Global Security Challenges:

Seeing the United States as Others Do

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | March 9, 2005

Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I can move the world.

Archimedes

On February 17, 2005, the directors of the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), FBI, and the assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research presented, in open session before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, their perspectives on the security and intelligence challenges facing the United States. Although such perspectives (as well as those given in secret sessions) help legislators exercise proper oversight of U.S. intelligence agencies, the public briefings present only part of the picture—that is, the world as perceived and interpreted by and from the United States. And it is this one-sided view that results in Washington's general inability to "move the world" except through the lever of military force (or threats of force), which quickly unbalances the moral ("the city on the hill") and diplomatic (defender of freedom, democracy, and free markets) stances traditionally claimed by Washington.

This article analyzes testimony by the directors of the CIA and DIA describing various countries and regions as threats or "of concern" to the United States. The evaluation of the United States as a threat to others is an amalgamation of press reports and foreign government statements. With Archimedes in mind, the article attempts to achieve a perspective that is outside the Washington world. Or, to put it another way, what follows is something akin to what Congress and the president should be hearing.

Intelligence Appraisal of U.S. Global Intentions and Capabilities—2005

As in 2004, the chief source of worldwide instability and armed conflict in 2005 will continue to be the United States. There had been some faint hope that the elections of November 2, 2004, would see Democratic Party candidates win the presidency and/or control of one chamber of Congress, which in turn might have been enough to reorient Washington's approach to international relations. But since one political party controls the White House and Congress, U.S. foreign policy will likely remain heavily militarized, as it has been since 2001. Washington believes it is under constant, if not imminent, threat from "terrorism" and the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiological weapons that potentially could be used against the U.S. homeland or interests outside its territory. What U.S. leaders cannot seem to grasp is that the activities they regard as "fostering stability, freedom and peace in the most troubled regions of the world" often do the opposite.

Current leaders in Washington tend to see the world in black and white. For example, President George Bush has declared that there are only two categories for countries and individuals: "with us or against us," and all those in the second category are considered terrorists or supporters of terror subject to "preventive" war with the time, place, and weapons determined by the U.S. president. What is wrong with this division is that the overwhelming majority of the earth's people want nothing to do with either

side. Their concerns are survival: food, water, health, and shelter, not terrorists.

Terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf

But as U.S. intelligence directors confirmed in mid-February when they spoke before Congress, the formerly semistructured organization known as al-Qaida has devolved into an amorphous network of activists, sympathizers, and "imitators"—all of whom are regarded interchangeably as "jihadis," extremists, or terrorists. Their numbers have multiplied since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq because, to quote CIA Director Goss, "The Iraq conflict, while not a cause of extremism, has become a cause for extremists."

This polarization results from many Muslims viewing U.S. actions in Iraq as state terrorism and a Western jihad upon Islam, a perception that is not based on some "fundamentalist" misinterpretation of religion, as President Bush has declared. Perhaps such Muslims have read the definition of terror used by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation: "the unlawful use of force against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in the furtherance of political or social objectives." According to the United Nations Charter, any country is entitled to defend itself when attacked. An invaded nation may use military action to reclaim lost territory and—if the UN Security Council is slow to respond to the breach of peace—may act unilaterally to prevent imminent recurring attacks.

When al-Qaida violently struck Washington and New York, most governments in the world condemned the perpetrators. When the Taliban government in Afghanistan declined demands to surrender al-Qaida leaders for trial, many governments supported—and several participated in—the war that overthrew the Taliban. The problem is that more than three years later, 18,000 foreign troops remain in Afghanistan—most of them still engaged in fighting Afghan citizens—for the purpose of imposing political and social change upon the country. Moreover, a prominent Republican senator has suggested that the United States will need permanent bases in Afghanistan, since Washington plans to keep military forces in that country for "the indefinite future."

March 2005 marks two years since the United States launched an unprovoked—by international standards—attack upon Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and U.S. troops still occupy the country. Washington claims it has returned sovereignty to a legitimate Iraqi government, but that is not the opinion of many Iraqis. Although the Bush administration once declared that most of the suicide bombers and many insurgents were foreigners controlled by al-Qaida-affiliated Abu Masab Zarqawi, field commanders now tell the Pentagon that Iraqi nationalists opposed to the foreign presence fuel the insurgent ranks.

As in Afghanistan, the United States is intent on changing the political and social structure of Iraq. Unlike Afghanistan, however, Iraq has power centers—religious, ethnic, and tribal—around which people have rallied. The national assembly chosen in the January 30 ballot was a victory for Iraq and a defeat for the Bush administration's plans to install a governing body that would give U.S. companies control of Iraq's oil and permit the Pentagon to establish permanent bases.

Washington's hope is that by solidifying a long-term presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan it can overwatch Pakistan—an unstable country possessing nuclear weapons and where power is usually transferred by *coup d'etat*—and can project its influence deep into Central Asia's former Soviet republics. And with tens of thousands of troops and "enduring bases" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait, Washington will attempt to intimidate Iran, can keep Saudi Arabia's oil on a security tether, and may threaten an attack on Syria unless it leaves Lebanon.

Meanwhile, the United States persists in tolerating, working with, and supporting both economically and militarily several authoritarian regimes in Asia and the Persian Gulf. In his most recent State of the Union Address to Congress and the U.S. public, President Bush merely chided Saudi Arabia and Egypt for not moving further along the road of democracy. Meanwhile, at the behest of non-democratic foreign leaders, Washington has included on its list of terrorist organizations some movements that

are fighting to defeat repression (e.g., the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and is considering adding groups such as Hezbollah and other Palestinian organizations, even though they pose no direct threat to the United States. And now there is a new category on the State Department list: "pop up" groups that commit one or more acts of "terror" and then dissolve—circumstances that suggest these groups are more criminal than terrorist.

Proliferation of Missiles and Nuclear Weapons

As with terrorism, the United States exercises a double standard regarding the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Washington condones the continued possession of nuclear weapons by Britain, France, and Israel; it accepts the arsenals in Russia, China, India, and Pakistan, because it cannot eliminate them; but it denies even the option for nuclear energy development in countries where relations are strained, contending that these countries will inevitably try to develop nuclear weapons. This latter case is seen most acutely in Iran and North Korea.

The United States also appears to forget its own energy history. In categorically rejecting Tehran's claim that nuclear power use curbs domestic petroleum consumption, allowing Iran to conserve its exportable reserves, Washington ignores the fact that the United States established its first nuclear power plant while America was still the world's largest petroleum producer.

By refusing to join direct European Union-Iran talks and by discounting the agreement between Moscow and Tehran authorizing Russia to provide fuel for and re-possess spent fuel from Iran's nuclear reactor, Washington shows that it is not serious about finding an equitable solution to the Iran impasse. Instead, President Bush seems bent on punishing Iran for exercising its treaty-guaranteed right to develop a peaceful nuclear energy program, judging from comments made during his late February 2005 trip to Europe. The president first said that diplomacy is just beginning, and then, with a grin, he added that "all options are on the table." From Iran's perspective, all options for defending itself from U.S. incursions—whether CIA agents and spy drones or special operations soldiers—are also on the table.

Similarly, Washington seems intent on depriving North Korea of the economic development assistance promised in the 1994 Agreed Framework. Hostility toward North Korea was displayed early in President Bush's first term when he expressed loathing for the Kim Jung Il administration. This animosity created an unfavorable atmosphere for negotiations in the six-party talks and eventually led to Pyongyang's decision to reprocess spent fuel rods into plutonium for nuclear weapons. However, contrary to claims by both sides, North Korea may still have only a handful of usable nuclear devices, since such weapons require close, skillful monitoring to avoid deterioration. Unlike the sale of missiles, this may be a factor in the apparent absence of exports of a complete nuclear weapon by Pyongyang.

The White House claims that North Korea possesses a ballistic missile—the Taepo Dong-2—that can reach U.S. soil with a nuclear warhead. How it judges this capability is unknown, since the missile has never been test-fired: only its predecessor has been tested, and in that test the third (orbital package) stage failed to function. Given Washington's unfriendly attitude toward Pyongyang, the U.S. military's presence in South Korea, and the U.S. refusal to provide an unnuanced pledge that it will not invade North Korea, current tensions between the two parties will likely persist.

Despite U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military pressures, a "regime change" in North Korea or Iran is not likely to happen. In fact, Bush's sanction efforts may produce gains for anti-U.S. factions in the June 2005 Iranian election. If this occurs, the new rulers in Tehran may step up their support both for Hezbollah in Palestine and for anti-American forces in Iraq.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

Chinese leaders have a growing sense that influential members of the U.S. administration and Congress view China as the emergent great-power competitor of the early 21st century. CIA Director Porter Goss was quite explicit about this when he

stated that "Beijing's military modernization and military buildup is tilting the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait." Apparently, only the United States is permitted to modernize its military. It's okay for America to install a missile defense system, acquire a new class of nuclear submarines, develop new "stealthy" airplanes, and amass stockpiles of "precision" weapons. Yet of the four modernizations that the PRC is pursuing, military modernization is last priority. In fact, by the end of 2005, the United States plans to boost its military forces by 33,000 and wants to double its special operations cadre, while China will complete a cut of 700,000 troops over two years bringing the People's Liberation Army forces to under two million. In all, the annual U.S. military budget currently exceeds half a trillion dollars (compared to the PRC's $50-60 billion).

Above and beyond this 10-to-1 disparity and despite Beijing's protests, Washington is trying to force Taiwan to accept and pay for $18 billion in new "defensive" weapons. The PRC considers Taiwan's status an internal concern of the Chinese people, who need no "assistance" from other countries. The February 20, 2005 joint declaration by the Japanese foreign minister and U.S. defense secretary that the state of affairs in the Taiwan Strait is a "common strategic objective" was an attack on the unified sovereignty of China, which both the United States and Japan have acceded to under the "one China" policy.

And U.S. provocations do not end there. In addition to annual State Department funding of the American Institute of Taiwan—transparently an unofficial embassy—Washington reportedly plans to send military officers to Taiwan as official representatives of the Pentagon. For years, many in Congress have advocated UN membership for Taiwan, though this status is granted only to legitimate national governments. And this year, five members of the House of Representatives have introduced legislation demanding that the Bush administration restore full and official diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Such a move would embolden Chen Shui-bian, who so far has been dissuaded from declaring Taiwan's independence both by the better judgment of the Taiwanese people and by the insistence of the PRC on the island's peaceful reunification with the rest of China.

The Bush administration hopes to turn China and Japan against each other. But China is now Japan's number one trading partner, and China has opened its doors to Japanese investments. Japan also recognizes China's role in facilitating the six-party talks with North Korea over the latter's purported nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs.

Russia

President Vladimir Putin's Russia was singled out by both CIA chief Goss and President Bush as a country of concern. The CIA director cited both the continuing insurgency in Chechnya and inadequate safeguards at many facilities housing weapons of mass destruction as lethal opportunities for terrorists.

But perhaps of equal concern to Putin as he looks out from the Kremlin is the encroachment of NATO and U.S. tentacles into Moscow's "near abroad." No sooner were the Baltic States included in the Western alliance than NATO aircraft were sent to patrol the newly incorporated airspace. The obvious question both then and now is: Who does NATO see as an opponent in the region that necessitates defensive air patrols? Also of concern to Putin is the new president of Ukraine, Viktor Yuschenko, who is expected to enlarge contacts with the West, perhaps going beyond the NATO Partnership for Peace program to press for full NATO membership followed, eventually, by membership in the European Union (EU).

Putin sees U.S. encroachment into Central Asia as part of a new encirclement, but he can do little to counter it. All five of the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—eventually joined the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, first formed by Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in 1991), through which Moscow intended to exert political and military influence over the former Soviet republics. This was followed in 2003 by the Common Economic Space (CES), Putin's answer to the EU. The Russian leader hoped the CES would reestablish trading patterns prevalent during the Soviet era. But Ukraine's turn toward the West was

followed by a call from President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan for a separate economic Central Asian Union, effectively ending the CES and reducing Moscow's influence to backroom political dealings not unlike its abortive interference in Ukraine's recent election.

By chiding Putin for backsliding on implementing democracy in Russia, President Bush is at once accurate and hypocritical. In Central Asia, both the United States and Russia have ignored the human rights records of the former communist bosses who inherited the presidencies of four of the five republics when the USSR disintegrated. Washington is reportedly funneling support for "democratic" opposition movements in the Central Asian countries through nongovernmental organizations, threatening the rule of the autocrats. Kyrgyzstan President Askar Akayev commanded widespread popular support in 1990 but has subsequently become as autocratic as his neighbors and is a factor in the most recent test of wills between the White House and the Kremlin for influence in Central Asia. In line with his worldwide declaration, Bush is pushing his democracy agenda and Putin is trying to deflect it, as he has done in Russia by closing opposition media, appointing regional governors rather than continuing to hold elections for these posts, and arresting political and economic opponents.

For the most part, Russian military modernization has been hampered for a decade by worsening economic conditions. Two exceptions are anti-terrorist operations and intercontinental nuclear missiles, which have become a fundamental element in the Kremlin's military planning. Like their U.S. counterparts, Russian special operations forces are engaged in the "war on terror," though their scope is concentrated within Russia and areas of Chechnya. But even close to home, Putin's ability to act pales in comparison to Bush's. The White House can deploy CIA agents and special forces on secret missions anywhere in the world without permission from the government of the country in question.

The Rest of the World

"Our policies in the Middle East fuel Islamic resentment." That admission by DIA Director Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby applies everywhere that Washington tries to impose its will on governments and peoples under the guise of "spreading freedom and democracy." Polls in four countries with the largest Muslim populations—Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India—reveal significant pluralities (if not outright majorities) who admire Osama bin Laden, are suspicious of U.S. motives, or feel that U.S. foreign policy is anti-Muslim.

Moreover, U.S. actions and policies are creating tensions and fostering resentments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Administration promises of economic aid have either not been fulfilled by Congress or have been tied to conditions that are defined and evaluated by Washington (e.g., "good governance," transparency and accountability, and the rule of law). Potential recipient governments must meet these conditions to be considered for U.S. aid. (These requirements do not apply to certain "friendly" states such as Nepal, where the king dissolved the government and seems set to rule by decree for the indefinite future, and Pakistan, where President Pervez Musharref's support for the U.S. "global war on terror" has earned him virtual immunity from "inconvenient" restrictions.) Yet Vice Admiral Jacoby acknowledges that "economic and political disenfranchisement" is a prominent factor exploited by terrorist groups to gain new recruits.

Such U.S. coercion has come to be expected whenever countries pursuing their legitimate national defense interests conclude arrangements not subject to Washington's veto. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is intensely disliked by the Bush administration and was recently almost a coup victim due to U.S. displeasure. In purchasing jets from Brazil and rifles, helicopters, and jets from Russia, Caracas contends that it is merely replacing 50-year-old weaponry with systems that do not introduce new military capabilities, but the message of such military independence is not lost on Washington.

Conclusion

Given continued generous funding for the Pentagon, it appears the United States will continue to rely on a militarized response to most disputes with countries and international blocs it considers unfriendly. Although outright armed conflict will not be the first or even the preferred option, America will attempt to extend its Cold-War system of military bases into countries and regions newly accessible in the post-Cold War and post-September 11, 2001 world. Washington's ultimate objective appears to be a new containment model that seeks to keep Russia weak, to prevent China from emerging as a peer rival, and to secure unlimited U.S. access to world energy supplies.

What the White House seems incapable of recognizing is that an impetuous U.S. presence in many of these regions—usually in the form of military forces or trainers—is more likely to defeat freedom and democracy than enable it. Ironically, though the United States is perhaps the clearest example of the power of markets, commerce, trade, and travel to promote democracy and ensure freedom, the Bush administration apparently does not trust the capacity of these forces to work, over time, in other countries. Instead it trusts only military force.

To be truly free, a people must not feel intimidated; they must, in fact, be able to choose to be "unfree"—at least to reject Western concepts that do not accord with local culture. Democracy thrives only when it is chosen freely, administered justly, and exercised transparently. As one foreign observer so aptly stated, what his country wants—what the world must have—from the United States is respect.

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