

February 1, 2010

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Posted: January 30, 2010 10:18 PM

China: The Next "Necessary" Enemy?

Some things never change. The Democrats hold the White House and run Congress, but military spending is going up. It's as if George W. Bush never left office.

The Pentagon budget is the definition of wasteful, unnecessary spending. The U.S. spends almost as much as the rest of the world combined on defense. In real, inflation-adjusted terms, Washington devotes more to the military today than during the Cold War, Korean War, and Vietnam War.

Big-spending advocates speak of America being "at war" today. Former president George W. Bush even called the war on terrorism World War III. But terrorists, though evil, pose no existential threat to America. The idea that al-Qaeda and underwear bombers are a substitute for Nazism and armored divisions or communism and nuclear-tipped ICBMs is ludicrous.

Decrepit and impoverished Third World dictatorships pose no significant threat either. Over the last three decades the U.S. has intervened in, invaded, and/or bombed a number of nations: Grenada, Lebanon, Panama, Iraq (twice), Somalia, Serbia, and Afghanistan. The U.S. has threatened to attack or treated as an enemy a potpourri of other states, including Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Put them all together and they collectively can't match the firepower of one U.S. carrier group.

What else is there? Russia is the enemy du jour for some, but Moscow today is a pale imitation of Moscow during the Cold War. The Soviet Union has been dismantled; its constituent states have seceded and shifted westward in orientation; the European Union alone has more than ten times Russia's GDP and spends more than Moscow on the military. Most important, though Vladimir Putin's Russia has taken a nasty authoritarian turn and exhibits near paranoid concern about the security of its border, world domination is no longer on Moscow's agenda. Even the most nationalistic Russian is not suicidal, and initiating war against America would be suicidal.

Which leaves China. For some, the Yellow Peril is the latest excuse for ever more military outlays.

A decade ago the Project for a New American Century, also busy promoting war with Iraq, declared: "Raising U.S. military strength in East Asia is the key to coping with the rise of China to great-power status." The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission routinely worries about the Chinese threat. The Rand Corporation has warned of U.S. military "vulnerability."

The Center for Security Policy even charged that China hopes to be able "to defeat us militarily." Common are "China as enemy" books, including Jed Babbin's and Edward Timperlake's *Showdown: Why China Wants War with the United States* and Richard Bernstein's and Ross Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*. The

conservative web service NewMax.com once advertised *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*.

The U.S. government affects a more measured tone, but worry still underlies U.S. policy towards China. Wallace C. Gregson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, told Congress in early January: "There are other [military] capabilities China is developing that are destabilizing to regional military balances, that could restrict access to the maritime, air, space, and cyberspace domains, or that could enable China to exercise military aggression or coercion against its neighbors."

The Pentagon produces an annual report which warns of expanding Chinese military capabilities. A few weeks ago Adm. Robert F. Willard, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, testified before the House Armed Services Committee, contending that the PRC's "military modernization program [had] raised concerns in the region--a concern also shared by the U.S. Pacific Command."

It seems a lot of people in Washington are searching for the next "necessary" enemy.

It is a quixotic quest. Mao's China was an impoverished and murderous madhouse. By some estimates, Mao Zedong killed more people than did Joseph Stalin. Mao's Cultural Revolution consumed many of the Communist Party faithful, just like Stalin's purges.

That China has disappeared. Today the PRC is more prosperous, open, interconnected, and responsible than ever before. True, Beijing is no ally, but it certainly is not an enemy. On some issues China is a "strategic partner." On others a "strategic competitor."

None of this should surprise U.S. policymakers. The last two decades have been an artificial moment of history, when America dominated the globe and was able to disproportionately enforce its will on other states. Despite the apparent assumption that any nation which disagrees with Washington is guilty of ill, even evil, intent, there is no reason to expect the positions of other countries to always match those of the U.S.

Washington obviously has important issues with Beijing: human rights, proliferation, military transparency, trade, North Korea, global economic cooperation, Iran, terrorism. Tensions exist: economic competition between China and America is reaching Africa and Latin America and there is nervous wariness in Washington about East Asian security. The challenge facing the U.S. is real. But the best response is thoughtful, nuanced diplomacy, not self-righteous scare-mongering.

Most important, as serious as are some of the differences between Washington and the PRC, none of them is important enough to trigger war. For all of the discussion of conflicting security interests, Beijing has neither the will nor the ability to threaten America. And it is hard to imagine the time when China will be able to seriously threaten America.

Beijing's military build-up is real but measured. Official PRC military spending was \$71 billion last year; estimates of China's real defense outlays range up to \$150 billion.

That's more than any other country -- except America. U.S. military outlays this year will run around \$700 billion. Strip out Afghanistan and Iraq and spending will still exceed \$530 billion. So Washington starts with an enormous head start over the PRC: the U.S. possesses the most sophisticated nuclear arsenal, advanced air wings, numerous carriers. And America continues to spend four to seven times, depending on how one measures what, as much as Beijing on the military.

Moreover, the U.S. is allied with every major industrialized state other than Russia, while China is surrounded by countries with which it has been in conflict: India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Vietnam. The PRC is not well-positioned to launch a war of aggression even if it had both the ability and desire to do so.

The real issue for Washington is dominance, not defense. For instance, Adm. Willard complained that China's military capabilities "appear designed to challenge U.S. freedom of action in the region and, if necessary, enforce China's influence over its neighbors -- including our regional allies and partners." House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ike Skelton (D-Mo.) opened the recent hearing: "the United States must demonstrate our own interests in the Asia-Pacific region including our ability to project power effectively there."

In short, what worries U.S. officials is the difficulty of preserving Washington's ability to intervene every where at any time, even along China's border. Over the last two decades the U.S. has had the world's air and ocean space largely to itself. But, observed Assistant Secretary Gregson, "As China's international role expands, our two militaries will increasingly find themselves operating in the same space." What he meant, though was unwilling to say directly, was that Washington will no longer be able to threaten the PRC with war.

That ability is fast disappearing. To deter the U.S., Beijing need not match American military power. Rather, China must modernize its nuclear force, to forestall atomic coercion, build missiles and submarines, to sink U.S. carriers, improve its air force, to end automatic American superiority, and develop asymmetric weapons, to take out U.S. satellites and attack America's information infrastructure. All of these the PRC is doing.

Thus, the Chinese build-up looks threatening -- but only to *Washington's* global ambitions. To no longer be able to intervene at will might unnerve U.S. policymakers, but that was the world which faced America for most of its existence. And it is the world in which every other country finds itself today.

Moreover, Washington can only delay, not prevent, its return to normalcy. Beijing can build a solid deterrent force at far less cost than the U.S. can maintain its offensive capability to overwhelm China's military. And in a time of extraordinary financial crisis and widespread social need, America doesn't have the money to waste trying to remain the globe's "unipower." Far better for friendly states, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, to cooperate defensively to encourage Chinese restraint than to assume America must defend every state against every possible adversary under every circumstance.

Why the seemingly incessant search for a new enemy by Washington? Is peace too boring?

The U.S. has vital interests, but not all interests are vital. Moreover, not all interests are worth war.

Rather than continue a foreign policy of promiscuous intervention, which requires an ever larger military and military budget, U.S. policymakers should gratefully embrace the benefits of peace. Instead of finding another enemy, Washington should end global meddling, avoid foreign confrontations, demobilize unnecessary armed forces, and cut wasteful military outlays.

Finally, the U.S. should pursue a cooperative relationship with China. Differences between the two nations are real and serious. But the outcome of the 21st century depends much on the nature of the relationship between the globe's current superpower and likely next superpower. The international order accommodated America's rise without causing world conflict; Germany's rise triggered the two worst wars of human history. It is in the interests of the world's people that China's entry on the international scene follows the former, not the latter.

It is time for genuine change in U.S. foreign policy. It is time to make defense rather than dominance the cornerstone of American strategy.

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