

Response to “Is China the Nemesis in a New Cold War?”



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by Emanuel Yi Pastreich and Charles G. Coutinho, Ph. D.

Response by Emanuel Yi Pastreich

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay "Is China the Nemesis in a New Cold War?" by Emanuel Pastreich, visiting scholar at the Center for East Asian Studies, University of Pennsylvania and a Japan Focus associate, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 06-18A: March 6th, 2006.

This report includes comments by Charles G. Coutinho, Ph. D. an independent scholar, having with a doctorate in the department of History at New York University in 1997. specializing in Anglo-American relations during the early Cold War.

II. Comments on Essay by Emanuel Yi Pastreich

1. Comments by Charles G. Coutinho, Ph. D.

I have read, and, been impressed with Pastreich's essay concerning current and future state of Sino-American relations. My comments are going to be much more directed towards the flaws that I see in the analysis, especially the historical examples used by the author, to hang together his argument, rather than per se, the predictions made by Pastreich, although, in my conclusion, I do offer my own opinion of the future course of Sino-American relations as well.

First, to characterize current relations between the USA, and the PRC, as akin to those between the USA, and the UK in the years 1910 and 1970, is to put it mildly, a rather distorted view of both relationships. Let us first, get the historical background in proper and accurate perspective: while, there were

at times

, elements of discord and even strain, no serious historian would characterize Anglo-American relations between say 1910 and 1939, much less in the later time frame as one of 'bitter rivalry', in the way that Pastreich does. 'Competitive Cooperation', in the words of David Reynolds, is a much more accurate term to describe Anglo-American relations in this time frame. ¹ As for the period after 1939, it would be accurate to describe it, as one of a de facto alliance. Admittedly, an alliance of unequals, especially, after 1945, but an alliance still. The best example of which, is that it would be difficult to put it mildly, to conceive any other foreign representative, had the same access, and influence in the inner corridors of American policy-making that the UK's did, in this time frame. In the embassy's of Sir Oliver Franks (1949-1953), Lord Harlech (1961-1964), Lord Cromer (1970-1973), and Sir Nicholas Henderson (1979-1982). It is pretty much inconceivable that a representative from the PRC, would ever be able to possess either the confidence or the influence that the above UK Ambassador's had, and, to some degree still possess. ²

Second, in his historical background Pastreich, has a simplistic and erroneous idea of both the UK's power political position circa 1910, and, USA, today. Contrary to Pastreich's statement that the UK 'maintained undisputed dominion in the economic, diplomatic and military realms', the reality was quite different. Firstly, by 1913, both the USA, and Germany, had overtaken the UK in share of World Manufacturing Output. ³ The USA's share being more than two and half times as large as the UK's. With the same being true of the former's production of Iron and Steel. ⁴ It was precisely with this shift in mind, that caused the then British First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selbourne, to remark that if the USA so wished it, British naval supremacy could easily be made a thing of the past. ⁵ As for land power, the UK's was far down on the list of existing military contenders. ⁶

As compared to the above, the USA, in contemporary terms possesses a power political position, which bears in fact, little parallel with the UK in 1910. In the economic realm, the USA possesses by far, the world's largest economy, with 23% of total world output. A figure which is double that of Japan and China combined. ⁷ In the military sphere, the USA is in a class by itself - both in contemporary terms and historically. With none of the other world's military forces being in the same league with the USA, much less competitive. ⁸

In short, the major flaw, as I see it, in Pastreich's argument, is his thesis, that the PRC, is in the equivalent position, vis-à-vis, the USA, that the USA, was vis-à-vis, the UK, in 1910. In addition to the examples adduced above, the key difference in the two situations, as I see it, is that while the USA, was by 1910, a major

world power

, with interests, both the Far East, the Pacific, as well as being the de facto hegemonic power on the American continent, the PRC, is none of these at present. While perhaps one can characterize it as

a

major Far Eastern power, no one would call it

the

hegemonic one. And, with no military bases or alliances outside of the Far East, China is still a provincial, limited actor, in power political terms. This perhaps harsh, but accurate characterization is reinforced when one looks at the global influence and attraction of China's cultural and ideology. It is difficult to put it mildly, to envisage the PRC's current rulers, having the worldwide appeal of say Presidents T. Roosevelt, Wilson, or F. D. Roosevelt. In the realm of 'soft power', the PRC is an also-ran, if it can even be said to be in the race at all. ⁹

To sum up, while one does not like to prognosticate the future from current conditions, it is difficult to envisage the scenario that Pastreich posits, whereby in the near future, the 'United States will concede', its 'dominant status to China'. While one may agree with Pastreich's caveats about Bush's 'war on terror', and, especially the way that it is being waged, it is very farfetched indeed, to compare the

war

, and its impact on the USA, with say the impact that the two World War's had on the UK. Lest Pastreich forget, on the

first day

of the Battle of the Somme, the UK, lost

eight

times as many men, as the USA, has lost in Iraq and Afghanistan, since 2001.¹⁰ The war on terror may perhaps be many things, but, it is most assuredly

not

a repetition of the Great War. Least of all, in its impact on the USA. Which means, that in the case of the near term evolution of Sino-American relations, that it is much more likely that the PRC, will retain its position as merely a great Far Eastern power, without expanding much beyond that area, much less, becoming a great power, with worldwide ambitions, and interest, `a la the contemporary USA, or such great powers in the past as say the Soviet Union, Czarist Russia, the British Empire, or France between say 1884 and 1939.

Endnotes:

1. David S. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-1941: a study in competitive co-operation*. 1982.
2. Robin Edmonds, *Setting the Mold: the United States and Great Britain, 1945-1950*. 1986; Nicholas Henderson, *Mandarin: The Diaries of an Ambassador*. 2000; Charles Douglas-Home, *Evelyn Baring: the last proconsul*. 1978.
3. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 1987, pp. 200-204.
4. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, 1954, pp. xxv-xxxi.
5. George Boyce, eds. *The Crisis of British Power: Imperial and naval papers of the Second Earl of Selbourne, 1895-1910*. 1990, pp. 133, 184-185.
6. Kennedy, op. cit.
7. Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. 2004, p. 18; Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, 2002, pp. 36.
8. Ferguson, pp. 16-17.
9. On the concept of 'soft power', see Nye, p. 9, and throughout.

Response by Emanuel Yi Pastreich

I am most grateful for the thoughtful comments I received in response to my essay. Many readers pointed out that China's own social, political and demographic weaknesses put an absolute limit on its geopolitical ambitions. I fully recognize the possibility that China may ultimately be hobbled by its own internal problems. I would only respond that ultimately the issue is not whether China has handicaps, but rather whether these handicaps will be more serious than the ones incurred by the United States over the next few decades. I will frame the argument differently, with greater qualifications, when I next write on this topic.

Nevertheless, if we look at East Asia as a whole, we can still see many parallels between the relationship the United States had with Europe, or Great Britain in specific, during the twentieth century and that which Northeast Asia has with the United States. A similar shift of capital, manufacturing, technology, cultural authority and the control of information and education can be readily identified.

Analogies are imperfect, and ultimately subjective, heuristic tools. There are aspects of China's relationship to the United States that can be elucidated through a comparison to the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and aspects of that same relationship that are better explained through an analogy to the competition between the United States and Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century.

I presented a brief argument employing the latter analogy in order to raise serious questions about current attempts to evaluate the challenge China poses in a purely military manner. I felt that such arguments are misleading, inappropriate and dangerous. That said, comparing the economic, political and diplomatic relations of the United States and the People's Republic of China in the 21st century with those of Great Britain and the United States in the 20th does not mean that I think the United States will adopt a Queen and parliamentary system, or that China will allow all citizens to own handguns and develop a strong anti-abortion movement. It could well mean that China will not be as open a society for the average citizen as the United States fifty years from now and at the same time play the role of honest broker in the world.

Dr. Coutinho's careful analysis of my article makes very valid points about the limitations of the analogy. One prominent error in my writing that Dr. Coutinho pointed out is the arbitrary decision to limit the historical scope for the analogy to the period 1910 to 1970. In fact, the competition between the United States and Great Britain went on for a far longer period of time and even included military conflict. A longer section of the history of the two countries would have allowed for a more nuanced and convincing comparison.

I would like to concentrate on the specific points in which the clear difference in opinion between myself and Dr. Coutinho goes beyond my rudimentary understanding of British history.

For example, Dr. Coutinho argues that the term "bitter rivalry" is exaggerated and suggests that the term "competitive cooperation" is more accurate to describe the Anglo-American relationship. Although "competitive cooperation" may well be the standard adjective for the relationship between the United States and Great Britain over the last hundred years, a strong argument can be made that whatever the surface impression may have been, in the battle for control of telecommunications, or the efforts to increase international market share, control of oil in the Middle East and diplomatic influence, there was a clear struggle between the two states that could be described as "bitter."

For example, as William Engdahl notes in his recent article, "The US Geopolitical Nightmare: The Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia," the competition between the US and China in the Middle East follows the same contours of the previous struggle between the US and Great Britain. Recently, after Chinese President Hu Jintao was insulted by President Bush in Washington, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz welcomed him with full state honors in Riyadh:

"Hu signed a deal for Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC) of Saudi Arabia to build a \$5.2 billion oil refinery and petrochemical project in northeastern China. At the beginning of this year, Saudi King Abdullah was in Beijing for a full state visit.

"Since the Franklin D Roosevelt-King Ibn Saud deal giving US Aramco and not the British exclusive concession to develop Saudi oil in 1943, Saudi Arabia has been regarded in Washington as a core strategic sphere of interest."

China has set its eyes on dislodging the United States over the next few decades from its privileged place in the Middle East much as the United States displaced Great Britain previously.

It is true that the Chinese ambassador does not have the access in Washington that an English diplomat like Sir Oliver Franks (1949-1953) had. I would say that even if China never has that level of influence based on a common culture, the general analogy may still be relevant. Obviously China has a different ideological and political history and different demographic challenges than the United States. The relationship between the two nations can never be as close as that between two nations sharing a language and many ethnic ties. That does not rule out the possibility that China

will gradually and increasingly have say over what happens in the United States, and the world, without most Americans even being aware of it.

Moreover, not all American influence in Great Britain was a matter of agreements between gentlemen. During the Suez Crisis (1956-57) the Eisenhower administration forced a cease-fire on Great Britain by threatening to sell off US reserves of the British pound, thereby precipitating a collapse of the English currency. It is quite easy to imagine China engaging in such arm twisting to get its way in some future disagreement without ever deploying an aircraft carrier.

There is no reason to assume that China cannot "possess the confidence or the influence" of the great UK ambassadors to the United States in the future. It is true that such a scenario is unimaginable today. But imagine a deeply indebted America that has been bogged down in devastating conflict in the Middle East involving Iran, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia for a decade or two? Might that America find that the China it once loathed has become one of its few allies. We should not forget that China is a state that is not motivated by religious principles, is committed to the ideology of free trade, has invested vast sums in the US economy, and in general does not harbor a strong Anti-American sentiment.

For that matter, should we assume that the outward signs of hostility towards China that radiate from the Bush White House rule out the possibility that China already has considerable backdoor influence in Washington? Perhaps that American hostility is little more than an infantile effort to cover up a growing and unseemly dependency.

History will show whether China ever produces leaders with a worldwide appeal. That may never happen, but I do not see any reason to assume it will not. Although China does not have military bases around the world that allow it to project military power, that massive military commitment is precisely what is undermining American power. China may be blessed not to have that burden in the first place. For that matter, much of the overwhelming American military consists of aircraft, tanks and weapons systems designed to fight an apocalyptic war of position that will never take place in the twenty-first century.

China is at an advantage not having an entrenched military bureaucracy dedicated to protecting those increasingly expensive boondoggles. The American military, in terms of highly trained individuals with a strong dedication to their work, has been seriously degraded over the last five years, even as spending goes up. The ultimate question is, could the United States end up so indebted, so dependent on the import of technology and so demoralized by its position in the world that nations previously closely allied with the United States would see China as a better partner, and the United States itself would fall into the Chinese realm? I am not saying that will happen, I am only questioning the certainty with which others assert that nothing even resembling that could ever happen.

Finally, Dr. Coutinho notes that there is no comparison between the terrible losses suffered by Great Britain in the First World War and the casualties of the United States over the last five years in Iraq and Afghanistan. I grant that the number killed is far is thankfully less than those killed in major WW I battles. But how can we be sure just how many Americans will lose their lives in the years to come? The Middle East is not Vietnam for the simple reason that the United States is so dependent on oil for every aspect of the economy. At a certain point, pulling out may be such a threat to the American economy that it cannot be done no matter how high the casualties.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send

responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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