The Cold War has been won. History has ended. America is the only global superpower left. It is therefore time to sit back, relax and enjoy the richly deserved peace dividend. Such appears to be the view among many Americans, including not a few among top level policy analysts in the Administration.

The view from India (where I was a visiting Fulbright Scholar in spring 1999) looks very different. It sees China as an expansionist Asian power rapidly filling the vacuum created by the Soviet collapse and a threat to global peace in the 21st century. Buoyed by impressive economic development, China is modernizing its armed forces and is increasing its technical capability. It has bought weapons from the former Soviet Union. It has developed long-range missiles, some capable of hitting targets within the United States, not to talk of targets within much closer India. And, if reports of Chinese espionage of American nuclear facilities are to be believed, China has managed to miniaturize its nuclear arsenal. China now has the technical ability to fit multiple nuclear warheads onto a single missile tip.

China is an acknowledged exporter of arms around the globe. It has shipped sophisticated weapons to Pakistan, Iran and Libya. It is also a proliferator of nuclear technology. The Pakistani testing of nuclear bombs in May 1998 was aided by the Chinese; the Pakistani bomb is modeled after a Chinese device. Pakistan, which has fought three wars with India, is also the beneficiary of Chinese missile technology. The arms race in the Indian subcontinent is a direct result of the Chinese actions to extend its sphere of influence and to buy client states as allies.

China’s assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea is a direct threat to Taiwan and to its continued independence. It insists that Taiwan is a renegade province of Greater China. It ignores the fact that, over the past fifty years, Taiwan has evolved into a separate and distinct social, cultural and political entity. The crisis in Taiwan will come. It is only a matter of time.

China’s mistreatment of Tibet’s Buddhist population and its widespread abuse of Tibetan religious values has received recognition in the world press, thanks to the efforts of certain Hollywood celebrities, not to those of our enlightened leaders. China also continues to deal harshly with any opposition to the Communist regime from within its own citizens. On the 10th anniversary of the Tianamen Square massacre, the communist regime in China expresses no remorse for what it did in 1989.

Unless contained, China will emerge as the Asian superpower in the next ten to twenty years. India has reasons to fear. It lost a war to China in 1962. China continues to occupy large portions of Indian territory.
Instead of seeing the Chinese threat for what it is, the Clinton Administration wants to enter into a strategic partnership with Beijing. The Administration hopes that a policy of engagement with China will lead to a kinder, gentler communist regime in Beijing; this in turn would lead to security for Taiwan, autonomy for Tibet, good neighborliness with India, and the right of free speech for Chinese pro-democracy advocates. History does not bear this out. Expansionist regimes cannot be sweet-talked into mending their ways. Prime minister Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler failed. George F. Kennan’s policy of containment of the Soviet Union succeeded. We ignore history only to repeat it.

A policy of containment brings up bad memories of the protracted and ugly conflicts of the Cold War. But the threat that China’s emergence as an Asian superpower poses cannot be wished away. It will only get worse.

The United States should hedge its bets and support those regimes that can counterbalance the growing military power of China. India, Japan and Taiwan are such nations. India is a culturally pluralistic nation. At times it is a fractious democracy, a situation not too dissimilar from that in the United States. India has among the largest trained man- and woman-power in the world. Its pool of software engineers is among the largest in the world. With a population nearing 1 billion, it is also a huge market for the sale of U.S. goods. During last year’s visit to the U.S., the Indian Prime minister remarked that the United States and India were natural allies. Given the changing power equation in Asia, the United States will do well to look more closely at this natural alliance.

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