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## The New (Cold?) War With China

By Alan Nasser  
December 27, 2016



Washington has recently initiated major war games in the neighborhoods and on the borders of Russia and China, the most intense martial exercises since the end of the Second World War. The old Cold War ante has been upped, and the danger of military confrontation between Washington and Russia and/or China looms large. (See my extensive discussion in “How Clinton Could Make a War”, in CounterPunch magazine, volume 23, number 5.) No less an authority than Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned that

Hillary Clinton's promise to implement a no-fly zone over Syria would entail war with Russia. Some have claimed that Trump's reluctance to impose no-fly in Syria is the silver lining on the dark cloud of his coming presidency. But more impressive commentators have argued that war with China is an equally horrific possibility. (John Pilger, "The Coming War on China", CounterPunch, December 2, 2016.)

Stephen Kinzer's foreign-policy commentaries stand head and shoulders above the rest of mainstream reporting. Kinzer was for more than 20 years a premier foreign correspondent for The New York Times. His book *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* is a first-rate analysis of exactly what the title describes and his *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change From Hawaii To Iraq*, details some of the major U.S. overseas interventions and exposes the corporate origins of each. Kinzer is no Washington apologist. He too warns of Washington's provocations of China. But his remarks reveal some of the major weaknesses in the thinking of even the left-ist of liberal commentators. (Stephen Kinzer, "China is a Psychological Problem", *The Boston Globe*, December 5, 2016)

### **Do the United States and China Have the Same Global Ambitions?**

Kinzer correctly points out that China's economic and military growth will eventually pose a problem for Washington, which touts itself as the world's sole superpower. Kinzer reminds us that "For the first time since we became a world power, we face a rival with...a bigger economy... China's share of world power is likely to continue growing while ours declines... Both our doctrine and our habit of command tell us we must limit its rise. That is a recipe for confrontation." But according to Kinzer it's not merely Washington's "habit of command", i.e. insistence on global predominance, what elites used to call Full Spectrum Dominance, that portends confrontation. Equally dangerous, he claims, is the likelihood that China, as it grows in power and influence, will ape Uncle Sam's imperial ambitions. This is a key premise in Kinzer's thinking. Here is his reasoning: "The United States began its rise by securing a continental empire, became an overseas empire by subduing weak island nations, and then began projecting power around the world. China might follow the same path... [China] could take another leaf from our book and use their island dependencies as a springboard to global power."

Kinzer seems to think that two factors threaten to set China upon the path of empire building, the historical behavior of the United States and the sheer fact of economic enormity. It was the United States's aspirations to and ultimate achievement of global economic hegemony that induced it to aspire to rule the world. Because China will some day surpass the U.S. economically, it too, Kinzer writes, may seek worldwide domination.

Kinzer's article contains the seeds of his own position's destruction. He writes that "if we continue to insist on policing East Asia" we will be drawn into confrontation with China. This is not essentially about bigness, economic or military. It is about Washington's desire to be the predominant power in every strategically important area of the globe, i.e. in the entire world. China does not currently police North America, nor does its leadership aspire to rule the world. But Washington's aspiration to endless expansion is as old as the hills. America's history from its very beginnings illustrates George Washington's characterization of the republic as a "rising empire." Westward expansion did not stop at the border, as the Hawaiians and Filipinos would

learn. China exhibits no such history. In *On China*, Henry Kissinger noted that China never sought and does not now seek to obtain colonies (i.e. control over non-contingent territory that was not “Chinese”). Kinzler’s inference from Washington’s historical imperialism to China’s prospective global policy is a non sequitur.

These historical observations are necessary but not sufficient for a realistic assessment of the danger of war with China. Required in addition is familiarity with U.S. policymakers’ recently revised position of the feasibility of nuclear war and their application of the new stance to China. Let’s have a look at Washington’s current military taunting of China and its relation to policymakers’ recently heightened fantasies of U.S. military omnipotence. These are the background circumstances and ambitions that inform the world view and potential policy recommendations of Trump’s major advisors. They display a predisposition to war. And worse, a resurrected conviction that nuclear war is back on the table.

### **Washington’s “Tilt To Asia” and Provoking China**

Shortly after Obama’s inauguration, Washington sent the Navy surveillance ships the USNS *Impeccable* and the USNS *Victorious* into China’s EEZ (exclusive economic zone). This was the beginning of a series of escalating provocations. The Chinese responded rationally, by installing defensive missiles around the zone.

The *New York Times* reports the most recent application of U.S. strategy, in a story titled “U.S. Carriers Sail in Western Pacific, Hoping China Takes Notice.” In mid-June Washington engaged two U.S. carrier groups, led by the U.S.S. John Stennis and the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan, in joint deployments into the Philippine Sea. 12,000 sailors, 140 aircraft, and six smaller battleships conducted joint surveillance operations. This was only the most recent incitement in a series of instigations.

In the 10 days prior to the above exercise, Stennis and Reagan had conducted joint maneuvers in the South China Sea with Japanese and Indian navies, after deploying four navy Growlers, electronic warfare planes and 120 military personnel to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. In the past year the U.S. has conducted four “freedom of navigation” patrols, the most recent in October, as a challenge to China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. But China’s claims are within the boundaries of traditional rough measures of what counts as a country’s national waters. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides no precise geographical coordinates specifying what counts as China’s territorial waters. In fact, these very waters are currently contested by many nations, including Brunei, China, Taiwan (not really a nation, according to current U.S. “one China” policy, but Trump sees it differently), Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Given that none of the nations claiming these waters has been as boldly harassed by the U.S. as has been China, China’s claim is defensible. China’s installation of anti-missile systems on seven of the Nansha islands is entirely rational under the circumstances. Washington would surely take comparable steps were China conducting war games in the waters off California.

But war drums are beating in Washington in response to China’s defenses. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has demanded that the U.S. take military

action against China. Its defenses “allow its military to project power and assert control of one of the most vital international waterways. This is unacceptable,” McCain asserted. Greg Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center For Strategic and International Studies, claimed “This is militarization. The Chinese can argue that it’s only for defensive purposes, but if you are building giant anti-aircraft gun and CIWS emplacements, it means that you are prepping for a future conflict.” Of course it does. Nowhere did Poling mention Washington’s extensive operations in the South China Sea. China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang responded that he “did not understand” Poling’s charges: “If China’s building of normal facilities and deploying necessary territorial defensive facilities on its own islands is considered militarization, then what is the sailing of fleets into the South China Sea?”

The bottom line rationalization of Washington’s aggression is that China’s island claims and its installation of anti-missile equipment threaten “freedom of navigation.” But what strategic aims would impel China to restrict navigation in this essential trade route? One of China’s overriding geopolitical strategies is to build regional alliances with local partners, all of whom have trade interests in access to these waters. Across the board restriction of access would make no sense. Possible restriction of U.S. access, given current American instigations in the region, is another story.

Trump’s comprehensive ignorance permits full-throttle, and perhaps unwitting, fabrication of Chinese offenses. A recent Trump tweet alleges that “China steals United States Navy research drone in international waters – rips it out of water and takes it to China in unpresided [sic] act.” In fact, the Chinese and the Pentagon had already “secured an understanding... through direct engagement,” as the Pentagon put it. A Chinese naval vessel had detected an unknown device in its waters and took measures to prevent its possible endangering of passing ships. After the object was identified as a U.S. asset, the Chinese communicated to Washington its intention to return it. Trump was probably unaware of this scenario. The man is unaware of so very much. Therein lies the rub. The instigators of past wars typically knew what they were doing. Factual ignorance has rarely triggered a major confrontation. Now things are different.

### **An Imperial Rule: Provoke With Allies**

Washington’s taunting follows a familiar imperial rule: gather as many allies as possible in order to enhance the credibility of the intended threat. Washington has in the last two years recruited leading powers in the Asia-Pacific region, and in March and April began a sharp escalation of its military threats. Japan and Australia, and other allies including Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia have initiated hostile operations against China. Most of these countries have been encouraged by Washington to develop their naval power, and have subsequently increased their military spending. In 2015 alone the Philippines increased military spending by more than 25 percent, and Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia by 5 to 16 percent.

Age-old and geopolitically insignificant contestations over reefs and small islands have been stoked in defense of these provocations. Vietnam has in recent months secretly fortified several of its islands in the Spratly group in the South China Sea with mobile long-range rocket launchers. It would take only days to make them operational with rockets capable of striking

Chinese-held islets. Hanoi's move is certain to further accelerate the arms race that is already underway and to heighten the risk that an incident or provocation could lead to military conflict. That danger has escalated in the wake of a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favor of a US-backed case brought by the Philippines to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

A recent Reuters report revealed that Vietnam has shipped its launchers to five of its Spratly islands and hidden them from aerial surveillance. The launchers are part of Vietnam's EXTRA rocket artillery system purchased recently from Israel. The system uses targeting drones, is highly accurate up to 150 kilometres and can deliver a 150 kilogram warhead that can hit ships and land targets. Chinese installations on Subi, Fiery Cross and Mischief Reef would be well within the range of Vietnamese rockets.

Admiral Henry Harris, the commander of U.S. Pacific Forces, and the Pentagon, see Australia as the essential southern dock of the "rebalance" to Asia. Within the next three years 60 percent of U.S. air and naval forces are earmarked for the Indo-Pacific. This month Harris signed an agreement with the Australian military to expand Washington's military presence there in 2017 with advanced F-22 Raptor fighters. He has also shared Trump's enthusiasm for bloating the navy with 350 warships almost entirely allocated to the Pacific.

Donald Trump will inherit this tinderbox from Obama. The entire setup invites a segue from threats to action. Compounding the danger is the mania for confrontation displayed the Pentagon's main man in the Pacific.

In an alarming development, Admiral Harris is pressing for further aggression to take place *inside* the 12-mile exclusion zone around territory held by China. According to *Navy Times* the commander "wants to drive through an area and do military operations," which would include launching aircraft and firing weapons systems. "We will be ready to confront when we must." The Obama administration is reluctant to push that hard, but Trump, who has made countless threats against China, is more in tune with these more aggressive recommendations.

*Navy Times* warned that, in the light of the current escalations "some sort of confrontation seems increasingly likely."

Chinese officials agree. A specialist in military strategy associated with the People's Liberation Army warns that "China will very likely strike back if the US comes within 12 miles of the [Nansha] islands." Another military authority at Nanjing University alerted Washington that "The US provocation has boosted the chance of military confrontation between Beijing and Washington." And the state-controlled *Global Times* warns that "China hopes that disputes can be resolved by talks, but it must be prepared for any military confrontation."

This has not deterred the U.S. from developing detailed plans for war with China. The Mitchell Institute For Aerospace Studies has reported that Air Force officers are preparing the most detailed plans to date for deploying the F-35, the most advanced fighter plane, in an all-out war with China. Is our next president licking his chops at this prospect? Prominent think tanks have recently provided grist for Trump's mill.

## Policy-makers' New and Improved Militarism

Last year the Council on Foreign Relations, the leading elite foreign-policy think tank, released a study titled *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China*. The upshot is that antagonisms are growing between what the Council considers the world's two most powerful nations, tensions that require an escalation of Washington's policy of confrontation. The hostilities are grounded in China's reluctance to embrace the core of U.S. foreign policy, identified thus by the Council: "Preserving U.S. primacy in the global system ought to remain the central objective of U.S. grand strategy in the twenty-first century." The "threat" to U.S. national interests consists in China's refusal to submit to the U.S. demand that it exercise no predominant influence in its own neighborhood! What unsettles elites most, according to the Council, is the "challenge by China to U.S. primacy in Asia." This is but one of the horrifying corollaries of what used to be called Full Spectrum Dominance and is now called simply global "predominance" or "primacy." Under a Trump presidency, this amounts to a recipe for war.

The RAND Corporation too has taken up planning for war with China in a study commissioned by the U.S. Army titled "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable." The phrase "thinking the unthinkable" was coined in 1960 by RAND's chief postwar strategist, the Strangelove counterpart Herman Kahn, whose book *On Thermonuclear War* advanced a strategy for winning a nuclear war against the Soviet Union. The study makes it clear that war with China is by no means out of the question, but stresses that as time passes Washington's nuclear advantage is sure to decline. The clear implication is that sooner is better than later.

Note that RAND's logic renders unimpressive Kinzer's consolation that "No war is likely soon. China's military is far weaker than that of the United States. It is engaged in a long-term buildup that, if unchecked, will substantially increase its offensive power." But according to RAND's wisdom, the relative weakness of China's military is all the more reason to assault China *now*, before it gains the capacity to deter.

RAND anticipates that military action against China will foment a resurgent antiwar movement, in which case the "system of civilian control" will be deployed for large-scale suppression. The Ur-retaliatory and repression-prone Trump cannot be averse to the prospect.

As if to prepare the way for the coming commander-in-chief, the Obama administration has begun a massive nuclear weapons "modernization" program. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute comments that "The ambitious US modernization plan presented by the Obama Administration is in stark contrast to President Barack Obama's pledge to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the role they play in US national security strategy." The Stockholm Institute is shocked, shocked by yet another Obama lie, another U.S. military escalation.

Against this background, only the blind fail to see the coming to power of a man with grandiose illusions of brutal omnipotence as potentially placing another world-historic crisis on the agenda.

The pivotal notion of maintaining the credibility of Washington's will to maintain its status as sole superpower is central to the new militarism and to the return to the table of the option of

nuclear war. Current elite thinking has it that the only surefire way to convince those who resist American global hegemony that their recalcitrance will be in vain is to threaten punitive damage. And the only credible threat is thought to be nuclear. Hence the enormous, multi-billion dollar nuclear upgrade initiated by the Obama administration.

I have found no mention of the Obama escalation in press reports of Trump's recent tweets calling for an expansion of U.S. nuclear capability. Trump is indeed more dangerous on the war-making front than Obama. But not *that* much more dangerous.

Policymakers perceive the decline of American economic dynamism and global political power -its inability to win the numerous wars it has brought about, its decline as a major exporter, its inability to reprise the economic growth rates it enjoyed during the Golden Age of its economic hegemony, the increased mistrust at best, loathing at worst, it has engendered worldwide, the mistrust of the political system evinced by very many Americans- as something that can be reversed only militarily. War may be perceived by the Trump junta as the only way to "bring us together" and "make America great again."

The ability of the U.S. to regain its former glory by economic means is not merely the conviction of its foreign antagonists, it is lamented by some of America's most distinguished economists. Lawrence Summers and Paul Krugman foresee a future of "secular stagnation" and our most distinguished scholar on growth and technological innovation, Robert J. Gordon, has recently described, in *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, the exhaustion of the possibilities for the development of further innovations spurring sustained and prosperity-generating economic growth rates. All are agreed that the inevitable results are growing inequality and lowered living standards. Adding insult to injury, the U.S. dominated world order is threatened. And it cannot be lost on elites that the Sanders and Trump phenomena indicate mass disillusion with the domestic economic and political systems, what the wags call a "legitimacy crisis."

The turn to war is not unprecedented under these political-economic circumstances.

We shouldn't characterize elites' apprehensions as "paranoia." That's irrational fear, but the rich and powerful are freaked by something real. Their premonitions are rational. Let's look further into elites' anxieties and their renewed willingness to "think the unthinkable."

### **The Fragility of the "Liberal International Order" and the Chinese/Russian Challenge**

Washington's current escalations against Russia and China are reflected in recent elite exhortations to revive the military confrontations of the Cold War era. In a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt state, "There are regions outside the Western Hemisphere that are worth expending American blood and treasure to defend... In Europe and Northeast Asia, the chief concern is the rise of a regional hegemon that would dominate its region, much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere." Here is an explicit statement both of the doctrine of U.S. predominance and primacy, that the U.S. must dominate the globe's every region, and of the perception that this hegemony is in jeopardy.

In a May *Washington Post* editorial titled “The Liberal International Order is Under Fire. The United States Must Defend It.” We are warned that

“Hardly a day goes by without evidence that the liberal international order of the past seven decades is being eroded. China and Russia are attempting to fashion a world in their own illiberal image... This poses an enormous trial for the next U.S. president... no matter who takes the Oval Office, it will demand courage to demand difficult decisions to save the liberal international order... The United States must keep trying to integrate China into the rules and traditions of the liberal international order... while also marshaling forces to confront China’s assertive and unilateral grab of territory in the South China Sea.”

The “liberal international order” is the world as dominated by the U.S. China and Russia are not attempting to “fashion the world” into anything at all. Russia is involved in no “violent subversion.” The reality is that these powers are feared to develop sufficient power and influence to obstruct America’s ability to call the international shots, to predominate politically and militarily everywhere, including in China’s and Russia’s neighborhoods. A comparably enormous U.S. hegemonic counterpower, elites believe, must be put into place. This will involve “difficult decisions.” Meaning that the U.S. leadership must be prepared to risk military confrontation in order to scare away these obstacles to U.S. hegemony. The *Post* cites a report by the Center For a New American Security, chaired by the neocon war hawk Robert Kagan, in support of a stepped-up global imperial campaign. Kagan’s report, titled “Extending American Power: Strategies to Expand U.S. Engagement in a Competitive World Order,” lays the cards on the table:

“At a time when partisanship in the American political establishment has reached unprecedented heights, the group believes it is more important than ever to rebuild the national consensus on America’s role in the world. This project promotes the idea that American leadership is critical to preserving and strengthening the bedrock of today’s international order, which is being shaken by a variety of forces.”

We are told that the State managers, the governing class, is in disarray and a “national”, i.e. popular, consensus on “America’s role in the world” is eroding – the masses are fed up with the wars. Moreover, the global system directed by America’s “leadership” is under threat. Steps must be taken. And Kagan deploys the erstwhile strategy of externalizing domestic tensions. The Trump-Clinton-Sanders debate has reintroduced a dangerous “partisanship” [read: debate beyond permissible orthodox limits] which threatens “national consensus” [read: vanilla debate within mainstream parameters]. A national campaign peddled as a defense against global threats to American freedom can neutralize partisanship by directing domestic discontent to external enemies. And there’s nothing like war to unite a nation internally riven.

A report by the influential Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments rationalizes Obama’s current multi-billion dollar nuclear buildup. The report focuses on U.S. tensions with Russia, and makes it clear that the recommended prescriptions apply as well to China. The report is frighteningly titled *Rethinking Armageddon* (RA). The conceit behind the title is that we must put behind us the belief that the Soviet Union’s achievement of nuclear parity with the U.S. guaranteed Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), and rendered self-destructive the use of nuclear

weapons. On the contrary, argues RA, we are now in a “second nuclear age” which frees the U.S. to deploy nuclear weapons “in a discriminate manner.” The report is introduced with a citation from the Cold Warrior John Foster Dulles: “If you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost.”

### **How Dangerous Is Trump as a War Monger?**

Were we posing this question about Hillary Clinton it'd be a no brainer. The woman's history tells an unambiguous story. Her role in the Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Iraq, Libya and Syria debacles is sufficient to fan the flames of panic. As noted above, her plans re a no-fly zone over Syria virtually guaranteed a confrontation with the Bear. Clinton's obsession with unqualified U.S. global dominance made nuclear war more threatening than it has been since the Cuban missile crisis. She had a political cosmology, bad in every way, and her commitment was assured and single minded. She would have been a disaster.

Trump has no policy record, and he has no politics beyond his general far-right leanings. His racism, gynophobia and ultra-nationalism will issue in the policies we'd expect regarding e.g. abortion, the harassment of anyone of color and the patented and “bipartisan” threats of the political leadership of both Parties against countries failing to march in step with Washington's global ambitions. On matters pertaining to the specifics of foreign policy, including the use of nuclear weapons, Trump exhibits his notorious incoherence. He routinely contradicts himself.

We don't know what he really thinks, any more than he knows what he really thinks, because there does not seem to be anything at all that Trump really thinks. He believes both sides of a contradiction. He claims that he is “highly, highly, highly, highly unlikely” to ever use nuclear weapons, even as he “won't take off the table” nuking ISIS or even Europe. All-encompassing ignorance cannot avoid contradiction, with the result that anything is as likely to be said, or done, as anything else. Nuclear war is as likely as not. It is an elementary truth of logic that from a contradiction *anything* whatever can be *validly* (i.e. consistent with the rules of logic) inferred. In this case, what is required to tilt the scales is an influence external to the “mind” of Trump. That can only be his advisors. You know, the junta.