission successfully, being one of the country's biggest achievements," Soleimani said.

The head of Iran's space organisation, Reza Taghipour, was quoted by the Khorassan newspaper on Thursday as saying Iran was also taking initial steps towards launching a manned space mission but he made clear this was still years away.

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[Taiwan Finalizes Long Awaited P-3 Deal](#)

Defense News – February 23

Taiwan, the U.S. Navy and Lockheed Martin have finally settled issues over price and offset options, and are expected to soon sign a contract for 12 P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft for \$1.3 billion, said sources in Taiwan. The signing will mark the end of two decades of struggle by Taiwan to replace its decrepit Northrop Grumman S-2T anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft.

In April 2001, former U.S. President George W. Bush authorized the sale of a major arms package to Taiwan that included 12 P-3s, eight diesel submarines and four Kidd-class destroyers. Much of the arms package was held up by years of bickering in Taiwan's legislature that alienated Washington.

The delay is also expected to have increased the price per aircraft - originally \$66 million in 2001 - but an exact breakdown on figures was unavailable. Lockheed Martin did not comment on final contract negotiations.

Taiwan's air force procured 37 S-2Ts in 1978 and transferred the remaining 26 to the navy's 1st Aviation Group in 1998 to outfit two squadrons, the 133rd and 134th. Today, sources in Taiwan have said there are only three functioning S-2T aircraft with ASW capabilities. One operational S-2T was spotted during a Taiwan naval exercise in 2008 in the Pacific.

Since 2000, besides the P-3C, the Lockheed S-3 Viking and Alenia C-27J Spartan were discussed as replacement options. Before 2000, with the pullout of European defense contractors from Taiwan because of pressure from China, the military considered the Fokker Maritime Enforcer and the Dassault Atlantique Europatrol aircraft. The U.S. had also discussed refurbished Lockheed P-2 Neptune aircraft, but Taiwan rejected the offer.

Part of the P-3 delay was early Taiwan military opposition to procuring refurbished aircraft. Despite the fact P-3 production had been discontinued, Taiwan military officials insisted on reopening the line, a costly option that delayed procurement for several years.

A late bid in 2006 by L-3 Communications also delayed procurement as Taiwan debated the option. L-3 hired former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to lobby Taiwan for an open bidding. L-3 finally canceled its bidding efforts. The P-3s will be pulled from the U.S. Air Force's bone yard, the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, in Arizona, for refurbishment.

China has greatly expanded its conventional submarine fleet over the past twenty years. It now has roughly 55 diesel attack submarines, including Kilo-class, aging Romeo-class, Ming-class and Song-class submarines.

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[India to Construct Own Aircraft Carrier: Navy](#)

Defense News –February 26

India has started building its own aircraft carrier, its navy announced Feb. 26, amid a protracted dispute with Russia over the cost of a Soviet-era carrier.

The navy said the keel-laying ceremony for the vessel would be held Feb. 28, but production of components for the 858-foot ship had already begun.

"With this project, India joins the select club of 40,000-ton aircraft carrier designers and builders," the navy said in a statement.

The carrier will be armed with surface-to-air missiles, latest radar and an array of other combat systems from Israel, France and Russia, naval officials said. "This is the most prestigious project that the Indian navy has taken up in-house so far," the navy said.

India currently has only one operational carrier - the INS Viraat - after scrapping its first, INS Vikrant, in 1997 after more than 35 years of service. Viraat is scheduled to be phased out soon.

India has been involved in a long-running wrangle with Moscow over a 2004 deal to buy a refurbished Soviet-era carrier, the Admiral Gorshkov. The original price for the refit was \$970 million, but Russia later demanded an additional \$1.2 billion. The sides eventually settled for an extra \$900 million, but the carrier has yet to be delivered, and the latest reports suggest the Russian export firm Rosoboronexport wanted to increase the price tag again.

The 137-ship Indian navy is in expansion mode and has warships from the U.S. navy and submarines from France.

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[Nuclear submarines collide in Atlantic](#)

Guardian – February 16

A Royal Navy nuclear submarine and a French vessel have been damaged in a collision deep below the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

HMS Vanguard and Le Triomphant, which were carrying nuclear missiles on routine patrols, are reported to have collided while submerged on 3 or 4 February. Between them they had about 250 sailors on board.

The Ministry of Defence initially refused to confirm the incident, saying it was not policy to comment on submarine operations. This afternoon the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, issued a statement saying the two vessels hit each other while travelling at very low speeds and no one was injured.

"We can confirm that the capability remained unaffected and there has been no compromise to nuclear safety," he said. The MoD said the Vanguard returned to its base in Faslane, Scotland, with only "scrapes".

Defence officials told guardian.co.uk the two submarines collided in what they said was an extraordinary accident. "They can't see each other in the water," one official said, raising questions about the submarines' sonar and why they did not detect one another.

Opposition parties asked how the accident was possible. The SNP's Westminster leader, Angus Robertson, said: "The UK Ministry of Defence needs to explain how it is possible for a submarine carrying weapons of mass destruction to collide with another submarine carrying weapons of mass destruction in the middle of the world's second-largest ocean.

"In contrast to MoD secrecy, the French military authorities publicised details of the incident on a website. The MoD cannot hide behind operational secrecy and must make a statement on this as a priority."

The shadow defence secretary, Liam Fox, called the incident "extremely worrying".

The Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, Nick Harvey, said: "While the British nuclear fleet has a good safety record, if there were ever to be a bang it would be a mighty big one. The public entrust this equipment to the government confident that all possible precautions are being taken. Now that this incident is public knowledge, the people of Britain, France and the rest of the world need to be reassured this can never happen again and that lessons are being learned."

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France's defence ministry said in a brief statement on 6 February that the Triomphant had struck "a submerged object (probably a container)" during a return journey from a patrol, damaging the sonar dome on the front of the submarine.

It said no crew members were injured and the nuclear security of the submarine had not been compromised.

Today the ministry confirmed that another sub was involved, saying: "They briefly came into contact at a very low speed while submerged."

After the accident, the French submarine returned to its base on L'Île Longue, near Brest, under its own power and escorted by a frigate.

Vanguard, one of Britain's four V-class submarines that make up the Trident nuclear deterrent, each of which is capable of carrying up to 16 missiles, was said to have visible dents on its hull as it was towed home at the weekend. Inquiries are under way on both sides of the Channel.

Kate Hudson, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament chairwoman, described the incident as "a nuclear nightmare of the highest order". "The collision of two submarines, both with nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons on board, could have released vast amounts of radiation and scattered scores of nuclear warheads across the seabed," she said. "The dents reportedly visible on the British sub show the boats were no more than a couple of seconds away from total catastrophe."

Hudson said it was the first time since the cold war that two nuclear-armed submarines were known to have collided. "These dangers are inherent whilst the British government maintains its 1960s policy of having at least one nuclear weapons submarine sailing round the Atlantic 24 hours a day, 365 days a year," she said. "HMS Vanguard is likely to be confined to port for months with a multimillion-pound repair bill. Gordon Brown should seize this opportunity to end continuous patrols."

Le Triomphant, which entered service in 1997, carries 16 nuclear missiles and is one of four nuclear-armed submarines in the French fleet. Stephane Lhomme, a spokesman for the French anti-nuclear group Sortir du Nucleaire, said its network of activists was on alert for any signs of radioactive leaks near French shores. "This reminds us that we could have a new catastrophe with a nuclear submarine at any moment. It is a risk that exists during missions but also in port," he said. "These are mobile nuclear reactors."

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[South Korea, US to hold military exercise amid tensions](#)

Channel News Asia – 18 February

South Korea and the United States will hold a scheduled joint military exercise involving tens of thousands of troops next month amid mounting cross-border tensions with North Korea.

The US-South Korean combined forces command said in a statement that the "Key Resolve/Foal Eagle" drill would take place from March 9-20 across the peninsula. It said the command had informed North Korea of the scheduled "defence-oriented" drill, which will involve "all available (South Korean and US) service members and equipment in the peninsula." It did not disclose further details.

A South Korean defence ministry spokesman told AFP an US aircraft carrier and 26,000 American troops -- 12,000 in South Korea and 14,000 from overseas -- and an undisclosed number of South Korean troops would be taking part.

Communist North Korea regularly denounces joint military exercises as a preparation for an attack on it, a claim denied by Seoul and Washington. The two Koreas are still technically at war since the 1950-1953 Korean conflict ended only in an armistice.

Seoul's defence minister told parliament Monday North Korea has been preparing to test-fire a long-range missile since January, in defiance of US and international warnings.

The North said last month it had scrapped all peace accords with the South, including a 1991 agreement that recognised the Yellow Sea border as an interim frontier.

The announcement sparked fears of a naval clash because the border was the scene of bloody naval battles in 1999 and 2002.

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[Chinese navy to attend joint military exercise in Pakistan](#)

China View – February 19

The Chinese navy will participate in a ten-day multinational naval exercise in the seas off Pakistan in March, a Ministry of National Defense official said Thursday. A task force, composed of the destroyer Guangzhou, a helicopter and 10 members of the marine corps will take part in the "Peace-09" exercise, said ministry spokesman Huang Xueping.

The drill, slated for March 5 in the port city of Karachi, was initiated by the Pakistan navy and will be attended by 11 countries. It includes search-and-rescue exercises, anti-piracy operations and fleet formation defenses.

The purpose for attending the operation is to allow the Chinese navy to gain useful experience from foreign counterparts, strengthen its communication capacity, learn how to cooperate with foreign navies in handling new threats and challenges at sea and maintaining regional peace and stability, Huang said. The Chinese navy, together with task forces from France, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States, attended a Pakistan navy-initiated joint military exercise in March 2007.

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[U.S. now sees Iran as pursuing nuclear bomb](#)

Los Angeles Times – February 12

Little more than a year after U.S. spy agencies concluded that Iran had halted work on a nuclear weapon, the Obama administration has made it clear that it believes there is no question that Tehran is seeking the bomb. In his news conference this week, President Obama went so far as to describe Iran's "development of a nuclear weapon" before correcting himself to refer to its "pursuit" of weapons capability.

Obama's nominee to serve as CIA director, Leon E. Panetta, left little doubt about his view last week when he testified on Capitol Hill. "From all the information I've seen," Panetta said, "I think there is no question that they are seeking that capability." The language reflects the extent to which senior U.S. officials now discount a National Intelligence Estimate issued in November 2007 that was instrumental in derailing U.S. and European efforts to pressure Iran to shut down its nuclear program.

As the administration moves toward talks with Iran, Obama appears to be sending a signal that the United States will not be drawn into a debate over Iran's intent. "When you're talking about negotiations in Iran, it is dangerous to appear weak or naive," said Joseph Cirincione, a nuclear weapons expert and president of the Ploughshares Fund, an anti-proliferation organization based in Washington. Cirincione said the unequivocal language also worked to Obama's political advantage. "It guards against criticism from the right that the administration is underestimating Iran," he said.

Iran has long maintained that it aims to generate electricity, not build bombs, with nuclear power. But Western intelligence officials and nuclear experts increasingly view those claims as implausible. U.S. officials said that although no new evidence had surfaced to undercut the findings of the 2007 estimate, there was growing consensus that it provided a misleading picture and that the country was poised to reach crucial bomb-making milestones this year.

Obama's top intelligence official, Dennis C. Blair, the director of national intelligence, is expected to address mounting concerns over Iran's nuclear program in testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee today.

When it was issued, the NIE stunned the international community. It declared that U.S. spy agencies judged "with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program." U.S. intelligence officials later said the conclusion was based on evidence that Iran had stopped secret efforts to design a nuclear warhead around the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Often overlooked in the NIE, officials said, was that Iran had not stopped its work on other crucial fronts, including missile design and uranium enrichment. Many experts contend that these are more difficult than building a bomb.

Iran's advances on enrichment have become a growing source of alarm. Since 2004, the country has

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gone from operating a few dozen centrifuges -- cylindrical machines used to enrich uranium -- to nearly 6,000, weapons experts agree. By November, Iran had produced an estimated 1,400 pounds of low-enriched uranium, not nearly enough to fuel a nuclear energy reactor, but perilously close to the quantity needed to make a bomb.

A report issued last month by the Institute for Science and International Security concluded that "Iran is moving steadily toward a breakout capability and is expected to reach that milestone during the first half of 2009." That means it would have enough low-enriched uranium to be able to quickly convert it to weapons-grade material.

Tehran's progress has come despite CIA efforts to sabotage shipments of centrifuge components on their way into Iran and entice the country's nuclear scientists to leave. Iran still faces considerable hurdles. The country touted its launch of a 60-pound satellite into orbit this month. Experts said Iran's rockets would need to be able to carry more than 2,000 pounds to deliver a first-generation nuclear bomb.

And there are indications that the U.S. and Iran are interested in holding serious diplomatic discussions for the first time in three decades. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said this week that his nation was "ready to hold talks based on mutual respect," and Obama indicated that his administration would look for opportunities "in the coming months."

Hassan Qashqavi, spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry, on Wednesday warned the U.S. not to wait for Iranian presidential elections this year, because ultimate authority rests with supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He also said Iran would be patient. "Since a new administration came to power in the U.S., we do not want to burn the opportunity of President Obama and give him time to change the reality on the ground," Qashqavi said.

But experts said Iran was now close enough to nuclear weapons capability that it may be less susceptible to international pressure. "They've made more progress in the last five years than in the previous 10," Cirincione said.

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[Iran cooperation poor, but slows nuclear growth: IAEA](#)

Reuters – February 17

Iran is still not helping U.N. nuclear inspectors find out whether it worked on developing an atom bomb in the past but Tehran has slowed its expansion of a key nuclear facility, the U.N. nuclear watchdog said Tuesday.

Speaking in Paris, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei said Iran had not been installing a significant number of centrifuges, machines that enrich uranium, as quickly as it could have been.

"They haven't really been adding centrifuges, which is a good thing," ElBaradei said at a think-tank in Paris, adding: "Our assessment is that it's a political decision."

The U.N. Security Council has imposed three rounds of sanctions on Iran for failing to suspend enrichment, a process that can produce fuel for power plants or, potentially, bombs.

Major powers and ElBaradei suspect Iran is trying to develop the capacity to make nuclear weapons. Iran says it only wants to master atomic technology to meet its growing electricity needs.

In its last report on Iran in November, the IAEA said Tehran planned to start installing another 3,000 centrifuges early this year, adding to 3,800 already enriching uranium and another 2,200 being gradually introduced.

ElBaradei's comments, made two days before his next report on Iran is due to be issued, suggested that progress on installing more centrifuges at Iran's Natanz enrichment site was much slower than had been expected.

"Natanz is supposed to have 50,000 centrifuges. Right now they have 5,000," he said, adding that Iran had not added a "significant" number of centrifuges.

NOT HAPPY

Iran had allowed access to nuclear sites to monitor activity there, but ElBaradei criticised Iran for its continued failure to cooperate with an IAEA probe aimed at clearing up the true nature of Iran's past nuclear work.

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Various suspicious materials have been uncovered in more than five years of inspections, including a document showing how to craft uranium metal into hemispheres, which could only be used to make weapons. Iran says it never used the plan.

"No, I'm not obviously happy with the degree of cooperation ... They shut off any cooperation with the agency over the past few months," said ElBaradei, who has for years called on Iran to do more to help his agency's investigations.

"Iran right now is not providing any access or any clarification with regard to those studies or the whole possible military dimension," he added. ElBaradei played down fears of an imminent Iranian bomb. "They will have probably in a year or so enough low enriched uranium which, if converted to highly enriched uranium, and if they have the know-how to weaponize it and to deliver it, then they can have one nuclear weapon," he said

But many other steps would have to be taken to produce a weapon, such as walking out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, expelling U.N. nuclear inspectors and mastering the technology to produce a nuclear explosion, he said. "If I go by the intelligence community in the U.S., they are saying that they still have 2-5 years to be able to do that -- to develop a weapon -- which to me means that we have at least enough time for diplomacy," he said.

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[North Korea 'plans rocket launch'](#)

BBC News –February 24

North Korea has announced that it is preparing to launch a rocket carrying a communications satellite. It did not give a date for the launch, but said it would mark a great step forward for the communist state. Correspondents say the statement is Pyongyang's clearest reference yet to what neighbours believe may be the imminent test of a long-range missile. When it tested the Taepodong-1 missile in 1998, it claimed to have put a satellite in orbit.

In July 2006 it test-fired the three-stage long-range Taepodong-2, but the missile failed shortly after launch. North Korea's move comes amid heightened tensions with South Korea, and with Pyongyang pushing for a top spot on the agenda of the new US administration.

Alaska reach

The announcement came in a statement from the national space agency, carried by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). "Full-scale preparations are under way to launch a rocket Unha-2 to put communication satellite Kwangmyongsong-2 into orbit," it said. "When this satellite is successfully launched, our space technology will make a great step forward toward becoming an economically strong country."

The launch is planned from a base in Hwadae in the northeast of the country, the statement said. Satellite images showed activity at the site, but there was no missile on the launch pad, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported, citing an intelligence official. The base in Hwadae, called Musudan-ri, was where North Korea test-fired its long-range Taepodong-2 in 2006.

There are fears that the missile, with a theoretical range of 6,700 km (4,200 miles), could be used to target the US state of Alaska. But when the missile was last tested, it failed within a minute and fell into the sea.

'Threatening act'

North Korea's move comes with talks on an aid-for-disarmament deal - involving the US, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea - currently stalled. Relations between the two Koreas are also tense following South President Lee Myung-bak's decision to link the provision of bilateral aid to progress on denuclearisation. Pyongyang has recently scrapped several peace agreements with Seoul.

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The mooted launch also follows speculation about the health of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, who is believed to have suffered a stroke in mid-2008.

On a trip to Asia last week, the new US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned North Korea against any rash moves, saying a test-launch would be "unhelpful". South Korean Defence Minister Lee Sang-hee urged North Korea to provide evidence to support its claim of a satellite, rather than missile, launch. "Whether it is a missile or a satellite, it is similar technology. In either case, we believe it is a threatening act towards us and we are preparing to deal with it accordingly," he added.

Japan said it was currently assessing the situation and China said it had taken note of the matter, while calling for stability in the region. North Korea tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006. But experts say it does not yet have the technology to make a nuclear warhead small enough to mount on a missile.

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[Navy Tests Trident Missile](#)

Global Security Newswire – February 27

The U.S. Navy successfully test-fired a submarine-launched Trident missile earlier this month, the main firm involved in producing the weapon said Monday. The Feb. 13 launch of the Trident D-5 long-range ballistic missile from the *USS Alabama* marked the weapon's 126th successful test flight, according to the defense contractor Lockheed Martin.

“The D-5 missile’s record of success underscores the readiness and reliability of this key element of our nation’s strategic defenses,” Melanie Sloane, vice president of Fleet Ballistic Missile programs at Lockheed Martin Space Systems Co., said in a statement. U.S. Ohio-class submarines and British Vanguard-class submarines carry the multiple-warhead missile, which can travel as far as 4,000 nautical miles.

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[Disarmament Commission Leader Accuses World of "Sleepwalking" on Nuclear Threats](#)

Global Security Newswire – February 27

Australia is reinvigorating efforts to prevent a nuclear catastrophe after a "decade of sleepwalking" by the international community, the co-chairman of the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament said yesterday.

Major nuclear threats include the atomic programs in Iran and North Korea; the potential for additional states in the Middle East and elsewhere to acquire sensitive nuclear technologies and materials; and the possibility that terrorists could obtain a nuclear weapon, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans said. The international commission, led by Evans and former Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, is working to set the atomic agenda for the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference and beyond.

Evans said nuclear weapons pose a danger on par with global warming and the current financial crisis, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

"This isn't the stuff of science fiction and fantasy," he said. "It's really very fragile, this whole system" (Yuko Narushima, [Sydney Morning Herald](#), Feb. 27).

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