Gates heads to KL to bolster defense ties
Malaysiakini.com
November 05, 2010

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates departs today for Australia and Malaysia to bolster defence ties amid concern in the region over China's growing economic and naval power.

boris yeltsin funeral 040507 robert gatesGates will join Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and top US military officer Admiral Mike Mullen at an annual US-Australia conference of ministers in Melbourne next week before heading to Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell told a news conference.

Talks in Melbourne will underscore the strength of the US alliance with Australia and address efforts to help regional partners with "maritime security" in Asia, said Morrell.

US officials often employ the phrase "maritime security" to refer to concerns about China's assertive stance over territorial rights in the Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea.

The meeting would offer a chance to assess "the vital role our military partnership continues to play in Asia's overall security environment," he said.

Both American and Australian officials have voiced worries about China's tough line on territorial disputes with Asian neighbours in the Pacific as well as its increased defence spending.

US military leaders are especially concerned over China's investment in anti-ship missiles and submarines that could limit the reach of the US Navy, which has long dominated the Pacific Ocean.

The meeting in Melbourne was originally scheduled for January this year but the devastating earthquake in Haiti led both Gates and Clinton to cancel their plans to help with the humanitarian crisis.

The US defense secretary's discussions in Melbourne would also focus on the war effort in Afghanistan, where Australia has deployed about 1,500 troops mainly in the south, Morrell said.

Gates to meet Najib

Gates was due on Tuesday to fly to Malaysia, where he will meet Prime Minister Najib Razak and Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, in the latest sign of improving relations after years of strained ties between the two countries.

NONEThe talks will address "our strengthening bilateral military ties," following an expansion in joint exercises in recent years, Morrell said.

President Barack Obama's administration has praised Malaysia for its decision this year to deploy a medical unit to Afghanistan and for its cooperation in efforts to secure the Malacca Strait, a vital channel for oil to East Asian countries.

Coming after Clinton's visit to Malaysia this week, Gates' trip marked "yet another signal of our deepening relationship with Malaysia," Morrel said.

- AFP

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/ 147398