



An insight on US strategic thinking - why so much covering/fear?

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Earlier last week, I wrote a diary ([What the west means and what roles NATO plays therein](#)) that used a recent Financial Times editorial as a springboard for a discussion on what the "West" was, and what the use of NATO was - questions that left-of-center Europeans tend to see quite differently from most Americans, including left-of-center ones.

The editorial, by a well-respected British pundit, was insightful and interesting, and led me to conclude what many on the European Tribune have long suspected: that NATO is simply an instrument for Europe to support US strategic priorities, and that the "West" exists only when Europe (and in particular France) aligns itself unconditionally on US positions. The UK, *as per that senior British commentator*, has as its main role that of disrupting and dividing Europe when it is insufficiently respectful of US interests.

Since I'm French, you may be tempted to conclude that this is just sour grapes by a citizen of a supposedly declining country; however, what I found more interesting in that article was the dominant tone of fear - about the west being under siege, and needing security against various threats - in the form of coordinated military power and little else. It was a narrow, downcast, closed vision of the world, with little about values, progress or hope.

The comment thread is worth reading too, and one of the last comments, by **Loefing**, pointed me to another article on the same topic, this time by a graduate of the US Naval War College, [Tony Corn](#). The article, ([The Revolution in Transatlantic Affairs](#)), has the same dominant tone of fear, but a much more detailed examination of the world. Given the credentials of its author, it is likely to have serious influence on the thinking of the strategists in the Pentagon, and it is thus worth deconstructing.

The return of both China and Islam in world history after a three-century-long eclipse has been the defining feature of the international stage since 1979.

(...)

Throughout the 1990s, this infatuation with globalization and a "time-space compression" in the virtual world led most Westerners to ignore the twofold epochal change taking place in the real world: the transfer of the center of gravity of the world economy from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with "three billion new capitalists" poised to put an end to three centuries of Euro-Atlantic economic primacy; and the rise of a "second nuclear age" in Asia and with it, the concomitant end of three centuries of Western military superiority.

The central theme, again, is that of fear from others - mostly China and Islam, which are described in terrifying terms further in the article - and the incredible naivety of our leaders in the meantime, thinking that 'the end of history' had arrived. Think "Clinton is from Venus, real leaders are from Mars" (although Clinton's name is never mentioned, and the real leaders are wished for, not actually there yet)

At the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, a little-noticed transatlantic revolution of sorts finally occurred when the Atlantic Alliance acknowledged that it would have to "go global" in order to remain relevant. Divided, America and Europe will fall; united, they can retain the lead.

This is not stated in this particular sentence, but permeates through the whole article, but it is clear that the only way to remain "relevant" is through military force and the accompanying strategic thinking. More obvious in that paragraph is that the only way to be "relevant" is to be in "the lead." The goal is very obviously and explicitly world dominance.

Tony Corn is the inventor, as far as I can tell, of the concept of the Long War (see his article in **policy review** in March 2006: [World War IV As Fourth-Generation Warfare](#)) - a long, assymetric struggle against insurgent Islam; he additionally sees today a new Great Game with China for the resources of the world, and it is in the context of these twin existential threats that we must think strategically.

The Long War promises to be a thinking man's war. As a full-fledged Alliance, NATO possesses the kind of staying power that mere ad hoc coalitions cannot deliver; but NATO still has to come to terms with the fact that thinking power will matter more than fighting power.

(...)

Ever since the 1999 intervention in Kosovo, NATO has been eager to prove that it stands for more than "No Action, Talk Only." But the adoption by the Alliance of the Marge Simpson doctrine ("Are we gonna just stand there like the French, or are we gonna do something?") has proved to be no substitute for a new strategic concept.

(...)

Europeans (...) have serious difficulties remembering something equally basic that they used to perform with undeniable virtuosity: coercive diplomacy. Be it with Iraq yesterday or Iran today, an astounding percentage of the allegedly sophisticated EU elites have the hardest time grasping what any American redneck knows intuitively: namely, that the collective threat to use force is still the best way to avoid having recourse to actual force.

(...)

Forget the "Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus" mantra that gave the Brussels Eurocracy the vapors in the summer of 2002. (...) The truth is, for the past 15 years, and on both sides of the Atlantic, there have been two major attempts underway to get rid of the strategy problematique altogether.

The contempt for the wimps in Europe permeates much of this article - as it permeates most of

the thoughts of the neocons, as well as the common wisdom of Washington (thus the success of Robert Kagan's [Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order](#), which very explicitly stated the notion that Europe was free-riding on America's dime, pontificating about democracy and rules and diplomacy while the US did the hard work of actually battling threats around the world and protecting the West alone). What is somewhat new is the notion that we are facing new existential threats right now, so the accusation of naivety is extended to a large portion of the Washington establishment as well, which has not yet understood the dire straits we are in.

That critique applies to 'the past 15 years', but it's pretty clear in the rest of the article that it's during the 90s that the most egregious mistakes were made, thus my reference above to Clinton being from Venus. The dismissive comment about that expression by Corn suggests that those that thought were from Mars back then are too weak for today. And if he sounds like a military pundit looking for a war to put his name on the grand strategic analysis thereof, that might just be because he is...

Of course, the idea that Iraq or even Iran can be used as successful examples of *avoiding the recourse to force* is so stunning that it might be hard to take anything else in that article seriously. But again, given how such an article can be expected to influence decision-makers in Washington, it is worth continuing to plod through.

Let's now go into naming names:

In the past hundred years, the instrumentalization of Islam has been a recurrent temptation on the part of every rising power, be it Wilhemine Germany or Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, not to mention America itself. As the latest rising power, China itself would not be immune to that temptation even if it were energy self-sufficient. The fact that China's energy needs are huge guarantees that the constitution of a Sino-Islamic axis is for Beijing not just a tactical option, but a strategic necessity.

While the pivotal states of this strategy appear to be Pakistan, Iran, and (more recently) Saudi Arabia, the geopolitical situation of Iran puts it in a class by itself, as the most precious proxy in China's "indirect approach" against American primacy. It is therefore no surprise to learn that China is using Iran as a conduit for the delivery of arms to both Iraqi and Afghan insurgents, and providing Iran itself the kind of small boats needed to conduct attacks against commercial shipping or the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf.

So now it's not just Iran arming Iraqi insurgents, it's *China using Iran* to arm Iraqi insurgents. Beyond trying to turn Iraq into a strategic battlefield in a desperate attempt to justify its invasion somehow, this neatly ties together the two enemies that have been identified, and btngs under the same roof the Long War and the Great Game (making it the **Great Long WarGame**, maybe? - enough stuff there to give work to at least two generations of Pentagon pundits and armchair generals).

And China is using an "artful combination of space power, sea power, and soft power", but Corn has such a ludicrous interpretation of "soft power" that it is worth quoting in full:

Last but not least, soft power. On the military side, China is focusing on developing security cooperation within the ASEAN Regional Forum framework with the intent of marginalizing America. On the civilian side, China is peddling "Asian values" from Africa to Eurasia and from Latin America to Southeast Asia. For the past six years, China has been promoting autocracy through soft power while America has been promoting

democracy through hard power, and the verdict is in: China today has a more positive image worldwide than America.

So, in his mind, soft power is essentially bribery. While it is true that it is a lot more efficient than bombing the shit out of countries to make them cooperative towards you, it is quite a restrictive definition of soft power... No wonder he is so dismissive of the idea of promoting values and democracy - they are a strategic hindrance to building relationships with other countries around the world.

But the lack of understanding of what the soft power of the USA used to be is shocking - the model others aspired to imitate, the successful, rich economy, the great power that, to some extent, restrained itself to gain support from others, and valued convincing others above imposing its rules (or at least the appearance thereof) - all gone and disappeared. This is in line with the fearful, hobbesian vision of the world propagated by the whole article - but it is all the more ironic that a good part of the article is about the need for new clear-headed strategic thinking from the West and NATO, and the notion that the Long War is a "thinking man's war" - or is it simply that this is the first 'war' to be run wholly by armchair warriors?

Regarding what soft power means, there is a revealing sentence much later in the article, where the author writes about the potential geopolitical consequences of climate change on low lying coastal areas, by saying:

As a security organization, NATO's reasons for caring should be based on a recent report produced by the Center for Naval Analyses entitled "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change," describing a number of not exactly rosy scenarios regarding the political-military consequences of rising sea levels in the next 30 years. The hard security consequences of soft-power issues: This is the kind of outside-the-box thinking that NATO should itself promote

Climate change as a "soft power issue." Basically, soft power is anything not done by military forces - even if it can kill you! The mind boggles.

And yet there are some real nuggets of insight in this article, such as, for instance, a mostly refreshing vision of Russia:

But while the SCO constitutes the core of China's Islamic strategy, it is for Russia a tactical option to both manage the rise of China in Eurasia and to gain leverage over the West.

(...) In a nutshell: While Yelstin's choice of an alleged Polish model of transition in 1992 resulted, by 1999, in 38 percent of the population living below the poverty line, Putin's reorientation toward a Chinese model has since created an annual growth rate of 6 percent for Russia -- and a 70 percent approval rating for Putin. Having taken considerable domestic risks by siding with America after 9/11, Putin, for the past 5 years, has received nothing in return -- other than a seemingly endless enlargement of NATO in his own backyard.

Now that Russia is rich with oil money and has paid its debts to the West, what Russia wants from the West is respect. Russia's nuisance capacity should not be underestimated, even though threats to withdraw from the CFE Treaty, or to turn the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) into a "natural gas OPEC," are intended primarily for domestic consumption and to signal that NATO has enlarged far enough.

Unlike China, Russia is not a rising power. Russian hearts and mind are still up for grabs, though, and there are three reasons why it would be grossly irresponsible to alienate Russia gratuitously. In the short term, Russia's support is critical to solve (militarily or not) the Iranian question; in the middle-term, Russia has considerable leverage over Europe, with much bigger sticks and carrots than America's, and the risk of a creeping Finlandization of Europe is real were America to indulge in brinkmanship; in the long term, the West would have nothing to gain were Russia, against its best interest, to upgrade its relations to the SCO from the tactical to the strategic level.

The current demonization of Russia in some American quarters is thus incomprehensible.

While one may disagree with the notion that Russia's leverage over Europe is one-sided, or with the idea that the Finlandization of Europe would be [a bad thing](#), it is at least refreshing to see a more realistic vision of Russia. Of course, one should remember that, for the author's America, this is just a tactical consideration in the new grand fight against the enemies of the moment (the Grand Long WarGame), of which Russia is not one, so it is easy to be clear-eyed. But still, a surprising moment of non-zero-sum-game thinking... Or maybe just contempt for the vanquished and weakened former enemy...

Simply put: when all is said and done, there is a difference in kind between totalitarianism and authoritarianism. If Islamist totalitarianism is the main enemy, as the neocons rightly claim, then it follows logically that Russian authoritarianism, however unpalatable to democratic sensibilities, is something we can live with.

But back to the grand visions:

One thing is certain: the Great Game and the Long War will be the two global and generational challenges confronting the West in the next 30 years. While the two challenges at times overlap, they remain analytically distinct. Attempts to conflate the two challenges with a new geopolitical concept like "Greater Middle East" risk confusing the issues. The Great Game? While the West remains fixated on the continental dimension, the East shows more lucidity in giving as much importance to the maritime dimension (more on that later). The Long War? Due to mass migration, the sociopolitical umma no longer coincides with the geopolitical Dar al-Islam.

(...)

In the West itself, the current fixation of America on Central Asia and of Europe on the Middle East -- the closest thing to a "Western" geopolitical vision -- is based on two flawed premises. To put it crudely: Americans believe that Caspian Sea oil is the key to success in the Great Game; Europeans are convinced that the resolution of the Palestinian question holds the key to victory in the Long War.

The "East", the "Long War" - pretty big concepts that are taken as givens by the author. He's promoting them, so I understand him using them and providing an analysis accordingly, but considering that Europeans are on board for the Long War is maybe presuming too much. In so far as they push for a resolution of the Palestinian question (or, more precisely, of the Israeli-Palestinian question...), it is to eliminate one of the most evident - if, of course, instrumentalised in

many ways - sources of tension in the region, not to "win a war". Europeans are, for the most part, trying to avoid the idea that there is war. Saying there is one, just like talking about crusades or about a "clash of civilisations", is already taking sides. But that's the point, isn't it? Creating sides, and labelling enemies.

There's a long part about navy issues, which is, again, focused on threats (how a terrorist attack on or with tankers or container ships would be both easy and devastating), and on the need to rebuild a strong navy in the face of China's own build up, but, hey, this is a Naval War College graduate writing after all. I won't comment other than to note that the article is focused on threats, once more. the irony is that the danger is made ominous by pulling up big numbers, corresponding to potential economic damage from a well placed attack on a major port or on important navigation straits - but these numbers are never compared to the cost year in and year out of the forces that would supposedly be used to prevent them...

So, more fearmongering and request for Military-Industrial Complex work. Pretty unsurprising stuff.

What follows is a lot more unexpected - a criticism of the UN, which sounds banal, given how the institution is hated in many circles in Washington, but is not given the angle of attack:

Once the embodiment of Western ideals, the UN has turned into a lean, mean anti-West machine. Though European publics no longer have any illusion today about a Europe-puissance, they still retain a surprisingly boy-scoutish view of the UN, one that no longer corresponds to reality. European public opinion saw nothing wrong, for instance, in the recent establishment of an International Criminal Court that would give its prosecutor the power of a grand inquisitor, in part because they are not aware of the politicization of the UN (and of the potential use of the ICC as an anti-Western weapon), but also in part because, over the years, they have resigned themselves to the creeping judicial and technocratic imperialism pursued at home by the EU Court of Justice and the EU Commission.

(...)

At the same time that it was becoming a major player in the propaganda game, the UN inside was gradually turning into a "lawfare" machine against the West.

(...)

In this ongoing weaponization of the UN against the West, China has not remained passive: beyond the OIC [Organisation of the Islamic Conference] and NAM [NonAligned Movement] proper, the largest group in the UN happens to be the "G-77 + China," i.e., 132 countries representing 69 percent of UN members. China's UN dues may be 2 percent of the UN budget, but Chinese activism in the past decade has spectacularly increased in recent years.³⁶ It is reportedly under Chinese pressure that the US was evicted from the Human Rights Commission in 2001 to make room for Arab dictatorships.

(...)

The Western-inspired international legal order is today under assault at the UN; at the same time, an obsolete Law of Armed Conflict is preventing the West from defending itself on the ground. As a military organization, NATO should today articulate a "Counter-Lawfare" doctrine for the sake of intellectual interoperability. As a security organization, NATO should not wait until it has become a full-fledged UN of Democracies to start elaborating a New Law of Armed Conflict adapted to the realities of post-

This is worth quoting at length, because it brings up back to the dismissal of soft power mentioned earlier. The new armchair warriors like Corn are going further, and effectively stating that they have lost the "soft war" - thus wanting to bring things exclusively on a military plane, where the US and NATO still rule.

Again, Iraq might be mentioned here as a proof that military strength is not *necessarily* the best tool for all problems (of course - don't tell a hammer you're not a nail, it might piss it off, with nasty consequences for you...). But the casual dismissal of international law - created by Americans, and nurtured for decades by the West, in one of the endeavors that were perhaps most worthy of the grand discourse on values that we are so fond of - is such a fundamental strategic mistake that it must be pounded on.

International law is turning against the USA because it has, in recent times (not starting on 9/11, but accelerating since then) decided that it would not be bound by such common rules, while trying to impose them on others, as was made possible by its global dominance and the lack of enforcement capabilities. The one thing that made it possible for international law to start having any effect was the decision by the USA, for a number of decades, to abide by it, despite its ability not to (thanks to its global power), followed by Europe in that. International laws were boosted precisely because the dominant power of the day decided to be constrained by such rules even when it could have ignored them. That provided legitimacy for demands that others follow the same rules, and created a lot of good will. That was real soft power - and very effective one at that. where that power ebbed is when the USA decided that such rules were becoming too burdensome and started opting out. Before 9/11, it could be argued that it was not a trend, but that some issues were more sensitive than others, and that overall, progress was being made. Since 9/11, the reversal has been complete. Contempt for the Geneva Conventions, for the UN Security Council, and for numbers of other international treaties has been absolute and open, and the double standard of nevertheless still requiring others to follow these rules simply breathtaking. what that signified was that the USA decided to rely solely on raw power, and it should not be surprised that others are doing the same, in a race to the "bottom" which can only be damaging to US pretensions at being the sole military superpower on the globe. Among other things, when you attack countries without nukes and bluster and bluff with countries with nukes, you cannot be surprised that a number of countries get the message that nukes will make them safer. And when you pontificate about human rights while explicitly promoting torture, renditions and unlimited detentions as official policy, you cannot expect not to have the same thrown as you, with Chavez's diatribes, Ahmedinejad's taunts and Putin's jibes - and their ensuing popularity - the inevitable result.

Drop the soft power, lose the soft power. Thus the need to use evil words to describe the adversary one has created:

The return of China alone would be enough to make the West "live in interesting times." To make things even more interesting, Islam too is back, this time in the form of a totalitarianism which manages to combine an ideological comprehensiveness (Salafism) unseen since Communism and an existential nihilism (jihadism) worthy of Nazism.

It's Stalin and Hitler combined! And brown and yellow people too!

Of course, this grand strategic vision that claims to replace the blindness of the current Washington deciders has a few blinkers of its own, notably the role of the West in general, and the US in particular, in antagonising the populations of the Arab countries we now seem to fear. For

some reason, they associate corruption and authoritarianism with the West, and islam with social progress and democracy (hmm... let's see ... could our support for local regimes in the hope that oil will flow have anything to do with it?). And emergin Asia, which has seen the results of two centuries of industrialization for the sole benefit of the West, is now told that resources are scarce and pollution should be avoided, even at the expense of growth (and industrialisation) for them?

Of course, for me as a European, the saddest thing is to see our own leaders acquiese to this small, fearful, destructive vision of the world, and be willing to go along with such tripe, and to denigrate the EU as an institution that has done its time and should just become a big free trade area, and let NATO become the entity representing Europe - a subversient provider of military subcontracting and cheap legitimacy to the Pentagon.

What a sad, sad world we are living in when these are the thoughts of our foremost strategists.

... unless one keeps in mind the particular conceit of democracies at war that Kennan, following Tocqueville, pointed out long ago: "There is nothing in nature more egocentric than the embattled democracy. It soon becomes the victim of its own propaganda. It then tends to attach to its own cause an absolute value which distorts its own vision of everything else. . . . People who have got themselves into this frame of mind have little understanding for the issues of any contest other than the one in which they are involved."

That was also in that article. But not about itself, even though it should have been...

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As an addendum for the Oil Drum, I should add that apart from the mention of the Caspian area as an over-hyped driver of policy in the "Greater Middle East", the note to China's policies to build up links with oil producing and commodity providing countries around the world, and the side reference to the possible military consequences of cliate change induced flooding of coastal areas, there was very little in that paper abotu the topics that we see here as the fundamental issues of the coming decades - the massive competition for (possibly shrinking) resources. The refusal to acknowledge that Western policies in the Middle East have been and are polluted (or driven, as you will) by oil, and that this is one of the main causes of the ambivalence (or plain and simple hostility) of these countries' towards us is quite stunning. Is it taboo, ignorance, or wilful refusal to acknowledge that others may have distinct interests?

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