

## IS MAJOR CONFLICT A THING OF THE PAST?

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**IS MAJOR CONFLICT A THING OF THE PAST?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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A review of the world history would suggest that major state-on-state warfare has not become completely a thing of the past. The potential shift in the balance of power between the United States and China might prove to be the catalyst to global-scale instability. When combined with global trends and historical flash points, they have the potential to create the strategic shock that could precipitate great power state-on-state conflict. The United Kingdom therefore needs to reconsider its grand strategy for the twenty-first century and structure its armed forces for major combat operations.



## IS MAJOR CONFLICT A THING OF THE PAST?

The United Kingdom government has just announced the findings of their Strategic Defense and Security Review. The key conclusion is a vision of the future that has hybrid conflict, as seen most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, as the dominant feature of warfare in the twenty-first century. As General Sir David Richards, the current Chief of the Defense Staff stated:

State-on-state warfare is happening and will continue to happen but some are failing to see how. These wars are not being fought by a conventional invasion of uniformed troops, ready to be repulsed by heavy armor or ships, but through a combination of economic, cyber and proxy actions. Modern state-on-state warfare looks remarkably like irregular conflict.<sup>1</sup>

For defense planners in the United Kingdom the threat to the realm from a conventional military force is considered remote and highly unlikely. The strength of the transatlantic alliance combined with greater European integration has created a sense of security in the country's ability to withstand an external threat. As a result, armed forces will be structured to deal with the most likely threat as envisioned by the Review and that means expeditionary forces that cover a broad spectrum of capability. There is a danger, however, with the baseline assumptions underlying this vision of the future, particularly as most of the assumptions rely on the United States' military power and prowess to provide the global police force. The principal concern rests with the belief that the current *status quo* in the balance of power will remain intact and that the United States will continue to act as the sole superpower and global hegemon.

The global recession that started in 2008 has given rise to significant doubts as to the validity of this assumption. The bewildering economic rise of China has led many

analysts to believe that the twenty-first century will see the rise of China to compete as a global power and, possibly, overtake the United States as the preeminent power.

If we say that the change of the international situation during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place around the disintegration of a former superpower – the Soviet Union – then the changes of international situation during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century took place around the economic recession of the (present and sole) superpower – the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of China as a regional and eventually global power and competitor to the United States has changed the global paradigm in the balance of power and there is an inherent tension as we move into an era of competing interests. As the Oxford academic and China expert Rosemary Foot stated, “some theorists of international relations<sup>3</sup> have argued that the danger of war is at its height when a power transition is about to take place.”<sup>4</sup> There seems little doubt that the balance of power is changing and the rise of a contender often leads to instability and conflict as the great powers enter what can be characterized as a “war prone zone,”<sup>5</sup> in which the specter of classical balance of power overshadows the relations among the great powers.<sup>6</sup>

No one can predict the future and star gazing is a complex art fraught with danger. However, it is a necessary activity for force preparation and design; something heightened by extreme curbs of national spending power. The seductive view is to classify the hybrid wars of today as the norm for the foreseeable future. History would suggest otherwise and, as Professor Colin Gray stated in his seminal work, the prospect of “another bloody century” beckons for the unprepared.<sup>7</sup> To ignore this possibility and prepare our armed forces solely for the current war is a dangerous precedent and reminiscent of the United Kingdom military after the Boer War at the turn of the

twentieth century. Even the United States seems to be guilty of not scanning the future environment in a manner that accepts the premise of a worst case scenario:

It is generally agreed that war between great powers is unlikely, although not impossible. A 'total war' of the World War II variety is not and should not be a major concern for today's or tomorrow's policymakers.<sup>8</sup>

This paper, therefore, seeks to review the cyclic nature of modern warfare before assessing the threat to the United States' domination as the sole global superpower. It hopes to highlight the danger of ignoring the Chinese rise to power and elicit debate as to the future nature of warfare in the twenty-first century.

### Background

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded the start of a new era in global politics.

Optimism bloomed as the Cold War ended, western liberalism found new security as the only remaining world-spanning ideology, and growing trade and modern communications brought nations closer together than ever before.<sup>9</sup>

The euphoria felt by many nations at the collapse of Soviet communism triggered extensive debate as to the future utility of war and how to structure armed forces to meet the threats of the new millennium. Most analysts seemed to coalesce between two principal camps; the liberals and the realists.

For the liberals the collapse of communism was the defining moment when any alternative contender to Hegel's vision of a modern liberal democracy, spurned on the battlefield of Jena in 1806.<sup>10</sup> The two most notable alternate ideologies of communism and fascism were discredited and the history of the world was seemingly changed irrevocably. The only possible ideological contenders were now nationalism and religion, and these were not considered at the time as global phenomenon. What was

left was increasing economic harmonization as “the death of this (communism) ideology means the growing ‘Common Marketization’ of international relations and the diminution of the likelihood of large-scale conflict between states”.<sup>11</sup> For the liberal school the loss of an ideological competitor meant that there were no grounds for major conflict and the use of military force became less legitimate. The idea of a non-offensive defense posture became fashionable and this optimism drove many analysts to conclude that all the nations of the world should adopt a more balanced military capability in keeping with the reduced threat to peace. At the forefront of this debate was the Danish political theorist Bjorn Möller<sup>12</sup> whose rationale was based on the relinquishment of offensive strike capability and replacement with static defensive measures. The peace dividend experienced by many western armies in the early 1990s reflected this school of thought.

The much heralded peace dividend was soon discredited as numerous nation states began to disintegrate and internal conflict between ethnic groups broke out in vicious civil wars; conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Kosovo dominated the decade. The wildly optimistic liberal utopian view of the future nature of warfare was undone and began to morph into the new paradigm of ‘war amongst the people’<sup>13</sup>. This new emphasis on nation building and societal restructuring was seen as the trend for the future of military engagement. The Israeli theorist Martin Van Creveld presciently stated that “in the future, war will not be waged by armies but by groups whom we today call terrorists, guerillas, bandits, and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit on more formal titles to describe themselves.”<sup>14</sup> More recently, the noted Australian expert David Kilcullen expanded on this new paradigm in his book “the Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One” and coined the term

“hybrid war” to express the emerging nature of military operations within complex terrain against ideologically, mainly religiously, motivated organizations. Whilst many definitions of hybrid war exist, Frank Hoffman’s definition of “any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain their political objectives”<sup>15</sup> seems the best to sum up this new form of warfare.

A cursory look at the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan would lend weight to this theory and to the growing suggestion among many strategic leaders around the world that this new form of warfare is likely to be the baseline for future conflict. To many people the prospect of twentieth century great power warfare has been consigned to the dustbin of history. In his speech to the Royal United Services Institute, the United Kingdom Chief of the General Staff pondered:

why would China or Russia for example, despite the often ill-informed debate after the invasion of Georgia by Russia last year, risk everything they have achieved to confront us conventionally? The social and economic costs of creating the scale of military capability required plausibly to succeed, even assuming we do not start to respond in like manner, are enormous.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is exactly the cyclic nature of history that suggests caution must be used when assessing future trends. Predicting the future operating environment is filled with danger and highly subjective in nature. As the noted military theorist, Professor Colin Gray acknowledged: “The future has not happened. No measure of skill in scenario invention, or indeed in any other methodology, can alter the reality of our ignorance”<sup>17</sup>. Attempts to prophesy an encompassing strategic theory for a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity is highly challenging. The oft quoted statement that no two liberal democracies have ever fought a war against one another

seems to miss the underlying issue of political expediency. As Professor Colin Gray indicates:

States operate in both an international political and international economic environment, and the former dominates the latter when the two systems come into conflict. When survival is at stake, the end will always be held to justify whatever means are believed to be effective.<sup>18</sup>

Politics and the human condition will therefore become factors that will not change with the passing of time and this has led to the emergence of an alternative school of thought.

The alternative perspectives to international relations are the realists who believe that there are numerous indicators to signpost the nature and utility of force within the perceived complex future environment. For a start, the context for war remains political activity and the central premise of the works of Clausewitz will continue to remain valid for the twenty-first century. In other words, the actions of governments to safeguard the interests of their people will provide the same basis for conflict as they did in the early nineteenth century. Equally, if one accepts that war is about policy and the waging of war is a basic element of the human condition<sup>19</sup>, then a logical conclusion remains that regular and irregular warfare will be a part of any future that emerges; it is impossible to separate the two forms of warfare when dealing with political and national survival. The delicate balance of power between peoples, states and religions creates an enduring tension which Thomas Hobbes articulated concisely when he stated that “hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.”<sup>20</sup> For Hobbes, the very essence of the human condition means that when a nation is threatened with national destruction, it will adopt any measure to

ensure its survival within the international order. In effect, the Darwinian paradigm of the “survival of the fittest” will continue to be played out at the macro strategic level.<sup>21</sup> For the realist the only logical conclusion for the future of warfare is that interstate wars will not only remain a possibility, they will almost certainly be a reality.

### The Shifting Balance of Global Power

Whilst the United Kingdom and United States remain fixated on the current ‘hybrid wars’ in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global balance of power is starting to change and serious contenders are emerging in South Asia, Russia and East Asia. The recent state visit to India by President Barack Obama highlights the strategic significance the current administration has on this rapidly emerging regional power:

For in Asia and around the world, India is not simply emerging; India has already emerged. And it is my firm belief that the relationship between the United States and India bound by our shared interests and values will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century.<sup>22</sup>

The reason for the United States courting a relationship with India is easy to see, it will be the world’s most populous state by 2040 and a major economic power within a multi-polar world. However, it is not seen as a direct threat to the United States and the global balance of power due to its ‘India First’ policy and focus on regional issues, namely Pakistan. Equally Russia has never fully regained its status as a global power due to inherent social and economic challenges, a military badly in need of reform and financial investment, and its own regional focus, namely the Caucasuses and Ukraine.

The growing threat to the global balance of power seems to be coming from the one nation that can compete on an international footing and who is becoming increasingly assertive and belligerent in its policies towards the United States; namely China. As the Pentagon noted in its 2009 report, “China’s rapid rise as a regional

political and economic power with growing global influence has significant implications for the Asia-Pacific region and the world.”<sup>23</sup> The issue for strategic leaders in many of the western countries is how seriously to take the threat posed by the emergence of China within the international order and could a shift in the balance of power degenerate into major global conflict. To answer this question it is necessary to understand the phenomenal rise of China over the last decade and its ambitions and aspirations for the future.

Attempting to establish the strategy and policy direction of China can be complex and difficult to achieve due to the opaque or not-so-transparent nature of the regime; the most obvious example of this being the interpretation of its armed forces’ motives and aspirations. However, a significant amount of information on political and economic policies can be gleaned from an analysis of public speeches by key leaders, and in particular the Chairman of the Communist Party. An analysis of these speeches gives an indication of an emerging shift in Chinese foreign policy.

As the Cold War came to an end and the United States emerged as the sole superpower on the global stage, the Chinese policy as described by China’s late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping was to “observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; never claim leadership”.<sup>24</sup> The rationale behind Chinese thinking at the time was articulated in greater detail by Liu Huaqiu, the Director of Foreign Affairs, when he stated that Deng Xiaoping’s strategy was formulated because China belonged to the “Third World” and that it would take “decades of arduous effort by China to achieve modernization to reach the level of moderately developed country”.<sup>25</sup> There was also the

cultural stigma associated with colonial repression where China suffered at the hands of the Great Powers and the fact that China “fully understands the true meaning of ‘do not do to others what you do not wish for yourself’”.<sup>26</sup> To amplify the point and give a greater temporal perspective on the strategy, Wu Jianmin the President of China Foreign Affairs University asserted that “the policy of *tao-guang yang-hui* (concealing one’s ability and biding one’s time) must continue for at least 100 years”.<sup>27</sup> It is easy to see the logic for the inward focused policy of the Chinese authorities at that time as it was very much the product of the internal disorder at Tiananmen Square in 1989, a stagnating economy in need of reform, and a military that was untested in combat.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close, the outlook for China is increasingly different. A booming economy with an average growth rate of 10% per year since 1978 has made China the world’s second largest economy. Furthermore it has been conservatively estimated that China will be the largest economy by 2025 and double that of the United States by 2040.<sup>28</sup> This economic resurgence has given China a far more global perspective as President Hu Jintao stated in 2005: “we will do our utmost to support and assist other developing countries in speeding up their development”.<sup>29</sup> The effect of this economic resurgence on China itself is equally significant with a sustained and substantial increase in public spending in key government departments. Government statistics, for example, indicate an average increase in defense spending alone of about 12% annually since 2000. The budget in 2006 was increased by 14.7% to US\$ 35.1 billion, in 2009 it reached US\$ 69.29 billion, and as at the 4<sup>th</sup> March 2010, Beijing announced a 7.5% increase to US\$ 78.6 billion. Getting an accurate figure for defense spending in China is complex and problematic

and the United States Department of Defense believes the exact figure could be as much as three times that figure, making China the second largest defense spender globally (although still only 10% of current United States defense spending).<sup>30</sup>

As a result of this increasing economic and military strength, the political direction of China has become more global and less insular as highlighted in the China 2008 Defense White Paper:

China has become an important member of the international system and the future and destiny of China has been increasingly closely connected with the international community. China cannot develop in isolation from the rest of the world, nor can the world enjoy prosperity and stability without China.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst the political direction for the military is to “pursue a national defense policy which is purely defensive in nature”,<sup>32</sup> there has been a change of orientation in the military outlook which indicates that “in recent years, in line with the strategic requirements of mobile operations and three-dimensional offense and defense, the Army has been moving from regional defense to trans-regional mobility.”<sup>33</sup> Much of this shift in strategic outlook has been fuelled literally by a desire to safeguard Chinese supplies of raw materials and energy sources. However, territorial ambitions stimulated by nationalism are an equally strong catalyst for military reform and China’s stated claim to Taiwan seems to be the principal catalyst for the change in defense posture. As Fareed Zakaria warned, “as economic fortunes rise, so inevitably does nationalism”.<sup>34</sup>

With an increasingly strong economy and investment in military capability, “China has the capacity and ambition to become No.1 in the world, no matter how modest current Chinese leaders make it appear”.<sup>35</sup> Whilst Chinese ambitions still seem relatively moderate, the concern for western strategists will be how to manage this burgeoning economic growth whilst curtailing overtly nationalistic military ambitions that could lead

to global conflict. The whole scenario will be complicated for strategists as they will have to conduct their deliberations against the backdrop of a weakening global power in the United States.

### The Potential Demise of a Superpower

The financial crisis in 2008 has precipitated a gradual reduction in the United States' influence around the world and many analysts forecast it as the start of a gradual decline in their status as the sole superpower. The contrast between the end of the British Imperial domination in the late nineteenth century and the current demise of the United States are stark. Paul Kennedy succinctly states that "great powers succumb to "Imperial overstretch" because their global interests and obligations outpace their ability to defend them all simultaneously".<sup>36</sup> For the British Empire this was particularly evident in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Although the British did worry a lot about their reputation and prestige what really killed the Empire was its eroding economic position. Once Britain ceased to be the world's major economic and industrial power, its days as an imperial power were numbered. It simply couldn't maintain the ships, the men, the aircraft, and the economic leverage needed to rule millions of foreigners, especially in a world where other rapacious great powers preyed.<sup>37</sup>

The multiplicity of complex threats to the United States is forcing its own "Imperial overstretch" as it jealously guards its global hegemon status against the advances of competitive powers. As Fareed Zakaria noted, "at the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world. But along every other dimension, industrial, financial, social and cultural, the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance".<sup>38</sup>

The catalyst for change is the relative downturn in the United States economy. There has been a gradual reduction in its global GDP (50% in 1950 to 22% in 2007) which has led to an inevitable reduction in the United States economic power; although

it should be noted that it still remains 3 times the size of its next competitor. However, the massive spending by the current administration to bring the economy out of recession, including the recent injection of a further US\$ 600 billion for quantitative easing, has left gaping holes in the budget and the painful prospect of deficits and cuts to bring the spiraling national debt under control. With a current deficit of 10% of GDP, a predicted net interest level rising from 1% in 2009 to 4% by 2020, and a Federal debt held by the public estimated to rise to 90% of national GDP by 2020, the President has some stark choices to make to bring the economy and burgeoning debt under control. “Militarily, the U.S. is the British Empire of the 21st century — and then some. But it is policing the world on the back of a colossal US\$ 1.5 trillion budget deficit and a staggering \$13.5 trillion national debt.”<sup>39</sup> It is hard to state categorically where the cuts will be made, however it seems fairly prudent to suggest that discretionary spending is the most obvious area and defense remains an attractive target for reductions.

On the back of an economic slump, there is speculation of a currency war with China and, perhaps more worryingly for the United States, real concern at the level of investment that China has made in the currency reserves where it currently holds more than half of its US\$ 2 Trillion in United States Treasury bonds. A safe bet for many years, the fragility of the current United States economy has led Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China to state that “we have lent a huge amount of money to the United States. Of course we are concerned about the safety of our assets. To be honest, I am definitely a little worried.”<sup>40</sup> A loss of confidence in the preeminence of the United States dollar could have catastrophic effects on the strength of the United States’ economy.

The United States' global influence is also suffering from its recent past as the sole superpower. In a bipolar world where it remained the preeminent power it established alliances and trust, and most states were keen and willing to be seen as 'friendly' towards the United States. In an increasingly unipolar world, this dominance has led to resentment and many "world leaders (have) decried American "hyperpower" and spoke(n) openly of creating a multipolar world to counterbalance the United States."<sup>41</sup> The actions of the United States have also attracted criticism and alienated otherwise supportive countries. The perceived and literal lack of support to global institutions like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court as well as disregard for major agreements including climate change at Kyoto and the 1999 Ottawa Treaty banning the use of landmines are seen as irritants by many states and indicative of national self interest.

However, it is the response to the 9/11 attacks with the declaration by President George W. Bush that "you are either with us or against us in the fight against terrorism"<sup>42</sup> that has generated much discontent; a fact that has been exacerbated by the revelations of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (waterboarding) and secret prisons which are deemed by many to be outside the rule of law. Despite the assertions of former President George W. Bush that:

The procedure was tough, but medical experts assured the CIA that it did no lasting harm. I knew an interrogation program this sensitive and controversial would one day become public. When it did, we would open ourselves up to criticism that America had compromised our moral values. I would have preferred that we get the information another way. But the choice between security and values was real.<sup>43</sup>

This has led to accusations of double standards and a global perception of a loss of moral authority.

More than anything, it has been the responses to complex situations that have undermined the sense of power and domination enjoyed by the United States in recent decades. Whilst the internal fiasco surrounding the damage, suffering and misery caused by hurricane Katrina was embarrassing to its image abroad, it is perhaps the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan which have most polarized the views of many nations and Diasporas towards the United States. The bitter sense of resentment in the Muslim world for the 'Great Satan' and its global crusade against Islamic states and its peoples has given added resonance to the dangerous views articulated by terrorist organizations like *al-qa'eda*. These views alone have already created the conditions for a deadly series of complex insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan and look likely to spread to many other Middle Eastern countries; Yemen and the Sudan being the most notable in the not too distant future. Taken together, these factors have all led to an erosion in the United States' standing as the pre-eminent global power around the world.

Based on this analysis there seems little doubt that there is a shift in the global balance of power that is underway and many analysts believe that China will have reached military and economic parity with the United States within the next twenty to thirty years. When combined with economic predictions and increasing foreign policy interventions, the assessment must indicate that the decade spanning the 2030s will be critical to the global balance of power. Unfortunately, international stability tends to be at its most fragile when a change in the global balance of power is either threatened or underway. In his paper on 'Great Power Peace and Stability in Asia', Dr Lai posits that: "when the national power of the challenger approaches that of the leading power, the

two enter a war-prone zone.”<sup>44</sup> History is littered with examples of conflict emerging from shifts in the delicate balance of power. In ancient Greece Thucydides highlighted the real reason for conflict: “War must be declared, not so much because they were persuaded by the arguments of the allies, as because they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians.”<sup>45</sup> More recent examples include the aftermath of the French revolution in eighteenth century France and the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth century. Conflict in all these examples became inevitable as the leading power of the day either launched a pre-emptive strike or the rising power exploited weakness in the dominant power and gambled on a more successful outcome.

The only exception to this has been the power transition between the United Kingdom and the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Kenneth Organski offered a number of reasons why this anomaly happened, but the most telling fact seems to have been the shared values and culture between the two countries. The growth of the United States did not appear to be a threat to the ‘Old World’ order and they were certainly not seeking world leadership. Therefore, as the United Kingdom lost ground within the global order, so the United States was able to pick up the mantle. In effect the United Kingdom was content to become a ‘loyal lieutenant’ to the United States.<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, it is hard to see the same seamless transition between the United States and China. The United States is well aware of the growth of China and its desire for greater resources and political influence. It is also not willing to cede any ground to an expanding China and is content to continue with its global reach and world leadership. Most significantly, the chasm between the United States and Chinese

cultures, and their respective values and standards, is too great to bridge in the short to medium term. The United States will not want to be second to China in the world order and it seems equally inconceivable that China will accept its long term status as number two to the United States. Both countries are now entering the war prone zone where the dominant power (in this case the United States) might attempt pre-emptive action against China. Equally, the challenger (China) may chance its arm and gamble on a weakening United States resolve, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. This potential for conflict is only going to be amplified when the prospects for a strategic shock in the international order are factored in.

### Strategic Shocks

It is highly unlikely that two rational powers would engage in any conflict where the consequences of their actions could be so detrimental to both countries. Indeed, United States policy already appears to be heading in the direction of engagement to achieve a peaceful evolution. At a recent joint press conference between the United States and China, the importance of political engagement was highlighted when President Hu stated: "The two sides (China and US) reaffirmed the fundamental principle of respecting each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Neither side supports any attempts by force to undermine the principle."<sup>47</sup> The problems will occur when an unforeseen strategic shock affects the global order and polarizes the two competing powers. A graphic example is underway in Korea at the moment with the shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong on 23 October 2010 by North Korean artillery. With both the United States and China backing their respective allies, the movement of the *USS George Washington* into the Yellow Sea for maneuvers, and the declaration by China that the United States must not infringe its exclusive economic

zone, the conditions seem set for confrontation that could lead to a downward spiral of military activity.

So what are the concerns that exist that could precipitate a strategic shock of the magnitude that might lead to deadly confrontation and the inevitable descent into major combat operations? Secretary of State Hillary Clinton perhaps cited the principal concerns in her press statement on 20 February 2009 when she stated the three challenges for US-China relations were the global financial crisis, climate change, and a range of security issues.<sup>48</sup>

#### The Global Financial Crisis and Poverty Gap

The economic downturn has inevitably led to friction between the two countries. The recent G20 summit in South Korea has not alleviated mutual concerns and suspicions as highlighted by the global media outlets: "There will be no pact on global trade imbalances at the Group of 20 summit because China and the US, or "G2", are locked in opposition."<sup>49</sup> However, these financial disagreements are very much market fluctuations and are unlikely to lead to deadly conflict; particularly as the United States and China have become so economically entwined. As Secretary of State Clinton said, the United States and China are "truly going to rise or fall together."<sup>50</sup>

Where the friction may arise is in the rapidly disproportionate distribution of wealth between the capitalist consumer countries of the western nations and the poorer countries; particularly in sub Saharan Africa and Latin America. The competitive environment championed by a capitalist society will always breed winners and losers within the international system and the poverty gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' will merely increase. The net effect of this growing inequality in wealth is likely to be a growing resentment in many parts of the world that could mutate in many forms. As the

United Kingdom's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre states: "inequality *may* also lead to a resurgence of not only anti-capitalist ideologies, *possibly* linked to religious, anarchist or nihilist movements, but also to populism and even Marxism."<sup>51</sup>

This will have two profound effects. First, it will disenfranchise a significant part of the global population and alienate them in a way that could lead to actions that appear irrational on the surface. For instance, the combination of increasing poverty, religious fervor and the acquisition of nuclear weapons in Iran could lead to a spiral of activity that brings the United States (through its close association with Israel), Russia and China into a heightened state of tension.

Secondly, there is the potential for an ideological or cultural struggle to emerge. The most obvious form would be where the revolutionary zeal of communism may pit itself once more against capitalism. However, China has so far shown no obvious tendency to export its brand of Marxism and support other countries in their struggle for power. This is not to say that a scenario may not emerge that has this ideological basis but it seems more likely that it will be cultural ties that breed future instability.

Samuel Huntington believed that the future world order would be governed by cultural ties and that a "clash of civilizations" was inevitable.<sup>52</sup> He believed that "as people define their identity in ethnic and religious terms, they are likely to see an "us" versus "them" relation existing between themselves and people of different ethnicity or religion."<sup>53</sup> As Huntington saw it, culture and cultural identities were shaping the pattern of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world; and "the dominant division [would be] between 'the West and the rest,' with the most intense conflicts occurring between Muslim and Asian societies on the one hand, and the West on the

other.”<sup>54</sup> Of the two principal opponents, China was the more dangerous one, for the Muslim world did not have a core state to lead the fragmented Muslim nations to defy the West, but a unified, powerful, and assertive China could.

Where ideological and cultural ties come together they could therefore form a potent mix that precipitates confrontation. For example, the recent release of Aung San Suu-Kyi from prison in Myanmar may polarize the country and international community between support for the Generals, where China has been active since the 1988 coup, and the pro-democracy movement championed by the western nations. It is unclear how far the United States would go to preserve its interests in this part of the world, although the proximity of Myanmar to major shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean will be of strategic concern to the United States. For China, however, “Myanmar’s strategic location on a trijunction between South Asia, Southeast Asia and China is nevertheless economically and strategically significant”.<sup>55</sup> How far China is willing to support culturally aligned states to assist its strategic design is unknown. What is clear is that Myanmar sits in its zone of influence and an ideological and cultural divide may be enough to pit the western nations and eastern cultures in a deadly conflict.

### Climate Change

The 2007 United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fourth Assessment Report stated that “warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice and rising global average sea level.”<sup>56</sup> Most observers predict a rise in global temperatures of about 2°C above pre-industrial levels. The effect of this rise in temperature is hard to accurately predict but the most likely scenarios indicate extreme changes ranging from increased

desertification, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, to permanent inundation caused by rising water levels (which could affect some 70% of the global population in coastal regions). The net result will be less land available for habitation and agriculture and an increasing demand for scarce resources.

The response to resource demands by both China and the United States could inevitably lead to conflict as both countries vie for energy related resources like oil, raw materials such as copper and more basic human requirements, namely water.

Notwithstanding the invention of a new energy source that would lower the demand for hydrocarbons, it is likely that oil will be of paramount importance to both China and the United States who are the two largest consumers of energy and account for 40% of global greenhouse gas emissions. China has been actively courting nations to secure its vital supplies and it “is becoming an increasing competitor to the United States for influence and access to energy related resources in the Middle East.”<sup>57</sup>

It is not just the oil rich countries that have attracted Chinese investment. Those countries with extensive minerals and natural resources are also strategically important for China. As an example, China is the leading investor in Afghanistan having secured a \$3.5 billion contract to develop its Aynak copper field in Logar Province. As China seeks greater access to resources, it is highly likely that it will come into confrontation with the other major consumer of raw materials, namely the United States. This may become a more significant issue as the effects of climate change take their toll on habitable areas and access to raw materials through congested shipping lanes becomes more problematic.

## Security Issues

The Chinese military is undergoing considerable modernization in an attempt to increase its utility in the twenty-first century. As Chinese President Jiang Zemin stated:

From now to the first 2 decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have a very critical time period. During this time period, the world's new revolution in military affairs will be at its early stage. If we can make good observation and take appropriate measures, we can achieve a big stride in our national defense and armed forces modernization, greatly reducing the gap between us and the world's advanced powers and laying a solid foundation for our further development.<sup>58</sup>

Achieving a delicate balance between sustained economic growth and defense spending has been a major concern of the Chinese leadership. Knowing when the effects of economic development was going to be enough to allow greater investment in the military was always going to be the fulcrum point for China's development as a great power. It would appear that this point has now been reached as the Strategic Studies Institute clearly articulates "the prosperous-nation-strong-military initiative has turned on the green light for China's defense modernization."<sup>59</sup>

The principal focus of the military is national defense, but it also harbors the ambition to unite China and Taiwan under a 'one China' policy. The Chinese armed forces are shifting capability from defensive to offensive action and are investing in Joint capabilities in order to prepare for an opposed crossing of the Straits of Taiwan. The PLA, Navy and Air Force are gaining significant capability enhancements and the Army is also undergoing much restructuring and combined training. However, despite all the modernization programs, the Chinese military still lags behind the United States military power substantially and the assessment is that the United States is "likely to remain the pre-eminent military power."<sup>60</sup> As Fareed Zakaria noted, "at the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world. But along every other dimension, industrial,

financial, social, and cultural the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance.”<sup>61</sup> The estimate is that the United States has about 15 years of dominant superiority before China reaches parity, particularly as a maritime power.

Any nationalistic ambition by the Chinese authorities would inevitably look towards the Strait of Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. These areas could have significant destabilizing effects within the regional balance of power. Of concern to the United States is the fact that China appears to be “increasingly investing in capabilities designed to thwart U.S. access to the region.”<sup>62</sup> The most important area of military expansion is in naval power and the PRC President Hu Jintao called China a “sea power” and advocated a “powerful people’s navy” to ‘uphold our maritime rights and interests.’<sup>63</sup> The strategic aim seems to be developing the capability for a ‘blue water’ fleet capable of securing its regional zone of influence as well as critical shipping lanes. It is the contested area of China’s coastal exclusive economic zone that is the most likely scenario for confrontation that could degenerate into major conflict. Taiwan, the Spratley and Paracel Islands and Japan’s claim to the uninhabited Diaoyu Islands (known as Senkaku in Japan) are all contested by China and the principal guarantor of many of these countries is the United States. For example, during a recent bilateral briefing, Secretary Clinton was clear that “the Senkakus fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security” and that the United States was “committed to our obligations to protect the Japanese people.”<sup>64</sup> Japan’s Foreign Minister Maehara was equally clear that the “Senkaku Islands, in terms of history and international law, are inherent territory of Japan.”<sup>65</sup> Whilst seemingly innocuous on the geo-political stage, these small islands could precipitate conflict

between the two dominant regional powers that has the capacity to embroil the United States in conflict.

To amplify this regional instability further, the confrontation in Korea in November 2010 has highlighted the fragility of this region and the ease with which rational countries could degenerate into major conflict. An artillery bombardment from North Korea onto a small territorial island of South Korea has ratcheted up the tensions on the Peninsular. Belligerent statements by both Korean governments have merely served to heighten the levels of anxiety and have forced the United States into a show of military force with the deployment of the USS George Washington for naval maneuvers with South Korea in the Yellow Sea. The proximity of this large carrier group within China's sphere of influence and within range of Beijing has prompted a stern response from China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei: "We oppose any party to take any military acts in our exclusive economic zone without permission."<sup>66</sup> Confrontation and military activity are not in the interests of the United States, China, the region and the world. However, such is the frailty of the region and the fallibility of the human condition, that an event such as this might well precipitate conflict. As media outlets are reporting, "North Korea can trigger the feared 21st century US-China war."<sup>67</sup>

### Is Major Conflict Inevitable?

There has been no formal declaration of war between the United States and China. Indeed it seems unlikely that this state of affairs would transpire whilst the United States retains its military supremacy. However, an analysis of the principal elements of national power would suggest that a form of proxy warfare has already begun. Politically China is using every opportunity to challenge the dominance of the United States, especially over regional matters. China's bellicose response to the Korean crisis and the

inflammatory language directed at the United States for its military exercises with South Korea merely serve as a warning of an increasingly confident regional power with broadening global interests.

Economically China is forging ahead of the United States. Contrary to the international trends, its economy is growing at an alarming rate. It is also securing its interests in those countries with significant mineral resources vital to the continual expansion of the Chinese economy. The Joint Operating Environment highlights this concern when it states that “the presence of Chinese ‘civilians’ in the Sudan to guard oil pipelines underlines China’s concern for protecting its oil supplies.”<sup>68</sup> It is also generating good will in many countries around the world through its extensive investments and, finally, it is out-maneuvering other competitors in its attempts to secure an economic advantage. Whilst the President courted India on his recent visit, it is the Chinese who are taking the lead on economic relations. The official visit to India by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was accompanied by a trade delegation that dwarfed “the number of trade chiefs led in recent weeks to India by US President Barack Obama (215), French President Nicolas Sarkozy (more than 60) and British Prime Minister David Cameron (about 40).”<sup>69</sup>

On the information front, “China’s appreciation for the centrality of information as a tool of statecraft and military power has significant implications.”<sup>70</sup> There seems little doubt that China has taken a great interest in cyber-warfare capability. In his testimony to the Congressional hearing in May 2007, the Honorable Robert C. Byrd stated that “China’s weapons acquisitions and training are guided by an overall strategy of preparation to win “informationized wars” – or wars that are heavily reliant on computers

and information systems.”<sup>71</sup> What is equally apparent is that China is willing to use its knowledge and increasing capabilities in the cyber-domain to protect its national interests and target competitors. For instance, in January 2010 the internet search engine Google announced that it was “no longer willing to continue censoring results on its Chinese site due to constant infiltration of its Gmail accounts of Human Rights activists.”<sup>72</sup> In its annual report to Congress, the Office of the Secretary of Defense stated that “in 2009, numerous computer systems around the world, including those owned by the U.S. Government, continued to be the target of intrusions that appear to have originated within the PRC.”<sup>73</sup>

Conflict between the United States and China is inevitable. A proxy warfare utilizing three of the principal elements of national power is already underway. The only reason that confrontation on the military domain has not taken place is because of the current disparity in military power between the two countries. However, in about 15 years it is estimated that the gap between the two nations will have reduced significantly, particularly in the maritime domain, and the weight of history, cultural sensitivities, economic and environmental challenges will inevitably lead to conflict. As Donald Kagan noted, “over the past two centuries the only thing more common than predictions about the end of wars has been war itself.”<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

The austerity measures being implemented by many countries around the world are changing the capabilities of many military forces. Strategic leaders are increasingly looking at the current ‘hybrid wars’ as the only logical form of warfare and the one that will endure throughout the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, this ignores the irrational nature of the human condition and the cyclic nature of warfare which has, historically,

led to major confrontation and the descent into global conflict. As such, many nations are structuring their armed forces solely to meet the current threat and are relying on external assistance and coalitions to deal with major threats to national security. For most nations, this means relying on the military strength of the United States to cover capability gaps in their national defense capability.

However, many analysts predict that the United States' influence and power is waning and that Chinese fortunes are in the ascendancy. On his recent visit to the United States, President Hu Jintao gave these conciliatory words: "We (China) do not engage in arms races, we are not a military threat to any country. China will never seek to dominate or pursue an expansionist policy."<sup>75</sup> Sadly they merely seem to mask the reality of global politics as the most dangerous time for world stability is seemingly when one superpower is challenged by an emerging 'great power'. In this regard, the threat for future stability in the next 25 years seems to come from the appearance of China as a peer competitor to the United States. Driven by an ever expanding economy, the Chinese revolution is taking place and they are in line to pass the United States economy by 2025. When coupled to an increasingly global foreign policy and improving armed forces, the era of western domination of international politics could be about to change.

However, a descent into global conflict is hardly in the interests of China or the United States and rational minds would always seek a way of avoiding confrontation. The problem is that the human mind is not always rational as British spy George Blake discovered while in exile in the Soviet Union: "I understand now that the Soviet project was doomed. The problem was not the Russians but human nature. Humankind was

not sufficiently moral to build such a society.”<sup>76</sup> Changes in the international order have historically emerged from strategic shocks which have changed the paradigm of the time, with recent examples including the 9/11 attacks on New York, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the global recession. Major conflict is also the victim of strategic shocks and predicting where the flashpoints might occur is a dangerous occupation. Needless to say, it seems likely that major conflict will be a feature of the twenty-first century and strategic trends like the increasing poverty gap and climate change might be the catalyst. Equally, the age old dynamic of power and wealth accumulation might precipitate conflict within the Asia-Pacific region with numerous competing parties vying for scarce resources.

If nothing else, the recent tensions on the Korean Peninsula should alert strategic thinkers to the serious risk posed by the emergence of another power within the global order and the necessity to be prepared for all eventualities. Many smaller western nations have been constrained by mounting debts and have had to cut their cloth accordingly with regard to defense spending. This has been achieved against an underlying assumption that the United States will remain the dominant military, economic and political power in the twenty-first century. Increasingly this appears not to be the case and a reliance on the United States as the sole nation capable of conducting major combat operations is a dangerous assumption. Whilst many would argue that the Department of Defense needs to be resolute in opposing changes that might restrict their ability to wage war at the upper end of the spectrum of conflict, it is highly unlikely that they will be exempted from stringent cuts across federal public spending. The gulf between the military requirement to operate at the high end of the

spectrum of conflict and the necessity to balance the public purse is stark. The strategic leaders within the United States will have to decide how to retain their dominance as the global superpower in the light of China's emergence, and other nations across the world will have to consider their assumptions carefully when planning future force capabilities and structures.

The United Kingdom must be cognizant of this shift in power politics and the rise of China as a 'Great Power'. It needs to review many of its baseline assumptions in the Strategic Defense and Security Review about the United States' ability to continue as the sole superpower and the *de facto* global police force. It is a fact that the United Kingdom has to win the current battle (Afghanistan). However, it must not lose sight of what the future may offer and be prepared for the nature of future conflict. Whilst the sad fact remains that one cannot predict the future, one can look to the past for patterns of behavior. In the case of power transition it has inevitably led to major conflict as the old and emerging world powers conduct a bloody contest for supremacy. As the United States' "loyal lieutenant," the United Kingdom must be prepared to assist its principal ally and this means having the capability to operate at the high end of the spectrum of conflict in major combat operations. Hybrid warfare is therefore not going to be the dominant feature of warfare in the twenty-first century, major combat operations are likely to prevail once again.

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