



Rising Powers and Agents of Change

By Thomas Donnelly

For the world's unreconstructed monarchies, autocracies, and tyrannies—the demographic of aggressive states—and for those like Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who aspire to create such states, there is not much to like about American geopolitical preeminence. Indeed, it sometimes appears as though it is the United States that is the aggressive, rising power. President George W. Bush's desire to maintain a “balance of power that favors freedom,” coupled with hyper-powerful means, prevents the United States from acting like a traditional, status-quo power. Viewed from the outside, the Pax Americana can appear less than peaceful.

Late last year, I participated in a seminar organized by the Foreign Policy Research Institute and was asked to make a presentation on “aggressive, rising powers.” In polite policy circles, that is usually a euphemism for the People's Republic of China, whose rise the world seems to take for granted but whose aggression is an open question. Viewed through the long lens of history, however, the government in Beijing could be more fairly regarded as an agent of the political status quo and America as the revolutionary power, history's agent of change.

This is hardly the way strategists and foreign-policy elites—American or others in the West—look at things. We take our power for granted and think of ourselves as the preservers of order, not the disturbers of the peace. The post-Cold War generation, in particular, assumes that the amazingly free, prosperous, and peaceful era occasioned by the surprise collapse of the Soviet empire is somehow the natural order of things. We are not so much interested in defending a place as in maintaining the condition of Pax Americana.

George W. Bush's presidency has been marked by an increasing rejection of status-quo strategy-making, and wise men of various domestic political persuasions regard Bush as a dangerous radical.

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The Iraq war has inspired a spate of books by former Clinton officials, including one intended as a sharp rebuke of Bush strategy, entitled *America Unbound*.¹ But that title could equally well describe the strategy of the Clinton era—the time, after all, when France charged us with *hyperpuissance*.

Nevertheless, it is fair to regard the policies of the Bush administration and the articulation of a “Bush Doctrine” as a departure in “quantity,” if not in “quality,” from the Clinton years. I would also argue that it is, in fact, a return to the traditions of American strategic culture.² But even if the Bush Doctrine is an anomaly, it is becoming ever more woven into America's assumptions about strategy and international politics, and it is indeed sharpening—if not creating ex nihilo—the aggressive tendencies of those for whom the Pax Americana is perceived as a threat. Some people and some states have the sense that we are gunning for them. Perhaps, in a very long-term sense, we are.

The goal of the Bush administration's *National Security Strategy*—“a balance of power that favors freedom”—is in fact an apt shorthand description of American strategy throughout its history. Inherent in this construct are the beliefs that American political principles are universal, that representative governments reflect a natural order of things, and that the expansion of American power is best

suited to achieve and to guarantee a favorable balance of power. Given that human freedom has not been history's rule but rather the exception—at least until the late twentieth century when the pendulum perhaps moved in favor of liberty—the United States' "rise" has tended to undermine and upset the status quo.

Enemies and Potential Enemies

So when Americans speak of "aggressive, rising powers," what we are really describing are forces of reaction. Today, there are three categories of international actors who fit this profile. Leading the list must be the People's Republic of China, whose remarkable economic growth already makes it an economic great power, whose size and geostrategic location make it a political great power, and whose rapidly modernizing armed forces are giving it a military capacity to create grave problems for the United States. The case for Beijing's aggression is opaque and will be reviewed in greater detail below.

At the other end of the power spectrum are al Qaeda and the network of Islamic radical terror organizations whose means of power remain limited but whose will to power and aggression is very great indeed. Though this movement is—after the expulsion of the Taliban from Afghanistan—without a state or much of a sanctuary, it is currently shopping for both, and its goals are above all political, as revealed by the recent communication between Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's chief strategist, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al Qaeda in Iraq.

In the middle are a handful of otherwise weak and derelict states whose possession, or imminent possession, of nuclear weapons makes them rising powers in the narrow military sense. Such is the nature of these weapons that they can vault the likes of Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan to positions of disproportionate international height, upsetting the "normal" calculations of relative power. With such weapons, these states' aggressive habits have far greater consequences and command far greater attention than they otherwise would.

The much-observed "rise of China" is most often a retold tale out of nineteenth-century European high politics. Talk of "containing" China evokes the memories of Cold War competition with the Soviets. A more apt analogy, given China's economic energy—hardly a trait displayed by the Soviets—and its exploitation of "globalization," is to Wilhelmine Germany, the puzzle being whether China's new generation of leaders represent a "post-Bismarck," more aggressive phase or think of

themselves as consolidating a "contented power" in the manner of the Iron Chancellor.³

The official position of the Chinese government is that Beijing's rise is inherently peaceful.⁴ American Sinologists and businessmen rally around the theory of "democratic inevitability"—that is, that continued economic development will lead inexorably to political liberalization. This theory retains its popularity even when Chinese actions are provocative. During his recent trip to Asia, President Bush, while simultaneously celebrating the expansion of Asian democracy and excoriating the Chinese for repressing religious expression, repeated the mantra that "once the door to freedom is opened, it cannot be closed."⁵ Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the theory of "democratic inevitability" is that it obviates the need for any diplomatic unpleasantness with the regime in Beijing and its prickly leaders.

My own view is that the rise of China—looked at as a military and geopolitical phenomenon, and removing the economic dimension—already is the greatest challenge to preserving the Pax Americana. China's complaints about U.S. "hegemony," "colonialism," and "imperialism" are more than retro-Maoist rhetoric. They express a deep sense of injustice done to China for centuries not only by the United States but by the West more broadly, and a desire to assume Beijing's "rightful" position in the world. Instead of simply abiding by the agreed international order, China seeks to shape it in ways congenial to its political interests. The increasing volume and virulence of expressions of Chinese nationalism reflect these deep-seated and widely held beliefs.⁶ First among these is the continuation in power of the Chinese Communist Party.

Moreover, the rise of China is not simply an East Asian but a worldwide event. The fact that China is inextricably intertwined in the global economy means that Beijing has vital global interests—most immediately in the energy resources of the Persian Gulf—which it now must entrust to the tender mercies of the United States. Would we rest comfortably in such circumstances? After all, wasn't this the fear that led to the Carter Doctrine, under which President Jimmy Carter asserted that access to the energy resources of the Persian Gulf was a U.S. national security interest following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution? Within the UN Security Council, China also has become a protector of rogue regimes like those in Sudan and Zimbabwe. When Robert Mugabe and Hugo Chávez assert that they can "look East" rather than West, they are looking at Beijing as a "balancer" of American power.

In sum, there is little disagreement over the fact of China's rise (although, given the lack of transparency into Chinese financial matters, one wonders whether there is a fiscal landmine waiting to explode). The uncertainty is whether this rise will be eternally peaceful or create friction and conflict. The movement of hundreds of millions of Chinese out of abject poverty is a blessing for humanity that Americans welcome, and the dangers of Chinese internal political strife are well recorded in history. Yet Americans, and particularly American strategists, would be wise to think through the implications of the emergence of a Chinese great power. As Napoleon said, "When China wakes, it will shake the world."⁷

Truly world-shaking would be the rise of an Islamic radical, al Qaeda-inspired great power—indeed, a state power of any sort—in the greater Middle East. Armed with only his personal fortune and the pitiful resources of Afghanistan after decades of Soviet occupation and international neglect, Osama bin Laden orchestrated the attacks of September 11, 2001. What might he, or his acolytes, achieve in ruling a caliphate or even emirate perched on a giant oil patch?

Already we have seen the dangers that have arisen from the monarchs, pan-Arabists, and Baathist revolutionaries who have used their oil wealth not to build legitimate states, competitive economies, or modern societies but instead to foment the radical revolution that now makes us all tremble. If there is a hope that China's rise might be peaceful, there can be no doubt that the rise of a radical Islamist state or empire would be extremely violent. "Containing" this problem is simply too risky.

By all traditional measures of geopolitical strength, weak-yet-rising nuclear powers like Iran and North Korea are fragile and nearly failing states. Internally, they are corrupt and repressive in every way. The Iranian Revolution no longer inspires anyone outside the ruling clique or its terrorist clients, and it is probably money and material support that buys their loyalty. Further east, even China claims it is appalled by North Korea's staunch Stalinism.

But as these regimes acquire nuclear weapons, they confound the international order, including the United States. North Korea and Iran present the world with a nearly insoluble problem; witness the eternal "Six-Party Talks" with Pyongyang and the dance of the "EU three"—and the utter paralysis of the White House—with Tehran. As shaky as a policy of containment is, it is certainly preferable to confrontation, "rollback," or "regime change" through military force. Containment is, in fact, regime change by tolerable means, and the solution to the

problems of Iran and North Korea lie in an indirect approach. The United States is better served in Iran by continuing to stabilize and democratize Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus surround Iran in a larger movement for political change in the region. In this regard, the Shia of Iraq—much feared by conservative U.S. foreign policy elites—are quite probably our best allies. The solution to the problem of North Korea will not appear until the larger problem of China is on the way to resolution.

At the same time, we must understand that there may be exceptional circumstances where containment can fail. Or, more precisely, there may be circumstances where it appears as though continued containment is more risky and dangerous than some sort of intervention. If, for example, Iran were to slip nuclear materials to one of its sponsored terrorists, or—perhaps more likely and more nightmarish—if control of nuclear materials in Iran or even Pakistan were compromised by the regimes' very weaknesses, it will be hard to be patient and tempting to act preemptively. In sum, containment of this sort is a much less safe bet than was great-power containment of the Soviets during the Cold War, or perhaps than China will be in the decades to come. Containment may generally be the least-bad alternative, but not by a lot, and not under all circumstances.

What Is to Be Done Strategically?

How can the United States counter such an array and a variety of rising powers? Preserving the Pax Americana—making the twenty-first century a new American century—will demand strategy-making of a high order.

The first order of business should be to try to keep our enemies and potential enemies apart, to *divide et impera*. Indeed, this has been an unspoken assumption of U.S. post-Cold War policy—that each threat is unique and separate—that may not bear up over time and certainly will not unless we make a conscious effort to keep it thus. The major goal should be to prevent the wars of the greater Middle East from becoming a theater of great-power confrontation or war-by-proxy. Already China, pursuing its energy interests if not a more explicit "spoiling strategy," acts as a great-power sponsor of aggressive, if not rising, actors like those described above. More dangerous still are Beijing's links to Tehran. We also should be wary of emerging anti-American coalitions of the willing and coalitions of convenience within the Arab world, not only among states but between states and al Qaeda. Saddam Hussein's late-life conversion from Baath Party thug to defender of the Sunni faith and people, rarely

examined in detail—either before the invasion of Iraq or after—might well be a leading-edge indicator of this sort of phenomenon.

The four strategic partners of the future will be the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and India, bound together by strategic concerns over the greater Middle East and China and by shared beliefs in liberty and in the continued legitimacy of military power as a tool of statecraft.

Second, even as we attempt to keep our enemies divided, we need to begin to create our own coalition of the willing, the able, the free, and the committed. I have elsewhere written in some detail of a grand, global “Four-by-Four” alliance to help preserve the Pax Americana.⁸ This is the de facto plan of the Bush administration, though officials dare not speak its name. The four strategic partners of the future will be the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and India, bound together by strategic concerns over the greater Middle East and China and by shared beliefs in liberty and in the continued legitimacy of military power as a tool of statecraft. To be sure, this alliance-building is very much a work in progress—indeed, perhaps more on the drawing board than in actual development—but its work has begun. The Bush administration at last has moved beyond its go-it-alone instincts, as became apparent during the president’s recent trip to Asia.

A third basic rule of U.S. strategy-making must be to provoke a more serious discussion about these issues among the American public and politicians. If the tenets of the Bush Doctrine are in fact to guide us far into the future, they cannot be the property of one party. This is not nostalgia for the imagined nirvana of bipartisanship during the Cold War, but rather an injunction to a wider debate and a larger form of partisanship. It was, after all, a debate over international strategy that created Republicans from Federalists while at the same time inculcating all with a larger set of American purposes that endured beyond the formal life of either party.

The lack of consensus has even paralyzed the president’s own administration; not only has the entrenched

bureaucracy resisted his reorientation of U.S. strategy, but so have his senior lieutenants—Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld comes to mind. Further, President Bush is almost an outlier in his own Republican Party. The party is still largely split between traditional conservative Republicans and Gingrich revolutionaries, and neither camp wholeheartedly embraces the president’s more “neoconservative” security strategy. A resolution recently shepherded through the Senate by John Warner (R-Va.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, demanded that the Bush administration make periodic reports to Congress on the situation in Iraq and stipulated the Senate’s belief that 2006 should be a time of transition with Iraqi forces bearing a larger combat burden and U.S. troops a reduced one.

And of course the overwhelming majority of Democrats are still not ready to seriously address U.S. strategy. The Howard Dean-MoveOn.org wing of the party is still ascendant; even if it is driven by nothing more than anti-Bush sentiment, that energy has helped thrust Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to the forefront of the congressional Democratic Party, and drives their thinking on the Iraq war and their policies on troop withdrawal. Nor is there any sign of a debate within the party on the rise of China. John Kerry’s call during the 2004 campaign to increase the size of the U.S. Army by 30,000 soldiers was accompanied by an asterisk to the effect that the costs would be offset by reductions in national missile defense programs. Whatever one thinks of such programs, the numbers did not add up, and it was not a serious proposal. Indeed, as much as the Republican Party needs to think seriously about the substance of the Bush Doctrine rather than the fact that it needs to support a president of its party, so do the Democrats need to become a serious but loyal opposition party. The validation of the Bush Doctrine seemingly will be left for a time after the president leaves office.

Military Implications

Most unfortunately, this domestic political and strategic uncertainty has likewise paralyzed the Department of Defense. The project of “transformation” was misshapen from the beginning by focusing on technology and capabilities—it has been an entirely self-referential process—and is wheezing to a halt. Just as the validation of the Bush Doctrine awaits the departure of the president, so does the process of change in the Pentagon require the departure of

Secretary Rumsfeld and the team of senior civilians and generals he has installed.

True transformation will be shaped by a clearer recognition of the military implications of the Bush Doctrine.⁹ The missions inherent in dealing with aggressors and potential aggressors against the Pax Americana—containing Chinese military power, securing a democratic political revolution in the greater Middle East, and responding to a nuclear crisis in a state like Iran or North Korea when containment looks likely to fail—will be driven by political realities more than technological or tactical realities.

In the post-9/11 world, the trace of American power runs eastward from our Atlantic coast to the border between Iraq and Iran, leaps over the Islamic Republic, begins again at the Iranian-Afghan border, slides southward along the rim of the Himalayas through Southeast and Northeast Asia, and then comes home at the western Pacific beaches.

Our main requirement now is to continue to project reassuring military power to the edges of the expanding American security perimeter. In the post-9/11 world, the trace of American power runs eastward from our Atlantic coast to the border between Iraq and Iran, leaps over the Islamic Republic, begins again at the Iranian-Afghan border, slides southward along the rim of the Himalayas through Southeast and Northeast Asia, and then comes home at the western Pacific beaches. It is a big space.

So big, in fact, that the instinct of late has been to thin out forces along the perimeter and base a larger portion of U.S. combat power at home. But again, this allegedly “transformational” plan has run afoul of post-9/11 strategic realities that have seen U.S. ground forces again adopt what is essentially a garrison posture in the Middle East. No serious strategist believes, whatever the rotational force in Iraq at any particular moment, that the larger war in this region will be won quickly or at a distance. The means of engagement may change, and troop levels in the region may fluctuate, but the measurement is

less how rapidly we can get there, but how long we can stay. The U.S. military commitment to the region has risen steadily over the last twenty-five years.

Indeed, the hand-wringing over the operational problem of access in deployment to far regions has been trumped thoroughly by the strategic need to operate far forward, constantly, and in larger-than-anticipated numbers. This is true in the western Pacific as much as it is in the Persian Gulf. The kind of forces may be quite different—built first around maritime rather than land forces—but the qualities of presence, substance, and sustainability are similar. The emerging “global reconnaissance and strike complex” that lately seemed to be the last word in U.S. military power is actually better regarded as a collection of secondary, enabling capabilities that allow in-theater forces to conduct their truly strategic business. This is in no way intended to play down the value of American air and space power: they may be first to the conflict and key to allowing other forces to succeed, but they are more likely to create the conditions for decisive action rather than creating the action itself.

The need to patrol, control, and police such an extensive perimeter ought to suggest a new approach to “jointness,” wherein U.S. armed services more clearly divide the strategic labor rather than compete to see who can do the best job in the same fight. Put crudely, the army will bear the primary load in the Middle East—although the Marine Corps will not be able to avoid this one entirely—while the sea services reposture themselves to operate along the East Asian littoral in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The enabling powers of air and space forces represent a kind of globally operational reserve, sanitizing the battlespace and providing additional firepower for those forces that are more directly “in contact.” Andrew Hoehn and his colleagues at RAND have dubbed this new approach “horizontal jointness,” distinct from the current style of “vertical jointness.”¹⁰

To conclude, the United States has been history’s most successful rising power, certainly expansionist if not openly and always aggressive. The story of the U.S. armed forces, from the continentals to today’s military, has been one of regulars—with all the conservatism inherent in the profession of arms—in service to political revolution. The preservation of Pax Americana, against the ambitions and aggressions of adversaries present and potential—powers that are rising at different rates, in different ways, and in differing regions—is not simply the continuation of the American security perimeter. Our military must defend the line, to be sure,

but if history is any guide, it should also be prepared to strike back across it and then to liberate. It has been ever thus.

Notes

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5. President George W. Bush, "President Discusses Freedom and Democracy in Kyoto, Japan," Office of the White House Press Secretary (Kyoto, Japan: November 16, 2005), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/20051116-6.html>.
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7. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power* (New York: Vintage, 1995).
8. Thomas Donnelly, "The Big Four Alliance: The New Bush Strategy," *National Security Outlook* (December 2005), available at www.aei.org/publication23524.
9. In the spirit of continuing and shameless self-promotion, see Thomas Donnelly, *The Military We Need: The Defense Requirements of the Bush Doctrine* (AEI Press, 2005), available at www.aei.org/book819.
10. Andrew Hoehn, Adam Grisson, David Ochmanek, David Shlapak, and Alan Vick, *A New Division of Labor: Reconsidering American Strategy and Forces to Meet New Challenges* (RAND Project Air Force, September 2005).