

# Countering Aggressive Rising Powers: A Clash of Strategic Cultures

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by Thomas Donnelly

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***Abstract:** The United States has to contend with rising powers ranging from the PRC, which is already an economic and political great power and potentially a military threat, to Al Qaeda and the network of Islamist terror organizations, whose means to power remain limited but whose will to power and aggression are great. In the middle are states that already or may soon possess nuclear weapons. Each of these powers has its own "strategic culture" that affects its decision-making, and attention needs to be paid to how the strategic habits of today's rising and aggressive powers might intersect with U.S. strategy.*

The United States has several rising powers with which to contend. Of these, the evidence is mixed on how aggressive the PRC is, but its remarkable growth already makes it an economic great power, its size and geostrategic location make it a political great power, and its rapidly modernizing armed forces are giving it the military capacity to create grave problems for the United States. At the other end of the spectrum is Al Qaeda and the network of Islamist terror organizations, whose means to power remain limited but whose will to power and aggression are great indeed. Though this movement has been without a state or much of a sanctuary since the expulsion of the Taliban from Afghanistan, it is shopping for both, and its goals are above all political. In the middle are a handful of otherwise weak and derelict states whose possession, or imminent possession, of nuclear weapons makes them rising military powers. Such is the nature of these weapons that they can vault the likes of Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan to a position of international weight—essentially upsetting the "normal" calculations of relative power. Their aggressive habits therefore command far greater attention than they otherwise would.

This article assesses the "strategic cultures" of a range of these potential and immediate adversaries, with a view to understanding the habits of mind that shape their decision-making. While the concept of strategic culture is controversial, prone to drawing grand conclusions on thin evidence, it can be a useful tool for making judgments about the geopolitical ends that others pursue. Its premise is the simple truth that the character of any regime ("regime" understood in a broad sense) is the best guide to understanding how it may act, and it recognizes the connections

between domestic and international behavior. At the same time, strategic culture is not ineluctable destiny; observing predispositions does not allow one to foretell fate.

While a great deal of attention has gone to “culture-clashing” since the publication of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* in 1996, less attention has been paid to how the strategic habits of today’s rising and aggressive powers might intersect with the strategy of the United States.

### **China Shakes the World**

The much-observed “rise of China” is most often a retold tale out of nineteenth-century European high politics. Talk of “containing” China evokes memories of the U.S. competition with the Soviets during the Cold War. A more apt analogy, given China’s economic energy—hardly a trait the Soviets displayed—and its exploitation of globalization is to Wilhelmine Germany, the only question 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.<sup>1</sup>

Beijing’s official position is that its rise is inherently peaceful.<sup>2</sup> American Sinologists and businesspeople 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, while simultaneously celebrating the expansion of Asian democracy and excoriating the Chinese for repressing religious expression, President Bush repeated the mantra that “once the door to freedom is opened, it cannot be closed.”<sup>3</sup> 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.

Militarily and geopolitically, China’s rise is the greatest challenge to preserving the *Pax Americana* over the coming years. China’s complaints about U.S. “hegemonism,”<sup>4</sup> “colonialism,” and “imperialism” are more than retro-Maoist rhetoric. They express a deep sense of injustice done to it for centuries—not only by the United States, but also by the West more broadly—and its desire to assume its “rightful” position in the world. The increasing volume and virulence of expressions of Chinese nationalism reflect these deep-seated and widely held beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Prime among these is the continuation in power of the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security*, Fall 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Zheng Bijian, “China’s Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “President Discusses Freedom and Democracy in Kyoto, Japan,” White House, Nov. 16, 2005, at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Gries, “China Eyes the Hegemon,” *Orbis*, Summer 2005.

<sup>5</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. “China’s State Control Mechanisms and Methods,” 109<sup>th</sup> Congress., 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 2005, at [www.uscc.gov/hearings](http://www.uscc.gov/hearings).

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? Wasn't that the fear that led to the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in 1979, after the Iranian revolution; the Carter Doctrine, which was announced in 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and which committed the United States to opposing any aggression in the Persian Gulf; and then the creation of U.S. Central Command as a successor to the Joint Task Force in 1983?

Given the lack of transparency into Chinese financial matters, one wonders whether there's a fiscal landmine waiting to explode. But to the extent the country continues to rise, the uncertainty is whether this rise will be peaceful or create friction and conflict. The lifting of hundreds of millions of Chinese out of abject poverty is a blessing for humanity, and the dangers of Chinese internal political strife are well recorded in history. Yet there are profound implications for America with the emergence of a Chinese great power.

There is a rich literature on Chinese strategic culture, which is not surprising, given the historical importance of writers like Confucius and Sun Tzu. Indeed, the idea that there is a distinctly Chinese way of war has long enchanted Western analysts; Sun Tzu in particular has achieved an exalted status, probably because of the epigrammatic nature of his writings and their seeming exoticism. "Most would argue," as Alastair Iain Johnston has written, "that Chinese strategic culture uniquely stresses nonviolent political or diplomatic means to deal with adversaries, or—when force is absolutely necessary—the controlled, defensive use of violence."<sup>6</sup>

But Johnston only summarizes this conventional wisdom to point out its problems. His detailed analysis of Ming Dynasty strategy-making draws him to the conclusion that, in distinction to the supposed Confucian-Mencian tradition, "there is a tendency in policy for [strategically and militarily] offensive behavior in periods when the Ming experienced relatively large advantage in capabilities, but a shift in less coercive directions as this capacity diminished."<sup>7</sup> Johnston argues that the patterns of Chinese strategic behavior do approximate what in the West would be regarded as realist, balance-of-power statecraft but, to borrow a phrase from Beijing's more recent leaders, with Chinese characteristics.

In the modern period, it would seem that the "nonviolent tradition" of Confucius and Mencius is even less useful in understanding Chinese strategy. Abram Shulsky's brief but insightful study of the PRC's strategic behavior suggests that it may be more prone to offensive operations, even for very limited strategic goals and without much chance of tactical success. "The Chinese have often shown a

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

willingness to resort to force precisely because they see the resulting tension as in their interest,” he concludes. “This type of behavior may be difficult to deter.”<sup>8</sup>

As China’s military power grows—and as it accumulates immediate advantages across the Taiwan Strait—the distinctions between Johnston’s and Shulsky’s analyses may become fewer and fewer. The Department of Defense’s 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* asserts that “China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States” and notes the development of comprehensive Chinese military power. It also concludes, euphemistically but ominously: “The outside world has little knowledge of Chinese motivations and decision-making.” In other words, we are concerned about the way in which Beijing calculates its strategic interests.

Thus the de facto U.S. policy of containment is an attempt to mitigate the geopolitical consequences of growing Chinese power. The happy talk about democratic inevitability is hedged by a harder-edged view that China is perfectly willing to use force—either in the basically realist way indicated by Johnston or in the less constrained sense suggested by Shulsky. Certainly the Bush administration does not agree with the many China scholars who still embrace the idea that China will follow the Confucian path.

### Uncontainable Islamists

As alarming as China’s rise may be, an even more world-shaking event would be the rise of an Islamist, 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 left to Afghanistan after decades of Soviet occupation and international neglect, Osama bin Laden orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. What might he or his lieutenants achieve in ruling a caliphate or even emirate perched on a giant oil patch?

Already we have seen the dangers that have sprung from the monarchs—pan-Arabists and Baath revolutionaries who have used their oil wealth to build neither legitimate states nor modern societies. It is these Middle Eastern potentates who are most responsible for creating the radical revolution that now threatens us. 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.

We have been at war with radical Islamists for more than a decade now—the initial 1993 World Trade Center bombing is a good place to start the clock—and the long, slow, inexorable process of the collapse of the *ancien regime* in the Middle East has been underway at least since 1979.<sup>9</sup> The adversary’s strategic goals are plain

<sup>8</sup> Abram N. Shulsky, *Deterrence Theory and Chinese Behavior* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000), pp. 38–39.

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller explication of this argument, see Thomas Donnelly, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: A Strategic Assessment* (Washington: AEI Press, 2004).

to see. Conventional wisdom is that Al Qaeda and such groups are reactionary responses to either U.S. policies like support for Israel or to the actions of the region's various autocratic rulers. But in fact, Al Qaeda's basic motivation is an internal one, and its purposes are revolutionary and political: to establish a multinational caliphate ruling according to Islamic sharia.

The roots of "Al Qaedaism"—more a movement than a unified political party or structure—are commonly traced to the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who was apprehended and executed by the Egyptian government of Gamel Abdul Nasser in 1966. His rejection of "modernity" was complete; by the 1950s he regarded it as "unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Enlightenment idea of separation of church and state was itself the problem. As my AEI colleague Frederick Kagan has written:

Qutb argued that the basic problem afflicting the human race was the subordination of human beings to one another. Only God, he wrote, could exercise just sovereignty, and only God's laws are truly laws. . . . Even within the Muslim world, the *umma*, he noted, state structures had been established and the leaders of those structures legislated and established laws of their own, distinct from the laws of *sharia*, which were of God. . . . Qutb was arguing that all human state structures are inherently evil and should be destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

Qutb's writings provided the fundamental political and military guidance for Al Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's senior lieutenant and strategist, wrote in his 2001 manifesto, *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*, that the struggle was not simply against the United States or the West, but within the Islamic world; political legitimacy was not a matter of a social compact amongst people or peoples, and indeed not for humans to judge: "[The war] is also a battle over to whom authority and power should belong—to God's course and *sharia*, to man-made laws and material principles, or to those who claim to be intermediaries between the Creator and mankind."<sup>12</sup> Osama bin Laden himself made the same observation in his "Letter to America" of November 2002, playing upon the why-do-they-hate-us school of media reporting of that time. Why, after the loss of Afghanistan, would the Taliban and al Qaeda fight on?

It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind: You are the nation who, rather than ruling by the *Shariah* of

<sup>10</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Dar al-lim, Damascus, p. 7. See also John Calvert, "Islamist Syndrome of Cultural Confrontation," *Orbis*, Spring 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick Kagan, "The New Bolsheviks: Understanding Al Qaeda," *National Security Outlook*, AEI, Nov. 16, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, 2001, serialized in *Al-Sharq al-Ansat*, London, at [www.asharqalawsat.com/english/](http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/).

Allah in its own Constitution and Laws, choose to invent your own laws as you will and desire. You separate religion from your policies, contradicting the pure nature which affirms Absolute Authority to the Lord and your Creator.<sup>13</sup>

But the occupation of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq created new strategic circumstances. They drove Al Qaeda into hiding and opened a new front much closer to the Islamic and, importantly, Arab heartland. Deprived of his sanctuary, bin Laden's ability to launch attacks was constrained; he has become more an ideological inspiration than an operational commander. Osama's media presence is also constrained. Moreover, the larger war in Iraq—larger from the initial invasion to the counterinsurgency campaign—was, perhaps, bound to shift Islamic and world attention away from Afghanistan to Mesopotamia. Similarly, that shift created an opportunity for new Al Qaeda leaders to emerge, leaders whose views would primarily be shaped by the operational realities of the fighting in Iraq.

These underlying dynamics may account for the rise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. While Zarqawi professes his subordination to bin Laden's larger guidance, operates under the banner of "Al Qaeda in Iraq," and clearly shares the same basic political goals, he is also obviously making strategy in Iraq according to his own appreciation of the strategic situation. Zarqawi's 2004 "situation report" to bin Laden and Zawahiri makes this plain:

As you know, God favored the [Islamic] nation with jihad on His behalf in the land of Mesopotamia. It is known to you that the arena here is not like the rest. It has positive elements not found in others, and it also has negative elements not found in others. Among the greatest possible elements of this arena is that it is *jihad* in the Arab heartland. It is a stone's throw from the lands of the two Holy Precincts and the al-Aqsa [mosque]. We know from God's religion that the true, decisive battle between infidelity and Islam is in this land, in [greater] Syria and its surroundings. Therefore, we must spare no effort and strive urgently to establish a foothold in this land.<sup>14</sup>

This preamble sounds like a military theater commander arguing to policymakers at supreme headquarters that his area of operations is strategically central. Further, Zarqawi offers quite a different perspective on who the immediate enemy is. It is not the Americans, he reports, who "as you know, are the most cowardly of God's creatures" and "an easy quarry." Nor is it the Iraqi Kurds, who "are a lump [in the throat] and a thorn whose time to be clipped has yet to come. They are last on the list, even though we are making efforts to harm some of their symbolic figures." For Zarqawi, the strategic "center of gravity" lies in preventing the rise to power of Iraq's Shi'ite majority. The Shia are "the insurmountable

<sup>13</sup> "Full text: bin Laden's letter to America," *London Observer*, Nov. 24, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> "Text from Abu Musab al Zarqawi Letter," *Coalition Provisional Authority*, February 2004, at [www.GlobalSecurity.org](http://www.GlobalSecurity.org).

obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom.” In Zarqawi’s opinion, they are the “key to change”:

The Shia have declared war against the people of Islam. They are the proximate, dangerous enemy of the Sunnis, even if the Americans are also an archenemy. The danger from the Shia however, is greater and their damage is worse and more destructive to the [Islamic] nation than the Americans. . . . Our fighting against the Shia is the way to drag the [Islamic] nation into the battle. . . . I come back and say again that the only solution for us is to strike the religious, military, and other cadres among the Shia with blow after blow until they bend to the Sunnis. Someone may say that, in this matter, we are being hasty and rash and leading the [Islamic] nation into a battle for which it is not ready, [a battle] that will be revolting and in which blood will be spilled. This is exactly what we want, since right and wrong no longer have any place in our current situation.

Zarqawi made good on his word; the insurgency has indeed been bloody, particularly for the Shia; car and suicide bombings of mosques and pilgrims have been frequent, and the leading Shia clergy, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have been targeted, sometimes successfully. Zarqawi has made the most of his limited means by making his violence as spectacular as possible, most obviously with the webcast images of beheadings of American and other hostages. He has yet to provoke the “Islamic nation” to battle, but open sectarian civil war remains a real possibility in a very fragile Iraq.

Zarqawi’s energy also appears to have forced bin Laden and Zawahiri to reconsider their immediate strategy. In a July 9, 2005 letter to Zarqawi, Zawahiri tried to rein in the Iraqi’s excesses of violence; clearly in the judgment of Al Qaeda’s senior strategists, the brutality of Zarqawi’s methods, whatever their local effectiveness, had created larger problems. Public opinion in the broader Islamic world was offended by the beheadings, attacks on mosques and killings of Shia pilgrims. At the same time, Zawahiri accepted that the struggle for Iraq was inherently of central strategic importance:

It has always been my belief that the victory of Islam will never take place until a Muslim state is established in the manner of the Prophet in the heart of the Islamic world, specifically in the Levant, Egypt, and the neighboring states of the Peninsula and Iraq. . . . As for the battles that are going on in the far-flung regions of the Islamic world, such as Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Bosnia, they are just the groundwork and the vanguard for the major battles which have begun in the heart of the Islamic world.

While acknowledging, from his hideout in Waziristan or some other remote fastness, that he could not have Zarqawi’s appreciation of the tactical situation in Iraq, Zawahiri nevertheless went on to give operational directives. Al Qaeda’s first two priorities should be to drive out the Americans and then to establish an

“Islamic authority or emirate” in the Sunni areas of Iraq. This emirate would simply be a first step toward the larger regional “caliphate,” but Zawahiri and bin Laden seemed to be taking a page from Stalin’s playbook: establish Islamism “in one country” before attempting to create a universal order.

Thus Zawahiri expresses doubts about Zarqawi’s strategy of fomenting civil war in Iraq between Sunni and Shia. “The collision between any state based on the model of prophecy with the Shia is a matter that will happen sooner or later,” admits Zawahiri, reinforcing the fundamental political tenets of the movement; moreover, he makes no distinction between the Iraqi and Iranian Shia, despite the many political differences and disputes between the two. But as clear as the apostasy of the Shia may be, and as inevitable the fight between Sunni and Shia, this is a distinction lost to most Muslims and so a problem for the larger Al Qaeda cause. Says Zawahiri:

The majority of Muslims don’t comprehend this and possibly could not even imagine it. For that reason, many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases when the attacks are on the mausoleum of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib [in Najaf, the holiest site in Shia Islam]. . . . Is this something that is unavoidable? . . . Or, does the conflict with the Shia lift the burden from the Americans by diverting the mujahideen to the Shia, while the American continue to control matters from afar?

On the face of things, it does not seem that Zarqawi has taken Zawahiri’s guidance fully to heart: attacks on the Shia have not abated, and we are seeing increasing signs of impending civil war. Bin Laden himself returned to the scene in January 2006 with a “truce offer” intended to play upon U.S. public opinion polls’ showing a sense of exhaustion over the Iraq War, but the initiative passed as quickly as it came.

One can draw from all this some conclusions about Al Qaeda’s strategic culture. For one, our enemy’s differences with us are of the most fundamental sort; the prospects for a policy of containment, let alone peaceful coexistence, seem very bleak indeed. Second, their geopolitical goals extend beyond driving the United States out of the Islamic world, beyond the destruction of Israel, to recreating a caliphate that would, in power, repress the Shia and other Islamic sects and enforce a strict Sunni form of rule.

If these are irredentist ends, the means of achieving them are open to debate. From a distance, Zawahiri questions the Zarqawi tactic of targeting Iraqi Shia, even while accepting the inevitability of Sunni-Shia conflict. However, this is simply an appraisal of the effectiveness of such tactics; both men feel that terror methods are entirely acceptable. What constrains their aggression, ultimately, is the lack of military means and their essential organizational weakness. For all the post-9/11 rhetoric about the resilience of the Al Qaeda structure, its “networked” nature

and “flat” hierarchy, these remain the virtues of military weakness, the traditional strengths of the insurgent. The common claim is that time favors the insurgent, but the failure to prevent legitimate and more representative governments from taking hold in Afghanistan and Iraq will be a big loss for Al Qaeda. “In the absence of popular support,” writes Zawahiri, “the Islamic mujahideen movement would be crushed in the shadows.”

### **Confounding the Calculus of Power**

Finally, if containing Al Qaeda is an impossible task, there’s also a huge amount of risk in adopting a containment strategy for weak-yet-rising nuclear powers like Iran and North Korea. By all traditional measures, these are fragile and nearly failing states. Internally, they are a mess in every way, corrupt and repressive. The Iranian revolution no longer inspires much of anyone outside the ruling clique or its terrorist clients—and it is probably the money and material support that buys their loyalty. Even China is appalled by North Korea’s staunch Stalinism.

But as these rogue 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.<sup>15</sup> As shaky as a policy of containment is, it’s surely preferable to confrontation, rollback, or military regime-change. Containment is 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. The solution to the problem of North Korea won’t appear until the larger problem of China is on the way to resolution.

At the same time, there may be exceptional circumstances where containment can fail, or 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. In sum, containment of this sort is a much less safe bet than great-power containment as practiced on the Soviets during the Cold War or perhaps on China in the decades to come. It may be the least-bad alternative, though not by a lot.

Perhaps the most confounding, at least to Americans, of these cases is that of Pakistan. U.S. policy toward Islamabad has ranged from close strategic cooperation to near isolation. The current situation, in which Pakistan is a large part of the problem of radical Islamism, is illustrative of the difficulties of dealing with nuclear-armed but otherwise weak states. And thus the question of Pakistan’s strategic culture is a compelling one. One of the reasons that American policy

<sup>15</sup> See Chadwick I. Smith, “North Korea: The Case for Strategic Entanglement,” and Colin Dueck, “Strategies for Managing Rogue States,” *Orbis*, Spring 2006.

toward Pakistan has been so confused is that the Pakistanis themselves have been divided and confused about many basic questions defining the nation and the state.

From its inception, as Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution has written, “Pakistan was to be an extraordinary state—a homeland for Indian Muslims and an ideological and political leader of the Islamic world.”<sup>16</sup> The Pakistan “movement” found its leader in Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a Karachi-born, English-trained lawyer and contemporary of Gandhi and Nehru in the India Congress. As the power of the British slowly receded on the subcontinent and the prospect of independence shone more clearly, the coalition of convenience between Hindu and Muslim likewise unraveled. And, for Muslims, Atatürk’s abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1922 tended to turn them toward more local concerns; the pan-Islamic caliphate movement of the times collapsed. The definition of what it was to be Muslim was an open one.

This was the environment in which Jinnah came to the fore. At the 1928 session of Congress he “proposed not only the reservation of places for his co-religionists in national and provincial legislatures, but the creation of three designated Islamic states—Sind, Baluchistan, and the North-West Frontier Province—within a future Indian federation.”<sup>17</sup> To Muslims, the supposedly inclusive All-India Congress looked suspiciously like a vehicle for dominant Hindu political power. Thus, to Jinnah, the father of the nation but an avowedly secular prince who favored well-cut English tailoring, the category “Muslim” was a loose and inclusive one, effectively defined in distinction to the Indian Hindu majority. The two communities, he said in 1940, “are not religious in the strict sense of the word, but are in fact different and distinct social orders, and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality.”<sup>18</sup>

Any realistic chance to keep British India intact ended with Gandhi’s “Quit India” campaign, which he launched at the low point of Britain’s fortunes in World War II, on August 8, 1942. As Jinnah’s political fortunes waxed, so did his demands for a future independent Pakistan. He now included Kashmir, the Punjab, and Bengal in his territorial demands. In its haste to leave India after the war, Britain offered no help in resolving these issues, with the result that the Punjab and Bengal were split, inciting massive ethnic cleansing and perhaps a million deaths, and leaving Kashmir a contested province. The tenuousness of the new Pakistan was underscored in 1971 when East Pakistan—with India’s help—seceded and became Bangladesh. The supposed bond of Islam was not enough to convince Bengalis that they should remain confederated with, and subordinate to, Punjabis.

These many traumas mark Pakistan’s strategic culture. “Pakistan is a paranoid state,” writes Cohen, “that has enemies. The strategic elite do not want to

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Cohen, “The Nation and the State of Pakistan,” *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2002, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), p. 523.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 540.

see their country become a West Bangladesh—a state denuded of its military power and politically as well as economically subordinated to a hegemonic India.”<sup>19</sup> The flip side of the coin of paranoia is a strategic “adventurism,” by which Cohen means Kashmiri and Afghani ambitions, but which could be more broadly applied to Pakistan’s nuclear program, its relations with China, and its ambiguous relationship with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, its homegrown Islamists, and international radical networks.

While originally conceived as an inclusive Islamic state, Pakistan has found it difficult to deal with the narrower but perhaps more immediately powerful vision of Islam advanced by the radicals. Islamist *madrassas* have provided education when Pakistani government has not, and other state services as well. The Pakistani army, the one strong institution of the state, has long had cozy relations with Islamist groups, particularly in the eternally troublesome North-West Frontier Province.

The army seems to believe it can retain the upper hand in these dealings. Cohen essentially agrees: “The political dominance and institutional integrity of the Pakistani army remains the chief reason for the marginality of radical Islamic groups,” he wrote in 2003. “Although the army has a long history of using radical and violent Islamists for political purposes, it has little interest in supporting their larger agenda of turning Pakistan into a more comprehensively Islamic state.”<sup>20</sup> But there is a strong correlation between Islamist radicalism and the “national” interests of Pakistan’s Pashtuns. The Pashtuns have traditionally been the Punjabis’ most reliable partners in power and in the military, balancing the fissiparous tendencies of Sindhis and Baluchis. A closer look at recent election results that brought to power an otherwise anomalous coalition of religious parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, reveals what is essentially a Pashtun alliance. The International Crisis Group notes rising resentment in Sindh and Baluchistan, particularly against the Punjabi- and Pashtun-dominated army.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, Pakistani strategic culture has been and remains largely shaped by the deep uncertainties that underlie the idea of the Pakistani nation and the formation and history of the state of Pakistan. These distortions are exacerbated by the army’s dominance of the state; civil society has been unable to ameliorate either Pakistan’s real fears or the fears that come from “adventurism.” Even Cohen is unwilling to predict that the army can continue to balance these competing demands in the face of an obviously rising Islamic populism; he is not confident beyond the next few years. From the start, Pakistan has faced a narrow range of strategic options and its own actions have served to narrow them further. The more Pakistan acts as though it were cornered, the more cornered it becomes. The more tightly the army grips the reins of power, the more likely it is that the bridle may break.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Cohen, “The Jihadist Threat to Pakistan,” *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2003, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> See “Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military,” International Crisis Group, Asia Report 49, Mar. 20, 2003.

Thus the stability of Pakistan's strategic partnership with the United States is in doubt, regardless of the policies of the Musharraf or any successor government. To be sure, there is very little choice; the only thing worse than engaging with the Pakistani government is to disengage (witness the experience of the 1990s). At the same time, American strategists need to take a more hedged approach; a weak and paranoid state in possession of nuclear weapons is an inherently risky proposition. Moreover, thinking through the problems of Pakistan would provide important insights on how to deal with Iran, another essentially weak state—though a strong nation.

### **And What of the Americans?**

The final piece in the equation of rising powers should be an American self-assessment. We may be the most dominant power, attempting to “preserve” a *Pax Americana*—but does that really make us a status-quo power? Indeed, American strategic culture will be the naturally decisive factor in twenty-first-century international relations. We need to consider carefully how our strategic culture might interact with the strategic cultures of aggressive, rising powers. It is this “clash of cultures” that will prove decisive.

The United States might do well to consider itself still a rising rather than a status-quo power; a revolutionary force in history, not a reactionary one. While the nation doesn't like to think of itself as “aggressive,” it repeatedly has been expansionist, unilateralist, and prone to regard those who do not accept its universal political principles as existential threats. Originally, Americans regarded their country, quite cheerfully—even prematurely—as an imperial power. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson conceived the United States as “a republican empire” and “an empire for liberty.” In the very first paragraph of *Federalist* No. 1, Alexander Hamilton described the country as “an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world.” To Hamilton, the United States was “Hercules in a cradle.” James Madison's more modest term was “extended republic.” A century or so later, Theodore Roosevelt would be an even more enthusiastic imperialist. In 1899, addressing the Lincoln Club in New York, he spoke of the legacy of the Spanish-American War, of America's new role as a world power:

We have a great duty to perform and we shall show ourselves a weak and a poor-spirited people if we fail to set about doing it or if we fail to do it aright. . . . We have taken upon ourselves, as in honor bound, a great task, befitting a great nation, and we have a right to ask of every citizen, of every true American, that he shall with heart and hand uphold the leaders of the nation as from a brief and glorious war they strive to a lasting peace that shall redound not only to the interests of the

conquered people, not only to the honor of the American public, but to the permanent advancement of civilization and of all mankind.”<sup>22</sup>

The rhetoric of Roosevelt and the Founders is not so different from that of President Bush; the times and the strategic circumstances of the United States profoundly changed, but the habits of mind remain consistent. Historian John Lewis Gaddis has made this case in a collection of lectures, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*: “American leaders [have] evolved a strategy of forestalling future challenges by enlarging American interests,” he writes. “The principal elements of that strategy were: preemption where marauders might exploit the weakness of neighboring states; . . . unilateralism, so that the United States need not rely upon any other state to guarantee its security”; and, finally, hegemony, initially over the North American continent, but with the purpose that “the dominant international system” would reflect “a preponderance of American power.”<sup>23</sup>

If this formulation sounds a lot like the Bush Doctrine, it’s because the president’s post-9/11 rhetoric has done much to recall the traditions of American strategy-making. And, not surprisingly, some people and states, particularly those we regard as aggressive rising powers, have the sense that we’re gunning for them. Perhaps, in a very long-term sense, they are right to think so. Gaddis’s “enlarging American interests”<sup>24</sup> are likely, if not bound, to come into conflict with a newly rising great power in Beijing, and they have already come into mortal combat with radical Islamists. Likewise, we may stumble into action if nuclear armed but weak states—what John Quincy Adams termed “derelict” states—either threaten us intolerably or simply convince us that they cannot control their own weaponry.

### **Military Measures**

To conclude, a brief discussion of strategic ends and military means. There is a dangerous gap between our strategic reach and our military grasp; the desire to maintain a global preponderance of American power—in President Bush’s terms, a “balance of power that favors freedom”—is a very tall order for the U.S. military, for a variety of reasons. First, it’s inherently a big task for a force substantially smaller than it used to be. Second, there aren’t many allies to be found, either internationally and militarily. And third, there are a lot of enemies and potential enemies. As President Clinton’s director of central intelligence, James Woolsey, put it long ago, we slew the Soviet dragon only to find the garden infested with snakes. Smaller, but still poisonous.

<sup>22</sup> Mario DiNunzio, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt, An American Mind: Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 812–3.

<sup>23</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 37–38.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.; see also David Hendrickson, “Preemption, Unilateralism, and Hegemony: The American Tradition?” *Orbis*, Spring 2006.

In February 2006, the Department of Defense released its report on the *QDR*, the Bush administration's second attempt to align its military plans with its grand strategy. The review acknowledges the challenges addressed above. The China question, which has been a growing concern in the DoD for a decade and a shaping factor in the 2001 *QDR*, gets the most thorough treatment. While trying to encourage Beijing to act like a "stakeholder" in the U.S.-led international order and to "choose a path of peaceful economic growth and political liberalization rather than military threat and intimidation," the review acknowledges that "the pace and scope of China's military build-up already puts regional military balances at risk." This is the thinking that is reflected, for example, in the reposturing of U.S. forces in the Pacific.

The *QDR* also discusses the potential for Chinese provocations by unconventional means; these are the asymmetric capabilities that can accelerate the ways by which China can become, in the Pentagon's terminology, a "disruptive" power. The report forecasts that Beijing is likely to continue to invest in high-end capabilities, "emphasizing electronic and cyber-warfare; counter-space operations; ballistic and cruise missiles; advanced integrated air defense systems; next-generation torpedoes; advanced submarines; strategic nuclear strike from modern, sophisticated land- and sea-bases systems; and theater unmanned aerial vehicles for employment by the Chinese military and for global export."

That makes China a great-power competitor if ever there were one; this section of the *QDR* is right on point, as is the section on nuclear proliferation. In addition to observing the immediate dangers from North Korea and the imminent danger from Iran, the *QDR* delicately discusses the dangers of nuclear states that suffer from "internal instability" and potential "loss of control over their weapons. . . . The prospect that a nuclear-capable state may lose control of some of its weapons to terrorists is one of the greatest dangers the United States and its allies face."

The *QDR* also begins what will be a long and difficult process of developing military options for such situations. The report moves beyond the idea of a strike operation like the preemptive one by the Israeli air force against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. It calls for improved surveillance and interdiction capabilities and, importantly, the ability "to deploy, sustain, protect, support and redeploy special operations forces in hostile environments" and anti-WMD missions. Yet because the report is mum on the most pressing reason for solving this very challenging puzzle—the deterrent effect the nuclear rogues, particularly those in the Middle East, have on U.S. grand strategy—it leaves the reader with the impression that old-style containment remains a realistic long-term solution. In short, the problem is not simply an operational one, although the operational challenges are severe.

Ironically, given President Bush's emphasis on the issue, the *QDR* is weakest in its discussion of what the administration has called the "long war" in the Middle East. It opens by stating, "The United States is a nation engaged in what will be a long war. The terrorist attacks on September 11 imposed a powerful sense of

urgency to transforming the Department.” It is as though we responded to Pearl Harbor with an accelerated program of bureaucratic reform.

That’s meant not simply as a cheap shot; to read the *QDR* is to begin to take the measure of the rejectionism of the key tenet of the Bush Doctrine in the DoD. The Pentagon insists upon understanding The “long war” as a massive counterterrorism campaign rather than a counterinsurgency war, as requiring forces that are “more agile and expeditionary,” not more durable and sustainable; marked by “technological advances, including dramatic improvements in information management and precision weaponry,” not by increased manpower; moving away from “war against nations,” even though the two main military acts since 9/11 have been invasions of nations and replacing their regimes.

The *QDR*’s keys to victory in this war are all tactical. The report reflects the thinking of the both the DoD’s senior civilian and senior military leaders that the primary need is to “find, fix and finish combat operations against new and elusive foes,” not complete the more strategic post-combat operations. The second need is for better “intelligence fusion” to “produce action plans that can be executed in real time;” not boldness in the face of an irreducible fog of war. And third, “everything done in this Department must contribute to joint warfighting capability,” whether or not a joint solution is the right one.

The fact is that today’s force is superbly competent in the tactical sense. Yes, until lately it has generally been focused on large-scale conventional operations. But the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan have been more strategic than tactical. Counterinsurgency tactics have been dramatically improved, and proven in the harshest environment imaginable, over the last several years. Likewise, the training of Iraqi and Afghan security forces has accelerated. But the essential problem—that is, where friendly forces are not present, unfriendly forces are free to operate, to terrorize and intimidate—remains unsolved. The Pentagon’s sense of urgency evaporates when it comes to increasing the size of the force. The force must be perfected before it can be made larger.

The DoD’s model for the long war is the recent history of Afghanistan—the *QDR* again is illustrated with pictures of Special Operations Forces on horseback. First, there was the invasion, which “reinforced the principles of adaptability, speed of action, integrated joint operations, economy of force, and the value of working with and through indigenous forces.” Since then, the *QDR* reports that reconstruction and counterinsurgency campaigns have been the mission of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force of 9,000. No mention is made of the long-term U.S. force presence, which has averaged about 18,000 and surged, at election and other crucial times, above 20,000.

The telling of the Iraq story is likewise distorted. “The weight of effort in Iraq has shifted over time, from defeating the Iraqi military and liberating the Iraqi people, to building up Iraqi security forces and local institutions, and to transitioning responsibility for security to the Iraqis.” What about the counterinsurgency part? Indeed, the main lesson the Pentagon seems to have to have learned from Iraq is, “Let’s *never* do this again.” Is it reasonable to presume that our current level of effort

in the region—a rotational force of about 20 brigade-sized units, counting Iraq, Afghanistan, the horn of Africa and elsewhere—is the limit to what we can anticipate in the future? Even if so, is a fully “modularized” regular Army of 42 brigades, plus a two-division-plus Marine Corps, sufficient to sustain the long-term strain? Do we expect the Army National Guard to continue to deploy at recent rates?

In short, the Pentagon seems to have understood neither the strategic culture of the Al Qaeda-like enemy—and the connection between terrorism and the larger political culture of the greater Middle East—nor the strategic culture of the United States as articulated in the Bush Doctrine. Thus, we have a military ill-prepared to sustain the current effort and incapable of rising to the probable future demands of American leaders. We seem to be ignoring the possibility of an escalating clash of strategic cultures. But a world marked by American superpower aspirations, the millennial aims of radical Islamists, and Chinese great-power pretensions, spiced with derelict states wielding the most destructive weapons, would seem an injunction to keep one’s powder dry and in full supply.