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## America's superpower status is about to end

By Gwynne Dyer

**03/30/05 "Cincinnati Post"** - - Assume that the people who run defense and foreign policy in the Bush administration are as ferociously intelligent as they think they are.

What would their grand strategy be?

The very phrase "grand strategy" has a antiquated ring; enlightened modern opinion rejects the notion that relations between the great powers are just a zero-sum game. But this is a group of people who are steeped in traditional modes of strategic thought: Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Stephen Hadley and Condoleezza Rice would all have worked quite comfortably for Cardinal Richelieu or Count Bismarck. (Whether they would have been hired is, of course, another question.)

They are, in addition, patriotic Americans who are firmly convinced that U.S. power is an instrument for good in the world. And they all know that the days of the United States as the world's sole superpower are numbered.

They must know it. They cannot be unaware of the statistics the rest of us know: a Chinese economy that has been growing over twice as fast as the U.S. economy for almost two decades now, and an Indian economy that has been growing at around twice the U.S. rate for almost a decade already.

And they surely understand the magic of compound interest.

China's economy will overtake that of the United States in one long generation if current trends continue. (Goldman Sachs predicted in 2003 that Chinese GDP would surpass that of the U.S. in 2042.) India, starting later and growing slightly slower, will not reach the same milestone for a further decade or more, but both Asian giants will be nipping at America's heels long before that. And economic power is the source of most other kinds of power.

Per capita income in China and India will still be much lower than that of the United States, but it will not be that low: Goldman Sachs predicts a Chinese per capita income in 2042 comparable to that of Western Europe today. Combine this wealth with populations that will be three or four times bigger than that of the United States in the 2040s, accept that there is unlikely to be any remaining innovation gap, and Washington will be facing a formidable pair of strategic rivals.

Most people are not panicked by this future because they assume that there will no longer be a Communist regime in China 35 years from now, and they know that India is a democracy already. There is nothing in either country's history or current behavior to suggest that they would behave less responsibly than the existing great powers have done (though admittedly the bar has not been set very high). But seeing the United States reduced to only one great power among others cannot be a prospect that appeals to American strategic thinkers of a traditional bent - so what is their grand strategy for averting it?

They must have one. Paramount powers facing relegation always have one, although it rarely stays the same for long and it never, ever works.

In the past four centuries we have observed three other "sole superpowers" of the age slide down the slope of (relative) decline - Spain, France and then Britain - and none of them even came close to solving the problem: economics trumps everything else in the long run.

People who search for a long-term strategy in neo-conservative policies invariably end up thinking there is none, but that's because they are looking for coherence. They expect too much.

When strategists are confronted with an insoluble problem, they generally try to solve it anyway, and they are not above using irrational assumptions to stick the bits of rational analysis together.

Great powers on the brink of decline typically have incoherent and foredoomed strategies to ward off their fate, simply because no better strategies are available. "I have not become His Majesty's first minister to preside over the dissolution of the British empire," Winston Churchill harrumphed in 1940 - but from the Spanish armada of 1588 to the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956, the flailing efforts of paramount powers to ward off impending demotion from "superpower" status have generally just hastened the process.

How might this apply to the senior people inside the Bush administration? Some of them clearly believe exactly what they say, no matter how simplistic and delusional it may appear to outsiders, but others genuinely are strategic thinkers. These people

will not speak in traditional power-political terms in public - instead they will use the "terrorist threat" or any other excuse that comes to hand to justify their strategies - but they know about the coming erosion of American power and they will be desperately seeking ways to avoid it.

Is the invasion of Iraq, and the whole project of resurrecting Pax Americana that lies behind it, just such an attempt to head off impending relative decline by putting the U.S. back in the global driving seat, as much the "leader of the free world" as it was in the halcyon days of the Cold War? Very likely.

Will it work? Don't be silly. It never works: economics rules, and there is no way of stopping China and India from catching up with the current Lone Superpower short of nuking their entire economies.

And no: I don't think they'd do that. But their little adventure will almost certainly have the long-term effect of hastening America's relative decline. That sort of strategy usually does.

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