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Will America Be Prepared for Its Next Peer Competitor?

by

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Introduction

Are superpower rivalries a relic of the past? Will instability, crime, ethnic violence, terrorism and anarchy be the future risks to the security of the United States? Should U.S. military forces over the next 20 years continue to expend resources preparing for a peer competitor whose power will rival that of the United States? If the American people become convinced that great-power threats are indeed a thing of the past, they will surely expect to see significant changes in the size, shape and doctrine of our military forces. If, however, the United States is likely to again face a great-power enemy in the not-too-distant future — before 2010 — then obviously we need to be cautious about how we change our military forces.

Intelligence cannot provide policymakers with intercepts or images of events that will take place in the future. Rather, an appreciation of history; an understanding of how nations and ethnic groups behave; and analysis of strategic, military and economic trends will provide us with a rough warning about the kind and nature of threat-related problems the future is likely to hold.

Miscalculations about the future can also be instructive: For instance, when the U.S. Army demobilized after the Spanish-American War, it seemed inconceivable that a few years later it would be creating great and numerous corps and divisions to fight in Europe. Also, during congressional budget hearings in 1940, General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, speculated that the U.S. Army was most likely to be deployed to Latin America, where the terrain favored 75mm howitzers rather than the new 105mm artillery pieces deployed by European armies.

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Where might we begin to look for a peer competitor in the foreseeable future? *America's National Interests*, published by Harvard's JFK School of Government, the Nixon Center and the RAND Corporation, points us in the right direction when it identifies two closely related U.S. vital interests: "Prevent the rise of a hostile hegemon in Europe or Asia. Ensure the survival of U.S. allies." It states that a "defining feature of the next quarter century in international politics will be the emergence of the Chinese juggernaut, the world's largest non-status quo power" and that China looks forward to reestablishing "what in their eyes is a natural hegemony in Asia."¹

Henry Kissinger stated in his book *Diplomacy* that the strategic challenge to the United States is "the domination by a single power in either of Eurasia's two principal spheres — Europe or Asia. . . . [S]uch a [threat] would have the capacity to outstrip America economically and, in the end, militarily." China is once again identified as the emerging superpower.²

Over the past 80 years, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to resist the rise of a dominant power in Eurasia — Germany in 1917 and 1940, Japan in 1941, and the Soviet Union for more than 40 years. We have paid the price in blood and treasure in World War I, World War II and the Cold War to ensure that no foreign power would dominate the abundant wealth and human resources contained in Western Europe and the Asian-Pacific region. More recently we have added the Persian Gulf as an area of vital interest, demonstrating our intent, resolve and capability to prevent the rise of a hegemon in and around the oilfields of the gulf.

Defining a Peer Competitor

The definition of a peer competitor used here is drawn from our recent history and an awareness of our vital interests. A country can become a peer competitor if it possesses (1) the will and (2) either enough sheer mass (i.e., land, population, resources and military might) or the ability to efficiently harness and manage smaller but still sizable and sophisticated human, technical and productive resources to gain regional dominance in Europe or Asia. Through such dominance, a country's leaders can become arbiters of power and thus establish a region's strategic and political agenda.

This definition differs from another commonly accepted definition of a global peer competitor: a nation or rival coalition with the motivation and capabilities to contest U.S. interests on a global basis. While both definitions speak to the motivation and capabilities of nations and coalitions, the scope and object of these definitions differ. In our definition it is not necessary for a peer competitor to be able initially to contest the United States globally; rather, global power will follow from the domination of either Europe or Asia.

Although it is highly unlikely that any foreign country will be able to match the overall power or the power-projection capability of the United States in the next 10 to 20 years (unless we unilaterally disarm), a few countries have the power to become peer competitors in that time frame. For the foreseeable future, Russia, Germany or an alliance including either of those two states (such as a Russo-German or Franco-German axis) could amass sufficient power to establish hegemony in Europe. In Asia, China, Japan, India and possibly Russia could achieve hegemonic status. Alliances are less likely in Asia than in Europe because of the far higher degree of distrust among Asian nations; however, some possible combinations — such as China-Korea, China-Iran or Russia-India — would enable the partner with the greater power to emerge as a hegemon. Only somewhat less

dangerous would be the establishment of hostile hegemonic power in the Persian Gulf region. Iran and possibly Iraq have the potential to establish regional hegemony, but neither one, acting alone or — a remote possibility — in league with the other, could acquire sufficient power or resources to qualify as a peer competitor of the United States. The greater danger is that either Iran or Iraq will act in league with a great power such as China or Russia. In short, the dramatic power shifts that have occurred in Europe, Asia and the Persian Gulf region over the past two decades should caution us not to make hasty decisions about the nature of future threats and the kind of military we may need. The most glaring examples of power shifts during the past decade are the rise of German power as a result of unification; the decline of Russia following the breakup of the Soviet Union; and, most dramatically, the rise of China's power relative to that of Russia and Japan. Also significant for the Asian balance of power is the increase in South Korea's power relative to that of North Korea.

Could America Be Surprised by the Rise of a Peer Competitor?

Could the United States be risking another Pearl Harbor or Persian Gulf surprise? Despite today's vastly superior reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities, we believe the answer is yes, for the problem with surprise is only partly technical and physical. Misconceptions and complacency regarding the durability of today's hierarchy of power, in which the United States is clearly dominant, and wishful thinking about the general willingness of the major powers to accept the current status quo could set the stage for another great war.

To prevent dangerous military surprises, democracies require knowledgeable, well-informed leaders and citizens. In this age of information and specialization, we assume the existence of a knowledgeable group of long-range strategic planners whose work is woven into the formulation of U.S. foreign and national security policy. We also assume that in a democracy the experts are willing and able to communicate with the public about emerging threats to security in ways that engage their interest, involvement and support. However, these assumptions may be undermined by elitism in the conduct of foreign and security affairs; by competing political agendas; by the impetus toward official consensus (leading to group-think and mirror imaging); by a narrow focus on very-short-term problems; and, perhaps most of all, by an educational focus that pays scant and often misguided attention to the theory, history and principles relating to the strategic and military implications associated with the rise and fall of great powers.

At present there appears to be a tendency to believe, as we did immediately after World War I, that the era of great-power wars has ended because of the U.S.-led triumph of democracy over totalitarianism. It was very late in the interwar period before we appreciated and responded to the alarming rise of the Axis' power and ambitions. Of course, the world has changed since the 1930s, with the spread of information and the increasing interdependence among nations. Nevertheless, we may once again fail to appreciate fully the implications for the United States resulting from the shift of power to Asia and China during the past 20 years, and the more recent change in the power balance between Germany and Russia in Europe. The clearest indicators of power shifts are changes in economic power, particularly the precipitous decline in Russia's gross national product (GNP) and the remarkable increase in China's GNP. Other important measures of power, such as population and capital military stocks, show similar trends, especially in favor of China.³ These changes alone do not mean war is inevitable; however, by failing to appreciate fully the ramifications of these power

shifts, the United States may pursue faulty foreign and security policies and find itself unprepared to manage the next major peer threat to arise somewhere in Eurasia.

On a more positive note, there is a model of successful long-range military planning to prepare for a peer competitor. During and even before the interwar period, U.S. Navy scholars and war planners gained valuable strategic and operational insights from a long-term process of scenario and war-gaming activities. Over a period of decades, in a series of war games and exercises that came to be known as the Orange plans, the U.S. Navy was able to gain a general appreciation of how Japan was likely to aggrandize power in the Pacific by fortifying selected islands flanking its mandated territories, and in the process pose military threats to U.S. sea lines of communications in the Pacific. U.S. Navy war gaming showed planners and operators how the United States could effectively respond to the Japanese threat by devising appropriate amphibious and carrier warfare tactics and doctrine. The Navy planning did not warn us of the attack on Pearl Harbor, but it did help prepare the Navy for war against a peer power.

Fortunately, the Navy, now joined by the other services, is still looking at future “what-ifs” involving not only the usual suspects, but also less traditional threats. This process of devising and playing out scenarios is a necessary, but insufficient, means to prepare for a peer threat. To prepare for a future major-power threat, the experts first must recognize and accept the genuine risk that the United States will once again confront a peer competitor. This recognition must be followed by a cohesive joint program — one involving all the services — to study the potential peer problems in depth over extended periods, as the Navy did with Japan for more than two decades. It is equally crucial to connect long-range analysis to budgetary priorities and programs. Finally, in a democracy of shared powers it is essential to generate appropriate public awareness of the problem.

The Department of Defense (DoD) has in recent years worked with the military services to develop notional or illustrative scenarios in which a wide variety of potential threats are examined in detail. But will DoD and the services join together with a deep and protracted sense of purpose to examine the implications of the range of potential threats to U.S. vital interests — including peer threats in Eurasia — and, if necessary, be able to convince Congress and the public that defense spending must respond to longer-range threats? Is there indeed an understanding that peer threats, while less likely than small-scale conflicts, will be far more damaging to U.S. interests? The answers to these questions are problematic. While it is true that at this time some intelligence centers, elements of the joint staff, and war colleges are undertaking joint efforts to examine likely peer competitors, official and public skepticism regarding real and identifiable great-power threats may undermine these efforts. The problem is perhaps best captured in a short article that appeared in the 16 December 1996, issue of *Newsweek* magazine. The article briefly cites Pentagon war planners asking the question, Who is the enemy? A DoD spokesman discounts Russia, Iraq, North Korea and China and concludes that the Pentagon is having a hard time coming up with a new challenge.⁴

Echoes of history reverberate. On 4 May 1935, the British government announced that the international situation was such that England would have to put its defenses in shape. Most of the new expenditures were devoted to the fleet. Before 1935, British planning assumed colonial armies were sufficient, since there would be no major war for the next 10 years, and even if war came to Europe, France would retain the greatest army. Not everyone agreed. In 1925, well before the period of Churchillian dominance, the historical adviser to the British Foreign Office wrote in a prophetic memorandum that the danger point in Europe was not the Rhine but the Vistula; he went on to ask

what would happen if there were another partition of Poland, if Czechoslovakia were dismembered, if Austria rejoined Germany, or if Hungary allied with Germany.⁵

However, in 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact supposedly outlawed war and reinforced the 1925 “Spirit of Locarno,” which appeared to have solved France’s security problems with Germany. Indeed, even on the eve of World War II, there was general confusion in Europe over exactly who was the threat. In 1939, as negotiations among the allies and the Soviet Union broke down, Britain and France contemplated war with the Soviet Union over its invasion of Finland. Might we not once again miss the central threat, perhaps this time by focusing on areas peripheral to our vital interests?

The process of discounting the problem of a major threat can entrap the United States in various ways:

- ◆ *The Technology Trap:* We may look for threats in all the wrong places.⁶ Given our technological advantages and proclivities, we will search for a technological peer and not find one. We will correctly discern that no country can match our spending on scientific and technical research and development nor begin to field our impressive array of air, ground and sea systems. Our future weapons will depend on sensors coupled with automation. We may exaggerate the power of information to blow away the fog of war, or we may depreciate a competitor’s ability to counter, deceive, camouflage or overload us with false or excessive information.
- ◆ *The Mirror Image Trap:* The West tends to assume that economic growth, free enterprise, the desire for freer trade, economic integration and material goods will overcome security-related problems, leading inevitably to democracy — and democracies do not go to war with each other. The corollary is that poor, undemocratic countries that do not qualify for inclusion in the democratic club cannot be a peer-level match for the United States. However, in Asia, authoritarian regimes have not only sustained growth rates greater than those enjoyed by Western democracies, but also show an increasing willingness to call into question Western values and models.
- ◆ *Complacency:* We assume that since no country can possibly match U.S. capabilities to project power to all areas of the world, no foreign leader will commit his country to a major war with the United States. The trap is that we will fail to realize that our adversary might find it in his vital interest to risk all-out war in Eurasia, where the United States will neither enjoy the local military advantage nor understand the stakes until it is too late. Great Britain and the United States did not respond to the Nazi threat until well after Hitler took power. Will this sort of delay occur again?
- ◆ *The Ally Trap:* We may come to assume that our alliances are permanent and healthy. This assumption may persuade us that we can draw down our forward-deployed forces, especially our ground forces; in effect, we gamble on the willingness of our allies to accept disproportionate casualties in case of a major war. If our allies begin to doubt our capabilities and commitment and seek other arrangements, we will consider them perfidious, whereas in fact they are likely to be responding to an increasing sense of vulnerability. We may thus fail to realize that we can reassure our friends and allies only when we share their risks. For our allies to remain reliable, they must perceive that the United States retains the capability and the will — as evidenced, sadly, by the risk of commensurate casualties — to protect them from the common threat at a time of maximum danger. Power, commitment and risk-sharing also lie at the heart of effective deterrence, providing the best chance to avoid war in the first place. The French system of security and alliances became unraveled after the Munich agreement in 1938, when it became

clear that power in Europe had passed from France to Germany and that French military doctrine had effectively written off its allies in eastern Europe.

- ◆ *Trendiness — The Information Trap:* In the aftermath of the Cold War, there is a tendency to believe that ideology is dead and that big wars are too costly and represent outdated thinking. The common (and cost-saving) wisdom now is that the new threats are the spread of weapons of mass destruction, terrorists, ethnic warriors, drug dealers and criminals, and that these, by implication, somehow preclude old-fashioned major power threats. Furthermore, in the extremely unlikely event that an old-fashioned threat reappears, we will have plenty of time and massive amounts of processed information to prepare for it. This latter belief may actually be true if we can separate fact from fantasy. But even Britain, with its thousand years of surviving by anticipating and appreciating delicate changes in the balance of power, came close to disaster in 1940 because of its gross miscalculations and complacency regarding the true nature of the balance of power in Europe, and hence the threat to itself. Can this happen to the United States?

Asking the Right Questions

Yes, it can happen because we, like other cultures and nations, are tempted to believe what we want to believe. Among our favorite beliefs are the following: How could a country such as ours, with mountains of information and pervasive automation, miss a big threat? How could a country that can barely afford weapons we discarded 20 years ago fight the United States? How could U.S. spies in the sky fail to detect a major threat to us or our allies? How could a country so far away hurt us except through a nuclear exchange, which is out of the question since we would both be destroyed? Most of all, why would a country that profits from U.S. trade and investments want to hurt itself by warring with the United States? Why would a country attack us if it knew it would lose? Why? Why, indeed, did Japan, North Korea, Germany and China go to war with the United States, given our vastly superior resources?

To explain why and how another country, particularly a peer competitor, might challenge U.S. power, we must first separate facts from myths. To do this, we must begin by asking ourselves the right questions.

Are there major revisionist powers in the world — countries (and leaders) that want to change the international order in ways that are more favorable to their goals and ambitions? Or are the major powers satisfied with the current world order? Michael Howard wrote: “The maintenance of peace always depends on a general agreement as to the acceptability of the existing status quo.”⁷ In 1922, for example, two potentially very powerful foes of the existing status quo — Germany and Russia — met at Rappallo, Italy, and entered into a military collaboration. Is it now prudent to believe Russia and China are satisfied with the current state of affairs, in which the United States is clearly the world’s dominant power? Both countries have long memories of former greatness, and it is highly doubtful that they will accept U.S. global and regional leadership any longer than they must. Perhaps, even if they do not like the status quo, they will find war too costly and will take advantage of various international forums to effect peaceful changes in the world order. However, if poor and backward China in 1950 was willing to attack a modern, nuclear-armed United States during the Korean War, might not a relatively stronger peer-level rival do so in the future?⁸

Have both human nature and the international system of states changed? Does conflict in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa inspire confidence that the nature of man and the state system have made obsolete the use of force, resort to violence, and the individual's desire for power? On the contrary, the breakup of old orders and the attendant shifts in power are generally chaotic and often set the stage for great-power wars.⁹ It is likely that among the Western democracies the peaceful settlement of disputes has replaced war. But ask the citizens of Sarajevo how much human nature has changed since the outbreak of World War I. In other regions, we certainly see the differences between Asia, with its rising economic power, and Africa, where the opposite condition exists. Therefore, we need to draw a distinction between the likelihood of ethnic strife in Africa and the more traditional implications of great-power wars in an emergent Asia.

Might we miss or dismiss "the big picture" because the consequences are too unpleasant? Earlier in this century we scoffed when little Japan, maker of cheap toys and paper airplanes, dared to take on the mighty United States. Great Britain meanwhile assumed the French army could take care of any nastiness in Europe while London attended to its domestic and imperial interests. With the end of the Cold War, might not our complacency, our focus on domestic problems, or our fears concerning terrorism, ethnic and cultural conflicts, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction to irrational actors blind us to more traditional great-power threats? These are the questions we need to address.

What can and should we be looking for in trying to determine the likelihood of a peer competitor? Fundamentally, it is a power shift over time. A peer competitor will be in no rush to confront the United States militarily. As long as the peer challenger assesses that its overall power is increasing relative to that of the leading nation, it will wait until it believes the last measure of advantage can be gained from changing the balance of power. If either the challenging or the leading nation assesses that the situation is changing and time is running out, then the condition necessary for war is likely to arise. For example, when Germany around 1913 realized that the Franco-Russian alliance would soon exceed the power of the German-Austrian-Hungarian combination, war became far more likely. A similar logic preceded World War II, when Hitler realized in 1938 that Soviet industrial output would irrevocably surpass that of Germany. Finally, when Japan understood that U.S. post-Depression rearmament would dangerously outstrip Japanese war production, its leaders decided to attack the United States before it was too late.

Signposts for Detecting the Rise of a Peer Competitor

There are several signposts to watch for in detecting the long-term rise of a peer competitor. These are economic and military trends, the state of alliances and strategic relationships, and the actions a rising superpower is likely to take as it pursues great-power status.

Economic and Military Factors. Economic shifts signify the rise of new great powers and herald significant changes in military power. There is a clear connection in the long run between the rise or decline of economic strength and the rise or decline in military power.¹⁰ A foreign nation's potential to become a peer competitor is most likely to become realized when, over the years, that nation continues steadily to outpace its competitors economically (as indicated by significantly higher gross domestic product [GDP] growth rates, higher rates of savings, and growing military budgets, both absolutely and as a percentage of the GDP).

If a country demonstrates through diplomatic demands accompanied by aggressive or assertive actions that it possesses the interest and will to aggrandize power, enhance prestige, and gain influence, there is every reason to assume it is a potential military peer competitor.¹¹ Over time it becomes clear that the challenging and leading peer competitors are beginning to fear each other, as indicated by reciprocating arms buildups accompanied by military exercises, rhetorical threats, tense diplomatic exchanges, and possibly even spontaneous military clashes.¹² It is at this juncture that the necessary and sufficient conditions for war are in place.

At this time Asia's economic power is rising relative to that of the rest of the world, and China's economic, demographic and military power is rising relative to that of the rest of Asia. China is also more assertively extending its influence in East Asia. China must assume that should such trends continue, it will meet resistance from such major powers as the United States, Japan and India.

Political and Diplomatic Factors, Especially Changes in Alliances and Alignments. A second major signpost will be raised when the leading powers' alliance system becomes troubled. When a country begins to watch its alliances unravel (as Germany did before and during World War I and France after that war), it means significant changes in the international environment are under way. The breakup of alliances can occur because the major threat that unites countries has considerably diminished; because the partners (e.g., United States-China and United States-Soviet Union in 1941–1947) are becoming problems or threats to each other; or because the junior partner begins to doubt the ability of the senior partner to ensure the former's security. Thus the state of health and cohesion of the NATO and U.S.-Japanese alliances will serve as a gauge of the state of their relations. If the United States begins to see its most important alliances or strategic partnerships either purposefully becoming stronger or, conversely, unraveling, it will mean the status quo is undergoing a major strategic change — either the threat is disappearing or a greater threat may be on the horizon. If the United States also begins to see strategic and military cooperation among major revisionist powers, it will be a clear indicator that the international security regime is undergoing fundamental changes. Five short years after inflicting huge casualties on each other in World War I, Germany and Russia launched a period of extensive military cooperation. At present we are witnessing a rapid realignment of the United States-Russia-China strategic triangle as relations between China and Russia show significant improvement, including enhanced military cooperation. The improvement in Sino-Russian relations means, among other things, that they perceive the United States to be their common strategic problem.

Asymmetric Actions. A thinking peer competitor will not choose to challenge its enemy's political, strategic or military operational strong points. The United States, with its approximately \$7 trillion economy and \$250 billion defense budget, is unlikely to find an adversary that will try to bankrupt it or engage it in a technology race.

What can a peer challenger do to gain an advantage over an adversary?

- ◆ Offer to improve relations and engage in negotiations to resolve outstanding differences with lesser potential enemies to position itself to confront the greatest rival.
- ◆ Gain allies from other revisionist states that are distressed with U.S. regional preeminence.

- ◆ Undermine U.S. alliances by raising doubts about U.S. intentions and capabilities. Failing that, attack the ally first if war is deemed necessary.
- ◆ Threaten to use or actually use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons against an ally of the United States.
- ◆ Develop the means to degrade U.S. technological advantages.
- ◆ Employ strategic deception and camouflage.
- ◆ Avoid sea and air warfare except on a highly selective basis.
- ◆ Fight essentially land wars.
- ◆ Fight “unfairly” by capitalizing on U.S. predispositions.
- ◆ Limit goals, and know when to stop.

Conclusion

Given (1) a continuation of economic trends that for the past 20 years have featured a dramatic rise in the economies of most Asian countries relative to the rest of the world and (2) the growing reliance of the United States and other Western countries on oil from the Persian Gulf region, it is likely that the United States will be confronted by a hostile peer competitor at some time during the first two decades of the 21st century. By that time a peer competitor may well conclude it has sufficient power to challenge the United States and will employ this growing power to achieve a position of regional and strategic dominance. It will respond asymmetrically to the military-technological advantages of the United States, which will be expected to resist the emergence of a regional hegemon. As the only real global power, the United States may find itself fairly strong everywhere, but not strong enough in an area of supreme importance, such as in Asia or the Persian Gulf, especially if stressed in two regions simultaneously. The emergence of a peer competitor will be truly recognized only when senior policymakers and the informed public understand that the plans, policies and actions of powerful rivals are designed to achieve one end: overturning the status quo. We will know the peer rival has succeeded if America’s existing and evolving security arrangements, treaties and understandings wither or die, to be replaced by a rival security regime — or if we lose a war.

Endnotes

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