

America Sees China as Next Big Threat; "It's an open secret in Washington"

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NEW YORK -- If you ask a U.S. White House official or any of Washington's senior intelligence analysts what they consider to be the greatest long-term threat to U.S. stability, the answer might surprise anyone expecting to hear the by now traditional apocalyptic warnings about global terrorism.

The real danger, they would say, is China.

"It's an open secret in Washington," says Kishore Mahbubani, who was Singapore's veteran ambassador to the United Nations until last year. "The emergence of China as a potential rival is considered the next big threat to the U.S. - and China knows this, too."

China's had "superpower-in-waiting" status - partly as a function of the sheer size of its geographical reach, population (1.2 billion and growing) and the dramatic transformation of its economy - since the Cold War ended. But the slow, steady expansion of its military force has tipped the balance for anxious Washington geo-strategists.

It explains the bitter quarrel surfacing this month between the U.S. and Europe over whether to lift a ban on sales of military technology to China imposed more than 15 years ago, in response to the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The U.S. wants arms sanctions to remain; the Europeans want sales to resume.

The quarrel is more serious than the transatlantic fireworks over Iraq. The Americans say the Chinese military build-up is already the most extensive in the world. They single out plans to build 23 amphibious assault ships, 13 attack submarines, and other upgrades in the navy and air force.

The Europeans agree that Chinese military expansion is worrisome; but they point out that blocking foreign technology sales will have only a marginal impact. Besides, they argue, keeping the Tiananmen-era ban in place because of a perceived new threat diminishes the credibility of sanctions.

Targeted countries will believe that nothing they do will ever get them off the hook, so why bother to pay attention? (Saddam Hussein's lackeys used to argue the same thing.)

But the U.S. has a point. China's military transformation, combined with its increasingly aggressive trade policies, is creating a new power dynamic in a region already anxious about rising Chinese influence from Japan to Taiwan.

And unchecked, China is likely to travel further toward projecting its military and economic power in the 21st century. U.S. Vice-Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, in testimony before the U.S. Senate, predicted Chinese nuclear-tipped missiles will soon be "capable of targeting U.S. and allied military installations" in the region - and, by 2015, on the North American continent.

Skeptics argue that the Chinese "threat" is a fantasy. China historically has been loath to extend its influence beyond its region. The irony, however, is that as Beijing grows increasingly suspicious of Western intentions, it may back into a role as a rival, or hostile, superpower.

"Anywhere you go in China, officials believe 100 per cent that the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Balkans war was deliberate," reports Mahbubani, who identifies the perception gap in his just-published book, *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World*.

As the title suggests, Mahbubani believes the U.S. needs to mollify fears about its own intentions - particularly in the emerging giants of China and India. The potential for dangerously crossed signals, he warned in New York recently, is far greater than the rivalry between Islam and the West.

"The U.S. needs to do much more to change its image overseas," says Mahbubani. That's good advice. Both the Chinese military expansion and the heated-up quarrel between Europe and Washington (Congress threatened this week to restrict technology sales to Europe) offer a way to put Ottawa's missile defence decision last week in context.

The critics who successfully lobbied for opting out of North American missile defence are congratulating themselves for keeping Canada out of a U.S. "space weapons" program and thereby avoid endorsement of Washington's terrorism-fixated foreign policy.

In fact, they may have knocked Canada out of the policy-making loop regarding Washington's deepest concern - of which the missiles represent just one strategic element: the struggle to cope with growing Chinese military and economic competition in the Western Hemisphere.

After the missile decision, Canada's ability to influence Washington over continental security issues, and by extension allow its voice to be heard on the Great China Question, may now have decreased.

That should bother anyone fearful for Canadian sovereignty.