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The Geopolitical Containment of China. By Francis P. Sempa.
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Since the time of the French Revolution, the world's political equilibrium has been challenged by would-be hegemon. Revolutionary and Napoleonic France subjected the world's political system to more than twenty years of nearly continuous war that only ended on the snow-covered fields of Russia and the battlefield of Waterloo. Wilhelmine Germany's expansionist aims produced the cataclysm of the First World War. The peace treaty in 1919 that ended that war created a global structure that was shattered twenty years later by Hitler's Germany and the Japanese militarists, producing the most destructive war in history. The global structure resulting from the Second World War was challenged for more than forty years by the Soviet Union—a challenge that was successfully frustrated by what George F. Kennan called “long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment.”

Since the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1989-91, strategists have speculated about the next great power that will challenge the global political system, and most of that speculation has focused on China. This is so because China combines the characteristics of a would-be hegemon: continental size; access to the ocean; a huge and productive population; a growing economy; a growing military capability; and expansionist goals. China also is ruled by a regime that justifies its continued dictatorial rule by a revolutionary ideology, even if it has pragmatically modified that ideology in practice.

China is a huge continental-sized landmass situated in central, south, and east Asia. Geographically, it is the fourth largest country in the world. It is bordered by Mongolia and Russia to the north; North Korea to the northeast; Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand to the south; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Nepal, India, Burma, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the west and southwest. To the east, it accesses the Pacific Ocean via the Sea of Japan, Korea Bay, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and South China Sea. Its coastline extends more than 14,000 kilometers.

It is currently the most populous country in the world, with more than 1.3 billion people, although the population growth rate has slowed considerably and the population is rapidly aging due to the government's “one child” policy. Its economy has continued to grow impressively, even in the wake of the recent global downturn. In 2008, China's estimated growth rate was nine percent. The previous two years the growth rate exceeded eleven percent.

China's military build-up has been going on for two decades, and includes emphasis on aerospace and naval programs. This includes a network of satellites and radars designed to locate and track surface ships; anti-satellite weapons; cyber-warfare capabilities;

attack submarines; cruise missiles; and possibly aircraft carriers. Most worrisome is China's apparent commitment to the development of anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), which some analysts believe could shift the regional strategic balance with the United States. China also continues to upgrade and increase its strategic nuclear forces, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

China's naval build-up is even more worrisome when viewed in the context of Chinese military and doctrinal writings indicating a new appreciation for the sea power theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan. U.S. Naval War College scholars Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes have documented the recent Chinese interest in Mahan's writings on such topics as "command of the sea" and control of "communications" and "strategic passages" which would enable China to deny access to a particular area by other naval powers.

A China that could deny access to the U.S. Navy to its coastal areas and beyond, would be better situated to attain some of its expansionist aims. In addition to its goal of annexing Taiwan, China has disputes with Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam over the Spratley Islands and their off-shore oil deposits; with Japan over the islands of Senkaku-shoto and gas and oil exploration in the East China Sea; with Taiwan and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands; and with north Korea over islands in the Yalu and Tumen Rivers.

A Chinese access/denial capability would also affect the attitudes of other regional powers, such as Japan and South Korea who rely on the United States for their security. The United States' security commitments to the Asia-Pacific region depend upon reliable U.S. naval and air access to the region. Deny that access, and you undermine those security commitments.

None of this means that China will definitely make a bid for hegemony similar to Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler, or the Soviet Union. But it would be foolhardy for the United States to ignore signs and developments that point in that direction. While it is true that China's economic liberalization and the phenomenon of globalization have resulted in vastly increased economic ties between China and the U.S. which benefit both countries, such economic interdependence will not likely trump long-term strategic interests and ambitions. Even if China only has regional ambitions, such as the conquest or incorporation of Taiwan and command of the sea approaches to the East Asian mainland, those regional ambitions are inconsistent with U.S. security interests and commitments in the region.

All of this points to the need for the United States to prepare for the geopolitical containment of China.

China and the lands adjacent to it occupy the area of the globe that Nicholas Spykman called the Asian Rimland. Spykman, toward the end of the Second World War, wrote that China would become the strongest power in the Far East, and he warned that, as with Western Europe, the United States needed to ensure that no adversary power or alliance of powers harbored an overwhelmingly dominant command of that region. Zbigniew Brzezinski has expressed this same outlook in different terms: the United States, he wrote, must ensure the “geopolitical pluralism” of the Far East.

China currently is effectively contained on land by the other regional powers: Russia in the north; India in the West; the Indochinese countries to the south. The south is the weakest land barrier to Chinese expansion, but China surely remembers its difficult war with Vietnam of a few decades ago.

China’s intended expansion and/or naval breakout will likely emerge from her lengthy coastline to the east. It is in that direction that U.S.-Chinese interests clash. Therefore, any U.S. containment policy must primarily look to the area beyond China’s eastern coast—an area that, geographically, is well-suited to naval and air containment.

A map of the Asia-Pacific region along the East Asian mainland shows a succession of marginal and enclosed seas potentially forming an effective sea and air barrier to Chinese expansion. At the far north, the Bering Sea is effectively enclosed by the chain of the Aleutian Islands. Further south, the Sea of Okhotsk is enclosed by the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Kurile Islands. Closer to mainland China, the Sea of Japan is enclosed by Japanese main islands, while access through the East China Sea can be controlled from South Korea, the tip of Kyushu and the Ryukyu chain of islands.

Further south, the island of Taiwan forms an impressive barrier to Chinese ocean access, reinforced by the Pescadores. The South China Sea is partially enclosed by the Philippines to the southeast and Indonesia to the south. China’s access to the Indian Ocean is decisively controlled by the Malacca Strait and the Malay Peninsula, including the vital port of Singapore.

The map shows the crucial location of Taiwan which serves as the Gibraltar of what Spykman called the “Asiatic Mediterranean.” Were Taiwan to fall under Chinese control, a central and crucial link in this series of island and peninsular barriers would be unhinged, crippling this containment perimeter. That is why the great Cold War strategist James Burnham once wrote that the abandonment of Taiwan would be a “strategic disaster” for the United States.

The geography of the region reinforces the need for the United States to rely on naval and air power and regional allies to serve as the foundation of containment.

Militarily, the United States should buttress its ability to exercise sea command of the approaches to the Asian mainland and especially key strategic chokepoints such as the

Taiwan and Malacca Straits. Naval experts will decide the size, composition, and location of the naval (and air) forces to accomplish these tasks.

The United States also needs to maintain, and if necessary, strengthen its nuclear deterrent force so that it can affect Chinese strategic calculations in any crisis or confrontation (similar to its effect on Chinese calculations at the end of the Korean War and Soviet calculations during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1973 Yom Kippur War).

The U.S. should also strengthen its strategic ties to India; ensure that Pakistan and Afghanistan do not fall under the control of Islamic *ihadists*; maintain better relations with Russia than Russia has with China (repeating the strategic insight of Henry Kissinger during the early 1970s); and improve and strengthen relations with the smaller powers of Indochina, including Vietnam. It is an axiom of geopolitics that a power distracted on land will not be able to focus on enhancing its sea power.

U.S. power projection capabilities will ultimately depend on the extent and strength of its alliances in the region. Japan, like Great Britain in the Second World War, is an insular strategic base, important for its location and manpower in any effort to contain China.

South Korea provides the U.S. with a key strategic and military base on the Asian mainland and is positioned to help the naval and air coverage of crucial sea lanes.

The Philippines' importance waned with the end of the Cold War, resulting in the U.S. exit from Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base. The effective containment of China may (nay, should) force the United States to revisit the possibility of a significant military return to the Philippines.

Taiwan, for reasons noted above, must not be allowed to fall under China's control. It is, in regard to effectively containing China, the hinge of fate.

Singapore and control of the Malacca Strait are crucial to denying China access to the Indian Ocean and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and Africa, if necessary. China's economic growth is fueled by high energy consumption, and it currently receives half of its oil supplies from the Middle East and one-third of its oil supplies from Africa.

Australia serves as a further off-shore base of naval power and manpower that can be brought to bear in the effort to contain China.

Gordon Chang and others have noted the recent mass protests and demonstrations throughout China that have the potential to shake the foundations of communist rule. These mass incidents, perhaps as many as 150,000, present both opportunities and concerns for U.S. strategy. Domestic unrest in China could be exploited by the United States as a strategic complement to containment, weakening the regime's hold on power as its external goals are frustrated. On the other hand, such domestic unrest

could persuade China's rulers to use external aggression and the perceived need to combat foreign enemies as a way of fostering domestic unity and thereby strengthening the regime's hold on power.

Since its founding in the late 18th century, the United States has had a Euro-centric geopolitical focus. The principal threats to its security were in Europe. Its national security was guaranteed in part by the operation of the European balance of power. Twice in the 20th century, the United States fought in Europe to preserve the balance of power. During the Cold War, the U.S. stationed large military forces in Europe and pledged to go to war (nuclear war, if necessary) to defend Western Europe. Although it also fought in Asia during the Second World War, and fought two "hot" wars in Asia during the Cold War, the United States still looked first to Europe in its geopolitical approach to the world.

The end of the Cold War and Europe's shrinking geopolitical significance has changed the U.S. strategic focus. Increasingly, U.S. security priorities are in Asia. U.S. forces are waging war on Islamic *ihadists* in the western extremity of Asia. The two aspiring nuclear powers that threaten U.S. regional interests are in Asia (Iran and North Korea). The fastest rising powers of the world economically and militarily are in Asia (India and China). And, the most likely peer competitor to U.S. power—China—is in Asia. Containment is the prudent and realistic response to the strategic implications and consequences of China's rise within Asia.