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William H. Overholt

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Inertia of Foreign Policies

The new in history always comes when people least believe it.

—Paul Tillich¹

The Cold War ended at the beginning of the 1990s, but the Cold War security structures have largely persisted. Across the Atlantic, mutual U.S.–European Union interests have drastically declined since the collapse of the Soviet Union. European behavior, particularly that of France and Germany, toward the United States has drastically changed, but NATO remains the core security structure. This creates tensions between the expectations, interests, and institutions of the old order and the realities of behavior in the new era. As James Thomson has said about the U.S.–European strategic partnership, “Strategic partnerships, alliances and international security institutions have their roots in shared perceptions of both interests and the threats to them. . . . When the perceptions diverge, as they now have, the institutions themselves are undermined.”² Specifically, he argues, the U.S.–European partnership was rooted in a half-century of mutual struggle against Germany and a half-century of mutual struggle against the Soviet Union, and those overriding common interests have vanished.

In Asia, one sees the same thing. A structure built to defend Asia against the Soviet Union, and for a while against the Sino-Soviet alli-

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952, p. xxvi.

² James Thomson, “US Interests and the Fate of the Alliance,” *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 4, Winter 2003–04, pp. 207–208.

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ance, still persists four and a half decades after the Sino-Soviet alliance collapsed and one and a half decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is no obvious reason why a set of institutions created to defend the periphery of Asia against the predations of the Soviet Union should be optimal for the new era. Some strategists jump to the assumption that China now fills the old Soviet shoes, but that is a case to be argued, not a self-evident reality. Is the assumption realistic, or is it an excuse for Cold War institutions to avoid the consequences of obsolescence?

The history of great foreign-policy doctrines and their associated institutions shows that they tend to develop great inertia during the time when they fit the strategic environment, and this inertia carries them well into new eras when they may no longer be appropriate.³ Thus, for instance, the No Entangling Alliances strategy presented in President Washington's farewell address⁴ became deeply ingrained in the American consciousness in the 18th century and continued to affect U.S. thinking prior to World War I, leaving the nation insufficiently prepared for that conflict. It then encouraged excessive demobilization after both world wars, leaving the nation inadequately prepared for both World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Many lives were lost because of the inertia of an archaic concept.

Likewise, the U.S. Open Door Policy in China served the nation's interests well at the beginning of the century, but eventually

³ For a more systematic view of this phenomenon, see William H. Overholt and Marylin Chou, "Foreign Policy Doctrines," *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Winter 1974. That research arose out of a three-volume study I managed at Hudson Institute for the U.S. Department of Defense to ascertain the implications of the Nixon Doctrine for the U.S. posture in Asia many years later. The study, entitled "The Future of the Nixon Doctrine," was completed in 1972. Its core argument, widely ridiculed at the time, was that the political future of the region would be largely shaped by a great wave of economic development. A small part of that analysis was later approved for journal publication (see William H. Overholt, "The Rise of the Pacific Basin," *Pacific Community*, July 1974).

⁴ "Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice? It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." (George Washington, farewell address, September 17, 1796.)

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it simply lost touch with the reality of Chinese weakness and Japanese aggression.

These great doctrines comprise core ideas that become regarded as axiomatic (e.g., the United States is better off leaving the Europeans to fight their evil battles themselves) and great institutions that implement or affect those ideas. The institutions include alliances such as NATO or the U.S.-Japanese alliance, other consequential organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), informal but institutionalized relationships such as the U.S. relationships of cooperation with various Southeast Asian countries or the pattern of hostility between China and Japan, and institutionalized relationships between interest groups and government organizations.⁵

With the onset of the Cold War, the United States organized itself around the Truman Doctrine: “It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”⁶ This was interpreted in the National Security Council’s NSC 68, the great 1950 formulation of Cold War policy toward the Soviet Union, as requiring containment, defined as “a policy which seeks, by all means short of war, to . . . block the further expansion of Soviet power.” In the aftermath of the Korean War, which began in June 1950, the doctrine came to be interpreted as using all means, including war, virtually everywhere in the world. This served the country well in most of the world, including all the most important places such as Western Europe and Japan. Eventually, however, the same doctrine and institutions were applied to Vietnam, where much of the population did not see itself as under attack by Soviet subjugators, many of the military techniques that worked elsewhere were inapplicable, and support in public opinion and among U.S. allies proved inadequate to the task.

The searing pain of the Vietnam War gave rise to a fundamental alteration of the Truman Doctrine, namely the Nixon Doctrine:

⁵ I use the word “institution” in a very broad sense. Its ordinary usage is also quite broad—it refers to organizations such as banks as well as to stable, systematized relationships (e.g., the institution of marriage).

⁶ President Harry Truman, addressing a joint session of Congress, March 12, 1947.

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First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments.

Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.

Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. *But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.*⁷ (Italics added.)

This effort to shift the defense burden to allies has centrally informed U.S. policy in Asia and (with some lapses such as the second Iraq war) elsewhere ever since. It provides the moving spirit behind the George W. Bush administration's vigorous efforts to get Japan to vastly extend the role and geographical scope of the Japanese military. The initial thrust of getting allies to pay for their own defense has, however, evolved into an effort to get allies such as Japan and Britain to shoulder military burdens that may be far from themselves (e.g., in Iraq) and offensive rather than defensive. That evolution, long after the evaporation of the threats that inspired the doctrine, may now be causing problems of its own.

To say that the institutions formed to support these great foreign policies, these foreign-policy doctrines, develop inertia is a bloodless statement that drains away the importance of the phenomenon. In support of these policies, we build great institutions such as NATO. We mold powerful institutions like the U.S. Army and think tanks in specific ways that support these policies. Great industries and politically influential unions arise to support the needs of these institutions by supplying everything from armament to propaganda. We indoctrinate our people to understand that good lies on one side and evil on another. Of necessity, we raise the perceptions of good and evil within certain institutions (the military, the diplomatic corps) to the point

⁷ The Nixon Doctrine was first enunciated on July 25, 1969. This version is from a speech by President Richard Nixon on November 31, 1969.

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where large numbers of people are prepared to risk death in order to support good against evil. The result is momentum that is anything but bloodless. Outside of certain rarefied circles, to call into doubt the continuing relevance of NATO or the U.S.-Korea or U.S.-Japan alliance is dangerous heresy.

Nonetheless, times change. For the first half of the 20th century, right-thinking Americans understood that China was good and Japan was evil. Today only historians and old folks remember the depth of that conviction, but in that era, even our most respected social scientists traced the roots of Japanese authoritarianism to deep, resilient cultural traits rooted in child-rearing. The most famous anthropologist of that era, Ruth Benedict, began her seminal book about Japan in this way: “The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle. In no other war with a major foe had it been necessary to take into account such different habits of acting and thinking . . . we were fighting a nation fully armed and trained which did not belong to the Western cultural tradition. Conventions of war which Western nations had come to accept as facts of human nature did not exist for the Japanese.”⁸ In other words, according to Benedict and to the conventional wisdom of the era, the Japanese were dangerous aliens, and their dangerous alienness was deeply rooted in their culture.

For the second half of the 20th century, good and evil in Asia reversed themselves. Now right-thinking Americans came to understand that Japan was inherently good and China inherently evil. Japan was inherently pacifist and democratic, with interests eternally aligned to the United States. For much of the Cold War, Americans perceived China as a nation of blue ants, of soldiers agreeable to human-wave attacks against overwhelming odds, of women who didn’t mind dressing in dowdy clothes to serve the goal of equality, of Beijing citizens who voluntarily came out in winter and swept the snow in unison.⁹

⁸ See, for instance, Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, p. 1.

⁹ The civic-minded snow-sweeping was recounted with considerable admiration in the U.S. press at the time of Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972. Contrary to the impression of

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I still recall, not long after Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China, one of my colleagues at Hudson Institute, Marylin Chou, recounting a trip to Beijing, where she observed more than once a young Chinese girl sneaking out with her boyfriend to a park in early morning, looking around to ensure that nobody was watching, and pulling off the top of the dowdy Mao suit briefly so that the boyfriend could take a picture of her in a pretty pink sweater. Then the Mao suit went quickly back on before the authorities could notice. For us, this was important, riveting information: Chinese girls were, after all, seemingly not microcosms of their autarkic, politically closed society; in crucial ways, they were a lot like American girls. It is now profoundly embarrassing that we regarded such an observation as a blinding insight, but at the time, reasonably intelligent people saw it as just that. Fifteen years after 1985, when the change in Chinese clothing really started for adults, there were a half-billion Chinese girls wearing colorful outfits, often with American logos. Not only do the Chinese women wear attractive sweaters, the educated urban ones talk about politics and sex, and they surf the Internet much as their American counterparts do. Nonetheless, as I lectured about China in 2005, I continued to unearth in many quarters residues of the Cold War assumptions that Chinese are inherently anti-American, that Chinese culture is inherently mysterious and difficult to penetrate, or that Japanese are inherently peaceful and inherently submissive to America's bidding for the indefinite future. Above all, there was an assumption of an unbridgeable gap between China's political system and the democracies—in particular, a gap that can be bridged only by some kind of collapse. This assumption is completely belied by the evolution of Taiwan and Singapore, among others, but nonetheless it is deeply held.

Institutional impositions lead everywhere to cultural caricatures. Maoist autarky and political repression led Americans to think that Chinese people are culturally xenophobic and difficult to connect with. The reality is the opposite; the cultures of coastal China are diverse, cosmopolitan, and welcoming to foreigners. Only in India, the

U.S. leading newspapers, the snow-sweeping was, of course, rigorously enforced, not voluntary civic-mindedness.

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United States, and a few western parts of Europe does one find similar cosmopolitan cultures and such a lack of xenophobia. Similarly, the U.S.-imposed Peace Constitution of Japan led to a Western view of Japanese culture as inherently pacifist and unaggressive. As a description of the overwhelming majority of the Japanese people (and most other peoples), that is certainly accurate, but it disguises the fact that as the Cold War began, the United States reinstalled a Japanese national-security elite, previously removed by General Douglas MacArthur, that included some very tough characters whose successors remain influential. Likewise, as I write this, a well-known American professor has just posted a comment on the Internet attributing the behavior of Japanese during the bubble years to a cultural tendency toward speculation; he clearly didn't live in Thailand during the property boom or in Silicon Valley during the technology boom. It is difficult to strip away such cultural caricatures, but we must, because they affect the way congressmen and generals think about vital foreign-policy issues.

The inertia of old foreign-policy institutions and beliefs is a normal, universal phenomenon. Like billiard balls, old institutions and old ideas roll inexorably forward until they hit a wall. When they do hit a wall, they often reverse quite suddenly. This is what happened with American views of Germany after World War II: Nearly a half-century of views of Germany as that time's evil empire, with political authoritarianism bolstered by an authoritarian family structure, slammed into the desperate need for German support against Soviet expansion, and this led to a rapid updating of images and institutions to conform to the new reality.

The problem of obsolete and inaccurate caricatures affecting foreign policy is much more severe regarding Asia than it is regarding Europe, because Americans have less information about or contact with Japan and China than they do with Britain and Germany. We have already addressed the early perception of Japan as utterly alien. The history of U.S. perceptions of China offers even more examples.

During much of the period before 1949, we viewed Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang Party as the force of democracy, even though its organizational structure, authoritarian leadership, formative advisors

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(Joseph Stalin's representatives in China), economic structure, and much else were quite similar to those of the Communist Party.

When Chiang Kai-shek's government lost to the communists, disappointed Americans attributed this for quite some time to an understanding that the corrupt Guomintang forces had stolen villagers' rice and raped their women, while the more virtuous communists had not. In reality, the historical record shows only limited differences of virtue. The Guomintang won in the cities and was defeating the Communist Party in the countryside (the Long March), much as the Thai and Malaysian governments drove their communists into the distant boondocks. But then the Japanese invaded, focusing on the cities, and inadvertently tilted the balance toward the communists.¹⁰

Subsequently, Chiang Kai-shek's government in Taiwan again became associated in American minds with democracy, even though until the late 1980s it continued to have a slightly modified Leninist political structure, a modified socialist economic structure, and widespread belief at very high levels that "an eighteenth century ideology like liberalism could never defeat a nineteenth century ideology like Marxism."¹¹ In accordance with that belief, Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo was educated in Moscow, where he joined the Soviet Communist Party prior to becoming a highly repressive chief of internal security in Taiwan. Subsequently, driven largely by internal social changes, he midwived much of Taiwan's transition to democracy—a transition completed by his successors.¹²

¹⁰ The most popular account of the corruption of Chiang Kai-shek's Guomintang, albeit a latecomer to this theme, is Sterling Seagraves, *The Soong Dynasty*, New York: Harper & Row, 1985. While the Guomintang certainly was corrupt, the problem with Seagraves' implicit thesis is that the communists' behavior, including alliances with some of the same gangs, was not so very different. The most searching argument that the outcome of the civil war was determined not by issues of social support but rather by the Japanese intervention is the China chapter in Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966, chap. IV.

¹¹ This assertion was common among senior Guomintang officials and scholars alike during my visits to Taiwan in the 1970s.

¹² Under Chiang Ching-kuo, Taiwan came to allow the opposition party to be legal and to compete openly in a free election. But the Guomintang still controlled the island's major

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Thus, we had a half-century with one assumption (Japan inherently evil, China virtuous) and a half-century with the opposite assumption, sprinkled with radical misconceptions. How do we know whether the geopolitical architecture of Asia is evolving in ways that render obsolete some of the key assumptions and institutions of the Cold War era? Will Southeast Asia and Korea remain tied to an alliance of democracies, or will antipathy to Japan mean that they move away from a United States that ties itself ever more tightly to Japan? Will Japan remain a pliant ally, only a more useful one because we have persuaded it to rearm, or will a rearmed, more nationalistic, more self-confident Japan expel U.S. bases and set a potentially troublesome independent course for the first time since World War II? Will China's rise threaten us with an alien system, or is it conceivable that many of China's interests and policies and structures will one day align better with ours than those of some of our current allies?

One titillating incentive to address such questions is the increasing post-Cold War tendency for political and economic behavior to be inconsistent with Cold War presumptions. RAND's Charles Wolf ranked various countries on the degree to which they supported U.S. policies regarding seven major international issues. He found that "China, India, Pakistan and Russia are more closely aligned with U.S. policies and interests than France or Germany."¹³ That result may well have been affected by temporary issues, so we should not generalize it, but it is a useful warning that we are in a new era where preconceptions and reality may often diverge.

corporations and, through the government, controlled all banks and television stations. Therefore, as long as the Guomindang was unified, the opposition had no serious chance of winning a technically free election. Subsequent President Lee Teng-hui became the first indigenous, directly elected president. But he still exercised Leninist power over his party and abused that power to designate an unpopular successor, Lien Chan, as the party's candidate for president over the more popular James Soong. That split the Guomindang Party and allowed the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to win. Subsequent Guomindang mismanagement of its position dissipated its resources and popular support, thereby creating a situation in which subsequent elections would be not only free, but also fair.

¹³ Charles Wolf, "A Test to Determine Who's an Ally," *International Herald Tribune*, July 7, 2004 (http://www.iht.com/articles/2004/07/08/edwolf_ed3__0.php).

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Part of the answer to these questions is that they cannot be finally answered, so we will have to resort to scenarios based on whatever trends we can pin down. There is one certainty I can establish at the outset, however: A decade and a half after the end of the Cold War, this is definitely the time to ask such questions.