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Daniel Drezner's Shallow Critique

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[Ted Galen Carpenter](#)^[2]

Last week, I was far away from Washington on a most enjoyable vacation and was, therefore, spared (at least for a few days) having to read Daniel Drezner's [snarky critique](#)^[3] over at *Foreign Policy Online* of my recent [TNI piece](#)^[4] about how China benefits from U.S. policy blunders.

Clearly, Dan was unimpressed with that piece. "Um, Ted? 2006 called, and it wants the hackneyed geopolitical analysis back . . . and sent via MySpace. Seriously, this blog post reads like it's five years old."

Ouch! How will I ever recover from such a devastating rebuke? Actually, with very little difficulty.

Drezner accuses me of ignoring several crucial facts, most notably that America's popularity in the world "has rebounded quite nicely since 2006," and that China, therefore has not been able to profit from antagonism directed against the U.S. Well, yes, if one uses the dismal depths of George W. Bush's administration as the benchmark, America is practically beloved around the world today. But by that standard, an analyst writing in 1935 could conclude that the U.S. economy was experiencing an unprecedented boom—if his benchmark for comparison was 1932 or early 1933.

America's global popularity is still at anemic levels—and the initial euphoria about Barack Obama has faded noticeably. And as shown in the Pew Research Center's 2010 survey of global attitudes, America's reputation in the Muslim world is not just anemic, [it is hideous](#)^[5]. That's 2010, Dan, not 2006. The Obama administration's hesitant, partial embrace of the so-called Arab Awakening may have improved matters somewhat, but one should not fall into the trap of exaggerating the impact of Washington's 11th hour conversion.

Drezner notes correctly that China made some foreign policy blunders in the past two years that "increased global wariness about the Middle Kingdom and (according to China experts who talk to me) forced Beijing to re-think its grand strategy." I encountered similar comments from Chinese scholars when I was in Beijing and Shanghai in 2009.

But two caveats are in order. First, China *has* shown recent signs of dialing back some of the

more objectionable features of its policy. That stands in marked contrast to the U.S. military escalation in Afghanistan, Washington's transparent efforts to maintain an outsized presence in Iraq after the scheduled withdrawal of its military forces, and the new intervention in Libya. In terms of intrusive policies, China doesn't begin to compete with the United States.

Second, those same Chinese scholars exuded a degree of nationalistic swagger that I had not encountered in previous visits. They were almost gleeful that the United States was tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan and was making so many missteps in both domestic policy and foreign policy. U.S. experts may sneer at that notion of America's relative decline, but their Chinese counterparts seemed to harbor few doubts on that score.

Finally, Drezner breathlessly points out that China has its own serious economic and social problems. That's not exactly an original insight. Hudson Institute scholar John Lee and other scholars have explored [6] China's domestic weaknesses in depth, and I did so most recently here [7].

But those weaknesses do not include running \$1.5 trillion annual budget deficits (much less having much of that debt funded by one's principal geopolitical competitor). Nor do China's weaknesses include overstressing its military forces in Middle Eastern and South-Central Asian snake pits. Those are actions that the United States has taken, and it is naïve in the extreme to assume that China does not benefit strategically and financially from such folly. Yet, oddly, Drezner addresses none of those points contained in my TNI piece.

The bottom line is that his critique exhibits far too much of the myopia and wishful thinking that plagues both U.S. foreign policy officials and their cheerleaders.

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