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Target China: The Emerging US-China Conflict

Michael T. Klare

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By Michael T. Klare

[*Michael Klare, who has written compellingly on oil as a driving factor in US policy in the Middle East and globally, here turns his gaze toward yet larger dynamics driving US military strategy. He concludes that in a world in which there is only one potential military threat to US primacy, the single logical explanation for the continued growth of the US military budget, its drive to expand its nuclear arsenal and to extend its nuclear hegemony to outer space, can be summed up in one word: China.*

To be sure, as Chalmers Johnson and others have pointed out, there is a self-reinforcing military logic inherent in a polity whose budget is dominated by the costs associated with permanent warfare, including a global network of thousands of bases, 8,000 generals who don't retire when the latest war ends, and a global naval-air power reach.

Nevertheless, with China's emergence as a potential future adversary, albeit a nation whose naval and air force arsenals pale before that of the US and many others, and with US moves to encircle China with U.S. bases and expanded strategic alliances, it is necessary to place the issue of containing China once again on the Bush administration's front burner. As Klare observes in a letter of April 19, 2006, there is an "iron determination behind the US decision to commit hundreds of billions of dollars to advanced weapons systems that can only be justified for use in a future war with China, and the decision to station six carrier battle groups and 60 percent of US submarines in the Pacific. These commitments will shape events in Asia and globally for decades to come."

US foreign policy is not, however, made by the President and his neoliberal advisors alone. Powerful interests from Microsoft to Citibank to General Motors are well aware of the fact that China is the number three trading partner, and is second only to Japan in propping up the US from the collapse that accompanies chronic deficits in the case of other economies. The intertwined US and Chinese economies, China's importance to the US in geopolitical and other spheres, and the over-extended state of the US military point to the fact that, at least in the short run, powerful forces are at work to settle conflicts short of war. Yet other flash points could precipitate US-China conflict.

The issues of China and the Middle East are intimately linked, most pointedly by the recent decisions of China and Russia to invite Iran to membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at the very moment when the US seeks to isolate Iran and secure United Nations condemnation of Iran preparatory for military attack or regime change. MS]

Slowly but surely, the grand strategy of the Bush administration is being revealed. It is not aimed primarily at the defeat of global terrorism, the incapacitation of rogue states, or the spread of democracy in the Middle East. These may dominate the rhetorical arena and be the focus of immediate concern, but they do not govern key decisions regarding the allocation of long-term military resources.

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The truly commanding objective -- the underlying basis for budgets and troop deployments -- is the containment of China. This objective governed White House planning during the administration's first seven months in office, only to be set aside by the perceived obligation to highlight anti-terrorism after 9/11; but now, despite Bush's preoccupation with Iraq and Iran, the White House is also reemphasizing its paramount focus on China, risking a new Asian arms race with potentially catastrophic consequences.

President Bush and his top aides entered the White House in early 2001 with a clear strategic objective: to resurrect the permanent-dominance doctrine spelled out in the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) for fiscal years 1994-99, the first formal statement of U.S. strategic goals in the post-Soviet era. According to the initial official draft of this document, as leaked to the press in early 1992, the primary aim of U.S. strategy would be to bar the rise of any future competitor that might challenge America's overwhelming military superiority.

"Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival... that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union," the document stated. Accordingly, "we [must] endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power."

When initially made public, this doctrine was condemned by America's allies and many domestic leaders as being unacceptably imperial as well as imperious, forcing the first President Bush to water it down; but the goal of perpetuating America's sole-superpower status has never been rejected by administration strategists. In fact, it initially became the overarching principle for U.S. military policy when the younger Bush assumed the presidency in February 2001.

Target: China

When first enunciated in 1992, the permanent-dominancy doctrine was non-specific as to the identity of the future challengers whose rise was to be prevented through coercive action. At that time, U.S. strategists worried about a medley of potential rivals, including Russia, Germany, India, Japan, and China; any of these, it was thought, might emerge in decades to come as would-be superpowers, and so all would have to be deterred from moving in this direction. By the time the second Bush administration came into office, however, the pool of potential rivals had been narrowed in elite thinking to just one: the People's Republic of China. Only China, it was claimed, possessed the economic and military capacity to challenge the United States as an aspiring superpower; and so perpetuating U.S. global predominance meant containing Chinese power.

The imperative of containing China was first spelled out in a systematic way by Condoleezza Rice while serving as a foreign policy adviser to then Governor George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign. In a much-cited article in Foreign Affairs, she suggested that the PRC, as an ambitious rising power, would inevitably challenge vital U.S. interests. "China is a great power with unresolved vital interests, particularly concerning Taiwan," she wrote. "China also resents the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region."

For these reasons, she stated, "China is not a 'status quo' power but one that would like to alter Asia's balance of power in its own favor. That alone makes it a strategic competitor, not the 'strategic partner' the Clinton administration once called it." It was essential, she argued, to adopt a strategy that would prevent China's rise as regional power. In particular, "The United States must deepen its cooperation with Japan and South Korea and maintain its commitment to a robust military presence in the region." Washington should

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also "pay closer attention to India's role in the regional balance," and bring that country into an anti-Chinese alliance system.

Looking back, it is striking how this article developed the allow-no-competitors doctrine of the 1992 DPG into the very strategy now being implemented by the Bush administration in the Pacific and South Asia. Many of the specific policies advocated in her piece, from strengthened ties with Japan to making overtures to India, are being carried out today.

In the spring and summer of 2001, however, the most significant effect of this strategic focus was to distract Rice and other senior administration officials from the growing threat posed by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. During her first months in office as the president's senior adviser for national security affairs, Rice devoted herself to implementing the plan she had spelled out in Foreign Affairs. By all accounts, her top priorities in that early period were dissolving the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia and linking Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan into a joint missile defense system, which, it was hoped, would ultimately evolve into a Pentagon-anchored anti-Chinese alliance.

Richard A. Clarke, the senior White House adviser on counter-terrorism, later charged that, because of her preoccupation with Russia, China, and great power politics, Rice overlooked warnings of a possible Al Qaeda attack on the United States and thus failed to initiate defensive actions that might have prevented 9/11. Although Rice survived tough questioning on this matter by the 9/11 Commission without acknowledging the accuracy of Clarke's charges, any careful historian, seeking answers for the Bush administration's inexcusable failure to heed warnings of a potential terrorist strike on this country, must begin with its overarching focus on containing China during this critical period.

China on the Back Burner

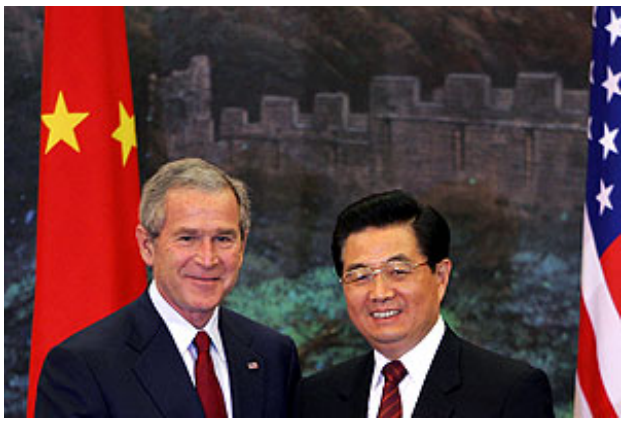
After September 11th, it would have been unseemly for Bush, Rice, and other top administration officials to push their China agenda -- and in any case they quickly shifted focus to a long-term neocon objective, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the projection of American power throughout the Middle East. So the "global war on terror" (or GWOT, in Pentagon-speak) became their major talking point and the invasion of Iraq their major focus. But the administration never completely lost sight of its strategic focus on China, even when it could do little on the subject. Indeed, the lightning war on Iraq and the further projection of American power into the Middle East was intended, at least in part, as a warning to China of the overwhelming might of the American military and the futility of challenging U.S. supremacy.

For the next two years, when so much effort was devoted to rebuilding Iraq in America's image and crushing an unexpected and potent Iraqi insurgency, China was distinctly on the back-burner. In the meantime, however, China's increased investment in modern military capabilities and its growing economic reach in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America -- much of it tied to the procurement of oil and other vital commodities -- could not be ignored.

By the spring of 2005, the White House was already turning back to Rice's global grand strategy. On June 4, 2005, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave a much-publicized speech at a conference in Singapore, signaling what was to be a new emphasis in White House policymaking, in which he decried China's ongoing military buildup and warned of the threat it posed to regional peace and stability. China, he claimed, was "expanding its missile forces, allowing them to reach targets in many areas of the world" and "improving its ability to project power" in the Asia-Pacific region. Then,

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with sublime disingenuousness, he added, "Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment? Why these continuing and expanding arms purchases? Why these continuing robust deployments?" Although Rumsfeld did not answer his questions, the implication was obvious: China was now embarked on a course that would make it a regional power, thus threatening one day to present a challenge to the United States in Asia on unacceptably equal terms.



George W. Bush and Hu Jintao
in New York City, September, 2005

This early sign of the ratcheting up of anti-Chinese rhetoric was accompanied by acts of a more concrete nature. In February 2005, Rice and Rumsfeld hosted a meeting in Washington with top Japanese officials at which an agreement was signed to improve cooperation in military affairs between the two countries. Known as the "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee," the agreement called for greater collaboration between American and Japanese forces in the conduct of military operations in an area stretching from Northeast Asia to the South China Sea. It also called for close consultation on policies regarding Taiwan, an implicit hint that Japan was prepared to assist the United States in the event of a military clash with China precipitated by Taiwan's declaring its independence.

This came at a time when Beijing was already expressing considerable alarm over pro-independence moves in Taiwan and what the Chinese saw as a revival of militarism in Japan -- thus evoking painful memories of World War II, when Japan invaded China and committed massive atrocities against Chinese civilians. Understandably then, the agreement could only be interpreted by the Chinese leadership as an expression of the Bush administration's determination to bolster an anti-Chinese alliance system.

The New Grand Chessboard

Why did the White House choose this particular moment to revive its drive to contain China? Many factors no doubt contributed to this turnaround, but surely the most significant was a perception that China had finally emerged as a major regional power in its own right and was beginning to contest America's long-term dominance of the Asia-Pacific region. To some degree this was manifested -- so the Pentagon claimed -- in military terms, as Beijing began to replace Soviet-type, Korean War-vintage weapons with more modern (though hardly cutting-edge) Russian designs.

It was not China's military moves, however, that truly alarmed American policymakers -- most professional analysts are well aware of the continuing inferiority of Chinese weaponry -- but rather Beijing's success in using its enormous purchasing power and hunger for resources to establish friendly ties with such long-standing U.S. allies as Thailand, Indonesia, and Australia. Because the Bush administration had done little to contest this trend while focusing on the war in Iraq, China's rapid gains in Southeast Asia finally began to ring alarm bells in Washington.

At the same time, Republican strategists were becoming increasingly concerned by growing Chinese involvement in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia -- areas considered of vital

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geopolitical importance to the United States because of the vast reserves of oil and natural gas buried there. Much influenced by Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose 1997 book The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Geostrategic Imperatives first highlighted the critical importance of Central Asia, these strategists sought to counter Chinese inroads. Although Brzezinski himself has largely been excluded from elite Republican circles because of his association with the much-despised Carter administration, his call for a coordinated U.S. drive to dominate both the eastern and western rimlands of China has been embraced by senior administration strategists.

In this way, Washington's concern over growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia has come to be intertwined with the U.S. drive for hegemony in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. This has given China policy an even more elevated significance in Washington -- and helps explain its return with a passion despite the seemingly all-consuming preoccupations of the war in Iraq.

Whatever the exact balance of factors, the Bush administration is now clearly engaged in a coordinated, systematic effort to contain Chinese power and influence in Asia. This effort appears to have three broad objectives: to convert existing relations with Japan, Australia, and South Korea into a robust, integrated anti-Chinese alliance system; to bring other nations, especially India, into this system; and to expand U.S. military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

Since the administration's campaign to bolster ties with Japan commenced a year ago, the two countries have been meeting continuously to devise protocols for the implementation of their 2005 strategic agreement. In October, Washington and Tokyo released the Alliance Transformation and Realignment Report, which is to guide the further integration of U.S. and Japanese forces in the Pacific and the simultaneous restructuring of the U.S. basing system in Japan. (Some of these bases, especially those on Okinawa, have become a source of friction in U.S.-Japanese relations and so the Pentagon is now considering ways to downsize the most objectionable installations.) Japanese and American officers are also engaged in a joint "interoperability" study, aimed at smoothing the "interface" between U.S. and Japanese combat and communications systems. "Close collaboration is also ongoing for cooperative missile defense," reports Admiral William J. Fallon, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM).

Steps have also been taken in this ongoing campaign to weld South Korea and Australia more tightly to the U.S.-Japanese alliance system. South Korea has long been reluctant to work closely with Japan because of that country's brutal occupation of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 and lingering fears of Japanese militarism; now, however, the Bush administration is promoting what it calls "trilateral military cooperation" between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. As indicated by Admiral Fallon, this initiative has an explicitly anti-Chinese dimension. America's ties with South Korea must adapt to "the changing security environment" represented by "China's military modernization," Fallon told the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 7. By cooperating with the U.S. and Japan, he continued, South Korea will move from an overwhelming focus on North Korea to "a more regional view of security and stability."

Bringing Australia into this emerging anti-Chinese network has been a major priority of Condoleezza Rice, who spent several days there in mid-March. Although designed in part to bolster U.S.-Australian ties (largely neglected by Washington over the past few years), the main purpose of her visit was to host a meeting of top officials from Australia, the U.S., and Japan to develop a common strategy for curbing China's rising influence in Asia. No formal results were announced, but Steven

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Weisman of the New York Times reported on March 19 that Rice convened the meeting "to deepen a three-way regional alliance aimed in part at balancing the spreading presence of China."

An even bigger prize, in Washington's view, would be the integration of India into this emerging alliance system, a possibility first suggested in Rice's Foreign Affairs article. Such a move was long frustrated by congressional objections to India's nuclear weapons program and its refusal to sign on to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Under U.S. law, nations like India that refuse to cooperate in non-proliferation measures can be excluded from various forms of aid and cooperation. To overcome this problem, President Bush met with Indian officials in New Delhi in March and negotiated a nuclear accord that will open India's civilian reactors to International Atomic Energy Agency inspection, thus providing a thin gloss of non-proliferation cooperation to India's robust nuclear weapons program. If Congress approves Bush's plan, the United States will be free to provide nuclear assistance to India and, in the process, significantly expand already growing military-to-military ties.



George Bush with Manmohan Singh

In signing the nuclear pact with India, Bush did not allude to the administration's anti-Chinese agenda, saying only that it would lay the foundation for a "durable defense relationship." But few have been fooled by this vague characterization. According to Weisman of the Times, most U.S. lawmakers view the nuclear accord as an expression of the administration's desire to convert India into "a counterweight to China."

The China Build-up Begins

Accompanying all these diplomatic initiatives has been a vigorous, if largely unheralded, effort by the Department of Defense (DoD) to bolster U.S. military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

The broad sweep of American strategy was first spelled out in the Pentagon's most recent policy assessment, the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) , released on February 5, 2006. In discussing long-term threats to U.S. security, the QDR begins with a reaffirmation of the

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overarching precept first articulated in the DPG of 1992: that the United States will not allow the rise of a competing superpower. This country "will attempt to dissuade any military competitor from developing disruptive or other capabilities that could enable regional hegemony or hostile action against the United States," the document states. It then identifies China as the most likely and dangerous competitor of this sort. "Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages" -- then adding the kicker, "absent U.S. counter strategies."

According to the Pentagon, the task of countering future Chinese military capabilities largely entails the development, and then procurement, of major weapons systems that would ensure U.S. success in any full-scale military confrontation. "The United States will develop capabilities that would present any adversary with complex and multidimensional challenges and complicate its offensive planning efforts," the QDR explains. These include the steady enhancement of such "enduring U.S. advantages" as "long-range strike, stealth, operational maneuver and sustainment of air, sea, and ground forces at strategic distances, air dominance, and undersea warfare."

Preparing for war with China, in other words, is to be the future cash cow for the giant U.S. weapons-making corporations in the military-industrial complex. It will, for instance, be the primary justification for the acquisition of costly new weapons systems such as the F-22A Raptor air-superiority fighter, the multi-service Joint Strike Fighter, the DDX destroyer, the Virginia-class nuclear attack submarine, and a new, intercontinental penetrating bomber -- weapons that would just have utility in an all-out encounter with another great-power adversary of a sort that only China might someday become.



F-22 Raptor

In addition to these weapons programs, the QDR also calls for a stiffening of present U.S. combat forces in Asia and the Pacific, with a particular emphasis on the Navy (the arm of the military least utilized in the ongoing occupation of and war in Iraq). "The fleet will have greater presence in the Pacific Ocean," the document notes. To achieve this, "The Navy plans to adjust its force posture and basing to provide at least six operationally available and sustainable [aircraft] carriers and 60% of its submarines in the Pacific to support engagement, presence and deterrence." Since each of these carriers is, in fact, but the core of a large array of support ships and protective aircraft, this move is sure to entail a truly vast buildup of U.S. naval capabilities in the Western Pacific and will certainly necessitate a substantial expansion of the American basing complex in the region -- a requirement that is already receiving close attention from Admiral Fallon and his staff at PACOM. To assess the operational demands of this buildup, moreover, this summer the U.S. Navy will conduct its most extensive military maneuvers in the Western Pacific since the end of the Vietnam War, with four aircraft carrier battle groups and many support ships expected to participate.

Add all of this together, and the resulting strategy cannot be viewed as anything but a

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systematic campaign of containment. No high administration official may say this in so many words, but it is impossible to interpret the recent moves of Rice and Rumsfeld in any other manner. From Beijing's perspective, the reality must be unmistakable: a steady buildup of American military power along China's eastern, southern, and western boundaries.

How will China respond to this threat? For now, it appears to be relying on charm and the conspicuous blandishment of economic benefits to loosen Australian, South Korean, and even Indian ties with the United States. To a certain extent, this strategy is meeting with success, as these countries seek to profit from the extraordinary economic boom now under way in China – fueled to a considerable extent by oil, gas, iron, timber, and other materials supplied by China's neighbors in Asia. A version of this strategy is also being employed by President Hu Jintao during his current visit to the United States. As China's money is sprinkled liberally among influential firms like Boeing and Microsoft, Hu is reminding the corporate wing of the Republican Party that there are vast economic benefits still to be had by pursuing a non-threatening stance toward China.



Hu Jintao and Bill Gates
in Seattle

China, however, has always responded to perceived threats of encirclement in a vigorous and muscular fashion as well, and so we should assume that Beijing will balance all that charm with a military buildup of its own. Such a drive will not bring China to the brink of military equality with the United States -- that is not a condition it can realistically aspire to over the next few decades. But it will provide further justification for those in the United States who seek to accelerate the containment of China, and so will produce a self-fulfilling loop of distrust, competition, and crisis. This will make the amicable long-term settlement of the Taiwan problem and of North Korea's nuclear program that much more difficult, and increase the risk of unintended escalation to full-scale war in Asia. There can be no victors from such a conflagration.

Michael T. Klare is a professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College and the author of Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum (Owl Books, 2005).

This article appeared on April 18, 2006 at Tomdispatch.com, a weblog of the Nation Institute, which offers a steady flow of alternate sources, news, and opinion from Tom Engelhardt, long time editor in publishing, co-founder of the American Empire Project and author of The End of Victory Culture. Chalmers Johnson is completing the third volume in the Blowback Trilogy. Posted at Japan Focus on April 19, 2006

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