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Part Two of an Interview with General Larry D. Welch (USAF, Ret.), former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and former President and currently Senior Fellow of the Institute for Defense Analyses. In this installment, Gen. Welch discusses some imperatives of the current international strategic environment.

This is one of a series of interviews with key national security experts conducted by David Trachtenberg, Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy.

Q. How do you assess the current international strategic environment compared to the 1980s? Is Russia today as much of a threat to the West as the Soviet Union was then?

A. The complexity of the current international strategic environment is due to far more than the traditional focus on Russia's threat to the West. I once heard Dr. Kissinger declare something like: "The day will come when we look back on the Cold War with fond nostalgia." I don't believe that, and I doubt that Dr. Kissinger believed it, but his point is clear. While much of the world lived under the effective dictatorship of the Soviet government and there were periods of danger of massive human annihilation, it was a world that posed national security threats that we had come to understand. It was a world that was more predictable and changed only incrementally over time. It was a world in which our national security strategy and priorities, shared by our allies, were clear with the top priority being to deter attacks on the



United States or our allies by the Soviet Union. There was a single existential threat to the United States and our allies. The focus on that single threat was the priority and we clearly succeeded in dealing with that priority.

Now, the situation is far more complex. Russia and China both pose existential threats. The overriding continuing priority is deterring an attack with nuclear weapons from any nuclear power. Virtually everything else has evolved to some degree. With that evolution there is an unfortunate tendency to treat the threats from Russia and China as similar. This tendency is not useful in understanding the threats or formulating effective strategies to address them.

Similarities in Great Power Competitors

There are important similarities in the challenge presented by each. Perhaps the overriding similarity is the prime focus in both Russia and China. That focus is survival of the political regime. Both are great power competitors who view the United States as the greatest obstacle to achieving their regional and global objectives. The similarities include intense focus on increasing military power, rapid exploitation of technologies to undermine U.S. military advantages, economic coercion, other activity to intimidate and threaten nations within their region, disregard for international law and norms of behavior, and near continuous engagement in attacks at levels below armed conflict – gray zone operations. Gray zone operations are inherently more difficult for nations that operate within the rule of law and adhere to international standards of conduct. While we have little strategic experience in dealing with gray zone attacks, we clearly have advantages that we can exploit. These advantages include information technologies, cyber operations, global economic power, and global status. Further, we have allies. We need to overcome our reluctance to engage in the gray zone. Within the limitations of international law and accepted norms of behavior, we can and should engage in the full range of activities to counter adversary gray zone operations.

Differences in Great Power Competitors

Beyond addressing the similarities in the challenges posed by Russia and China, effective strategies to deal with the broader strategic challenge require that we understand and respond to the differences in political motivations, objectives, geopolitics, and national strengths and weaknesses.

Russia

Russia is a declining power with the leadership striving to retain or buttress a great power role. It is a nation beset by a level of corruption and inefficiency that has been so pervasive for so long the society simply accepts this as the way things are with minimum motivation to change. Without such motivation for change, there is little likelihood of reversing the decline. Lacking



diplomatic or economic power beyond European dependence on Russian natural gas and being devoid of allies, their strength is in national military power that presents a credible threat to others in the region. The regime is in the survival mode that, coupled with military power, makes them particularly dangerous. The West's approach to dealing with that danger includes economic sanctions with little or no effect on the interests of Russia's political leadership. It is useful to remind that the demise of the Soviet Union was due largely to economic failure. The world is fortunate that, with General Secretary Gorbachev in power, the result was a peaceful end to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. It would be foolhardy to rely on a similar response to national collapse with the current leadership in Russia.

That the current leadership is facing renewed internal political opposition could be viewed by the West as a positive development. The decline in the economy with GDP per capita slipping from over \$15,000 in 2012 to under \$10,000 in 2020 may exacerbate the Russian leadership's political challenge. Both developments are likely to further harden the resolve of the Russian political leadership. Any strategy to deal with the threat from Russia must include the persistent combined economic, political, and military power of the United States and our European and Asian allies. It must also consider the prime motivation of the political leadership in Russia to sustain the regime. This is particularly important in formulating realistic strategies.

A respected military strategist that I greatly admired emphasized that two critically important factors in formulating a strategy for dealing with adversary objectives are the stakes and the capabilities to protect those stakes. Given that, when uneven stakes are buttressed by matching uneven capabilities, the likelihood of a result to our advantage is slim. That advice simply recognizes reality. That reality applies to the Russian response to their perception that Georgia was turning to the West. Both the disparity in stakes and in capability to protect those stakes made the outcome of Russia's support for the breakaway ethnic Ossetians and Abkhazians impervious to Western intercession. Twelve years after the Russian occupation of the breakaway ethnic entities, the recent attempt to change this new status quo failed again. The West had ample information to understand that Russia's political leadership saw and would continue to see change in the status quo in its relationship with Georgia or Ukraine as a threat to the regime. It should have been foreseeable that the threat of Ukraine joining the European Union would lead to a violent response. These experiences should teach us that Russia's red lines are real and that sustaining the position of the political leadership is the ultimate red line.

Hence, the outcome of a political collapse in a nation with the military power of Russia may be far more dangerous to the world than continuing to patiently manage the current challenges with the clear understanding this is not a short-term challenge. It requires a realistic strategy, renewed attention to the relationship at multiple levels, and attention to the long game. It also requires assured deterrence and unquestioned military strength. The needed military strength must include a balanced multi-domain force of land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace combat



capabilities since the United States and our allies are facing this full set of capabilities in Russia's military forces.

China

In contrast to Russia, China is a rising power pushing for regional dominance and increased global power and influence. While the economy in Russia is in continuing decline and the regime is under growing internal pressure, neither applies to China. In the same eight-year period with more than a one third decline in GDP per capita in Russia, China experienced a 62 percent increase. As to the stability of the regime in China, Xi Jinping has added more than a dozen titles to his roles as President and General Secretary of the Communist Party. Each added role provides additional authorities. Further, scrapping presidential term limits in 2018 may be a step towards "president for life" for Mr. Xi. In any case, China's political leadership has the economic resources and internal political stability to pursue their regional and global goals with confidence. At the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) 19th national congress, Mr. Xi announced that their global goals include becoming a top innovative nation by 2035 and a global power by 2050. This set of goals is typical of the long game approach of China's political leadership. Further, it is apparent that that leadership is confident they are on the path to those goals. Some China analysts in the United States believe they will achieve both goals well before those dates. It should be apparent that we are dealing with a set of challenges with China that are fundamentally different from those from Russia and our strategy must be accordingly different.

In formulating a strategy, it is useful to assess relative strengths and weaknesses. The growth of China's economy is impressive. Still, in GDP per capita adjusted for purchasing power, China's economy is only about a fourth of that of the United States. An important advantage of the United States is our allies. This combination, U.S. economic strength, the power of allies, and proven U.S. leadership sustains a wide U.S. economic and political advantage.

Any armed conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) will be vastly different than with Russia. There will be no massed ground maneuver forces facing each other. General MacArthur advised President Kennedy, "Anyone wanting to commit ground troops to Asia should have his head examined." As applied to conflict with China, that remains good advice. At present, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) ground force strength is almost a million soldiers on active duty. This can be a threat to India and was an important issue in the Korean conflict but has little relevance to the current U.S. challenge from China. Their ground forces are at least as directed at internal security as at foreign threats. Armed conflict with China will be predominantly conflict in the maritime, air, space, and cyberspace domains. China's advantage in the maritime and air domains is proximity. The most worrisome hot spot, Taiwan, is less than 100 miles from the China mainland but 1,700 miles from the U.S. airbase in Guam and 5,000 miles from Honolulu. The U.S. Naval presence



in the region is a powerful force but the balance is changing. The point is that regarding Taiwan, the stakes and capabilities to protect those stakes are heavily weighted for China. At the same time, the consequence of a U.S. failure to prevent a PRC invasion of Taiwan could do enormous damage to allied confidence in the United States. This means that an effective strategy to deal with that situation cannot be a U.S. led military defense of Taiwan against a PRC invasion. Instead, there must be other approaches to make the cost not worth the gain. That includes the need to make it clear to the political leadership in Taipei that provoking an attack by the PRC will have a near certain outcome that will not serve Taiwan's interests.

The Technology Imperative

The first announced goal by Mr. Xi at the CCP 19th national congress, to become an innovative leader by 2035, carries a focus on technology. This can strongly impact both economic and military advantages. While U.S. technical superiority remains an advantage, China is moving faster with more focus and our advantage is shrinking. The reason for the shrinking advantage is not because of any inherent advantage in their system. It is because the U.S. drive for technical superiority, once led by the Department of Defense, has been smothered in process, layers of decision and oversight, and unwillingness to take risks. To illustrate, in the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. Air Force considered that a useful increment of military capability should be delivered in five to seven years followed by increments of increased capability in follow-on models. The nation delivered on that expectation. The F-15 was delivered in seven years; the F-16 in six. In both cases, the initial capability was followed by incremental improvements that made the systems more and more relevant to the changing environment and operational need. The five-to-seven-year goal was dictated by the technology and operational horizon. Now the technology horizon is much less than five years, and the operational horizon is certainly no longer, yet it takes twice as long to deliver new systems. The same is true of naval aviation and space systems. We will lose our technology advantage unless we address this urgently and effectively. If we lose the technology advantage, it will be followed by losing the military advantage.

The Overriding Existential Threat

There is an additional dimension to the United States-China great power competition that is not relevant to competition with Russia. That dimension is the efficacy of governance and the benefits to the governed. More specifically, which best serves the governed, representative democracy or competent autocracy? President Joe Biden has declared that Xi Jinping is betting democracy can't keep up with autocracy and that proving the Chinese leader wrong is key to the survival of the United States. Chinese scholars point out that the United States did not become a fully representative democracy until somewhere between the 19th Amendment in 1920 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In the eyes of China's leadership and perhaps elsewhere in the world, that is not long enough to assume that representative democracy will survive



unless carefully nurtured and protected. This is perhaps the overriding existential threat to the United States.

Conclusion

While the United States and allies face a complex set of threats and challenges from gray zone conflict to the threat of nuclear annihilation, understanding the reality and implications of renewed and expanding great power competition is of paramount importance. It is not useful to attempt to prioritize the challenges presented by China over those from Russia or vice versa. These are fundamentally different threats. One with declining economic and international political power whose failure as a nation threatening the political regime could result in their cataclysmic use of military power. The other is a rising power with growing economic and political power and confidence they are on the path to their goals of regional dominance and global influence matching or surpassing that of the United States. These two threats are so different that effective strategies to deal with them will have little in common beyond the need for an effective strategic nuclear deterrent and allies that come together to provide increased levels of regional multi-domain strength.

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