



Paranoid Superpower: Threat Inflation Is the American Way

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In recent years, U.S. executive branch officials and members of Congress from both political parties have routinely portrayed Russia or China (and frequently both countries) as existential threats to the United States. It also is becoming increasingly common to find news articles or opinion pieces that adopt the same theme. Moreover, a significant number of politicians and analysts put smaller powers, especially Iran and North Korea, and even non-state actors, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, in that category. The concerted campaign on the part of opinion-shaping elites to hype the danger from such sources is leaving an indelible mark on public attitudes. Many Americans now believe that their country faces multiple, horrifying threats.

More sober reflection should cause the public to conclude that the dangers are greatly exaggerated, and that the individuals, agencies, and organizations that foster such hysteria are not doing the country any favors. An existential threat is one that poses a lethal menace to a nation's independence or very existence. Such situations are rare for any great power, but they are especially improbable for a superpower that has America's multiple advantages. The vast oceanic barriers on the east and west, and the existence of weak, friendly neighbors on the northern and southern borders, make the notion of a conventional invasion of the United States preposterous on its face. Likewise, the huge, diverse US economy, renders the idea of a successful foreign campaign of economic strangulation equally far-fetched. The United States is easily the most strategically and economically secure great power in history.

Given its huge nuclear arsenal, Russia theoretically could pose a threat to America's existence, and China is rapidly reaching that point. But they are the only two countries that could do so. It may be unpleasant to acknowledge that North Korea has joined the exclusive global nuclear-weapons club, but even in the unlikely event that Pyongyang decided to launch an attack on the

United States, it could inflict only limited damage, not extinguish America as a functioning society.

Moreover, as credible experts, most notably John Mueller, have shown, even the threat from larger nuclear powers, such as Russia and China, is overblown. Mueller notes correctly that while nuclear weapons may be useful as a deterrent, they are worthless for war-fighting, unless a country's leaders are willing to commit national and personal suicide. Governing elites are notoriously reluctant to make that sacrifice, and there is no evidence that the rulers in Moscow and Beijing are exceptions to the rule. If a nuclear war erupts, it will almost certainly be the result of accident or miscalculation by the United States or one of its nuclear-armed, great power rivals. The best way for Washington to avoid such a nightmare outcome is to stop crowding Russia and China—precisely the opposite of the strategy US leaders currently are pursuing.

It is extraordinarily odd that despite living in a country with massive military and economic advantages, so many Americans are susceptible to the hype about external threats. The United States spends roughly 2 ½ times as much on the military as Russia and China combined. And although both of those countries are developing cutting-edge weaponry, the United States is doing so as well, and the US military still enjoys superior qualitative capabilities. Moreover, Washington's military power utterly dwarfs that of North Korea, Iran, or any other potential adversary.

Yet too many Americans remain insecure, and some are susceptible to outright panic and paranoia. Hawkish hucksters find it far too easy to generate alarm toward whatever country they designate as the latest dire threat. Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. Throughout the Cold War, most Americans saw the Soviet Union not just as a strategic and geopolitical rival, but as an overpowering danger to the nation's security. The panic level reached its zenith during the period of McCarthyism in the 1950s, when a pervasive belief existed that Moscow's menace to the "American way of life" was both foreign and domestic in nature, but it did not really dissipate until the dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991. Indeed, in some respects it never disappeared, but merely morphed into an irrational hostility toward a noncommunist Russia. The ease with which cynical Democrats and their media allies promoted the fiction that Donald Trump was a "Russian asset" is testimony to the endurance of Russophobia.

Sometimes the fears about alleged existential threats take bizarre forms that are even reflected in the popular culture. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's administration hyped the extent of the Soviet threat to justify massive increases in US military spending. Hollywood contributed to the prevailing public fear with the release of movies and television series that are laughable in retrospect. In the 1987 television miniseries *Amerika*, Moscow managed to stage a nearly bloodless coup and establish a puppet regime in Washington. The movie *Red Dawn*, which appeared in theaters nationwide in 1984, managed to top even that absurdity, with North Korean, Cuban, and Nicaraguan forces joining Soviet troops to invade America. Such paranoid fiction was circulating just a few years before Moscow's East European satellite empire collapsed and the Soviet Union itself disintegrated.

Perhaps the most head-shaking case of successful hype was the ability of George W. Bush's administration and its allies in Congress and the media to convince Americans that small and

weak Iraq posed an existential threat. The level of disinformation and outright panic-mongering reached astonishing levels. The culmination of the propaganda campaign came when National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice warned that Washington could not wait until "smoking gun" evidence of Saddam Hussein's (fictional) nuclear-weapons program took "the form of a mushroom cloud."

One might hope that the emergence of definitive evidence that Saddam never had an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction would have inoculated the American people against such gullibility. However, the extent of public credulity that Russia and China (and North Korea, Iran and ragtag terrorist organizations) pose massive dangers to the United States indicates that the vulnerability to panic and paranoia remains as extensive as ever. Self-serving elites understand that reality and continue to pursue their strategy of hyping the latest "threats."

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