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Alternative Futures

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4-5 May 2009,
Washington, D.C.

Remarks prepared for the IHS Jane's U.S. Defense Conference,
"Meeting Security Challenges in the New Administration,"

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Any doubt among defense and security planners that they must make the study of alternative futures a key part of their portfolios should have been dispelled by the current global economic downturn and its likely long-term consequences, some of which are already coming into view. The rapid depletion of wealth will have a number of effects.

First, it will cause many actors to recalibrate their defense and security objectives and design strategies that accord with new limits on their capabilities. Second, some will look for partners whose additional weight might help them address objectives that are now sliding out of reach, but at the same time new alliances and relationships of convenience will also make them responsible for supporting someone else's objectives and strategies which hitherto was unnecessary, perhaps unwanted. Third, the downturn will push many actors to seek capabilities that fit their new budgets. Very likely, many will prefer defensive capabilities over offensive capabilities; some will look for cost-saving technologies; others will opt to balance better financed opponents with nuclear weapons.

While the downturn is global, not everyone will be affected the same. Some actors will surely find that in an era of general austerity, they have become *relatively* better off than their competitors because of natural advantages like superior geographic position, proprietorship of energy resources, a resilient economy or currency, or having had a decisive edge in capabilities or technologies before the current crisis hit. A worthwhile exercise—and one hopes that our intelligence services are far ahead of me on this—would be to assess the state of the global competition in terms of whose position has changed favorably relative to whom because of the global recession. This might give some advance warning of strategies that we do not now imagine but which will actually be empowered by this crisis.

Using these kinds of criteria for assessing relative advantage—geographic position, indigenous energy resources, a resilient economy, a decisive pre-crisis advantage in technology—it is difficult for me to deduce that the United States becomes less powerful relative to everyone else and quite easy to imagine that the existing power ratio in its favor will grow, perhaps substantially. Having a capable military with global reach should accelerate this redistribution of power, in my view. If this is true, then today's conventional wisdom about the decline or eclipse of U.S. power and of the emergence of a multi-polar world to replace America's unique position as the sole hyper-power are probably not just premature but badly off track. This assessment does not preclude the emergence of new power centers, but we should be cautious about ascribing relative weight to them that they are unlikely to attain.

That said, the United States, like most other actors, will certainly discover that the economic downturn has attached itself to existing or emerging crises in ways that render many actors incapable of dealing with them because they now lack adequate resources. I expect that many more states will dial 911 expecting that their call will be answered in Washington. But even the

United States, while relatively better positioned to project power and influence than most others, to adjudicate disputes or intercede between combatants, could easily find that its resources are insufficient to address the growing number of pleas for assistance coming in over the transom, or even to compete at full speed for all of America's vital interests. Consequently crises that might have been mitigated in less austere times will go unaddressed on the emerging security landscape; conflicts that might have been prevented, even wars, will take place; and the shape and dynamics of competitions that are familiar to us today will change in ways that we do not anticipate.

Can we forecast with confidence the outlines of some alternative futures for which we will need strategies? I believe we can, but with the usual caveat. No forecast should be accorded the status of inevitability or certainty; all should be scrutinized rigorously and challenged from many angles. With those cautions in mind, here are the outlines of four alternative futures that I consider possible, even probable. All, in my view, are likely to play out in the next 20-30 years, probably sooner. At a number of junctures and on a number of levels they might intersect or converge, which might accelerate the momentum of one or another, or, alternatively, create new dynamics and trajectories whose possible contours we should be contemplating now.

Alternative world number one is a world in which Russia declines and becomes dangerously assertive in the process. We already know a great deal about this Russia. For one, it is in a demographic death spiral that has it losing substantial population annually due to low birth rates, high mortality rates, disease, accidents and crippling life styles. Russia is old and sick, and will become more of both for the foreseeable future. It is hard to imagine how Russia could reverse this absolute decline; moreover, with an extended period of low energy prices, Russia will have little capital to improve its human position. Within several decades Russia is likely to decline to as few as 100-110 million people, according to some projections. Looked at another way, by 2030 it will have half the population of Pakistan.

Russia's physical collapse is the backdrop for other pathologies. The first is a pervasive sense of having been victimized by the West, and in particular by the United States, for and since the collapse of the Soviet Union: a predisposition that consumes the political spectrum in all directions, including the so-called liberal elite. The second is the devastating appraisal Russians make of their own society, which in their view is characterized by failure: corruption, poor leadership, a broken political process, and the accelerating erosion of Russians' dominance within their own state. The third, ironically, is the sense of hubris many Russians now have toward Europe and the United States following what they see as a highly successful operation against Georgia last August, during which they backed down the U.S., punched a hole in NATO's credibility, compromised the sense of security of energy pipelines that bypass Russia in Eurasia, put a scare into members of Russia's old empire and let them know that Russia's patience with them was at an end, and even sent a message to the Chinese, who are swarming over Eurasia in search of commercial opportunity, that Russia will contest any challenge to its dominance in what Russians consider to be their sphere of interest.

This powerful cocktail of physical degeneration, victimization, internal collapse and hubris suggests a mindset reminiscent of Japan in 1938 or of any number of states after WWI, even of the Roman Empire, if one wishes to go that far back. Russians are coming to understand that they have a short window of opportunity to establish a competitive position before the human resources they will need to compete for the long term become unsustainable. Today that window looks to be no more than two, perhaps three decades. Expect to see Russia maneuver aggressively within this window, and anticipate excessive risk-taking, miscalculation, and overreach.

The second alternative future is the disappearance of Europe as a serious global player on security issues. In fact, such a process has been going on for some time, as nearly every European country has conscientiously decided to go out of the military business. One need only look at their defense expenditure curves for the last few decades, which with only minor exceptions are all pointed downward, often sharply so. With few exceptions, European states can no longer project power far beyond their own borders, and given current defense priorities none is likely to be able to do so in the future. Increasingly they choose not to do so, in any case, or so constrain their troops when they become part of multinational force assignments, for example as part of the NATO contingent in Afghanistan, that it represents power projection in name only. Instead, Europe will be turned inward for the next few decades as it wrestles with slow economic growth and a prolonged recovery from the global recession, a severe demographic downturn that is making Europe smaller and older, changing ethnic balances that will result in many cities attaining Muslim majorities, and an EU structure that cannot respond to national interests while it fails to define a compelling common interest.

We should anticipate that not everyone will find satisfaction or safety in this decline. Interior European states—for example, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic states—will probably seek a more secure anchorage, especially as Russia becomes more assertive and the EU weakens. Turkey, too, will seek new attachments in the wake of its rejection by Europe, the most likely outcome, in my view. Their preferred partner will be the United States. But will American leaders seize the opportunity to create a new network of strong bilateral security alliances with key states like Poland and Turkey, or will they defer to the chimera of Europe? Regardless we should anticipate a new era of European statecraft, in which many states will seek an alternative to Europe while continuing to chant its mantras. The idea of Europe will hollow out, as will Europe's ability to act as a united entity on defense and security matters. Others, including the United States, will have to adjust their strategies to this growing vacuum. It is hard to see how Europe can remain America's partner of choice for global security engagement.

Just a few years ago, anyone suggesting the third alternative future on my list—a China that comes apart at its seams—was met with intense skepticism. Some analysts still treat it so, though I suspect with a bit more caution than before. In the last few years, before the economic crisis but now accelerated by it, China was showing signs of acute strain. Even as economic growth rates hovered above the 10 percent mark, China was experiencing structural economic problems that could not be overcome easily, for example in old manufacturing

industries and in the rural countryside. Today a host of economic and social problems have led to an unprecedented level of unrest in many parts of the country, with demonstrations of different sizes now numbering in the tens of thousands annually by the PRC's own count.

China's growth for the moment remains high compared to just about everyone else. But this may mask another reality. Chinese experts quietly note that anything less than about six and a half percent growth will be insufficient to absorb China's excess labor, satisfy the demands of the new middle class or to meet social entitlements, such as they are. And like Russia and Europe, China is in the early stages of its own demographic crisis featuring rapid ageing, a growing gender imbalance, and a looming public health catastrophe brought on by HIV/AIDS. Indeed, China's perverse demographics are changing the structure of the Chinese family and, hence, traditional support and kinship systems that have been key features of Chinese life for centuries.

Emerging China is in fact riven with fault lines that strong economic growth and an authoritarian political system have managed to disguise, but these dislocations will come increasingly into view in the next decade or so. Certainly this China is more fragile than the robust China most people had anticipated. China need not break into pieces or descend into chaos for its fragility to become a powerful driver of many strategies, its own as well as those of actors searching for competitive advantage against China.

The outlines of yet a fourth alternative future are looming in the Western Pacific, only this one will be driven largely the United States. This is a future in which American might is less visible, despite the U.S. having more power relative to everyone else. The poster child of this shrinking visibility is the U.S. Navy, which has been reduced today to fewer than 300 ships, less than half its size during the Reagan administration, and is rushing headlong toward 200 or fewer. While the defense debate in the United States has focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, that is on ground combat scenarios, the most challenging contingencies in the next several decades are likely to be maritime and in Asia. As my colleague Seth Cropsey has noted, "With the exception of piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden which have not stopped the pirates, the Navy has diminished in the public's awareness to an appendage whose mission today and in the decades ahead is unclear and whose role in assuring the future of the U.S. as a great power is dimly understood."

Meanwhile China's navy is plotting major damage to America's dominant maritime position in the Western Pacific through a significant naval expansion of its own. This includes buying conventional submarines from Russia and constructing at least four classes of conventional and nuclear-powered submarines. According to some analysts, if current shipbuilding rates are maintained on both sides of the Pacific, the Chinese submarine fleet will outnumber that of the U.S. by 5:1 in less than two decades. China is also building space systems necessary for effective command and control of a global fleet and its accompanying intercontinental power projection ability. It has improved its anti-ship ballistic missiles which can threaten U.S. ships at sea and, hence, the U.S. Navy's access to the Western Pacific.

Played out, this alternative future featuring a powerful Chinese anti-access strategy aimed at the United States would have dramatic implications for the ability of the U.S. to sustain vibrant alliances in Asia, especially with important allies like Japan and Australia; it could threaten Taiwan's current independence; it could increase pressure for the U.S. to vacate its position in Korea; and it would surely dampen the promising Indo-US strategic relationship. Competition for control of vital sea lanes and energy transport routes would likely intensify. One can easily imagine Japan responding to China eclipsing the United States in the Western Pacific by developing its own nuclear weapons, with all the consequences this might have for other nuclear aspirants in and around Asia. Asia's other states would be placed in a position of having to accommodate China in ways that they would not if the American navy were still visible and engaged. The unfolding of such a future is driven powerfully by America's decision to allow its navy to decline, even if its remaining ships are bristling with new and powerful capabilities. Presence and visibility keep this future at bay.

Allow me to conclude with several observations.

First, as I said in the beginning none of these futures is certain or inevitable. But all are plausible; we might even determine that several have reasonable probabilities based simply on the trend lines we can already see.

Second, each of these futures in its own way produces a strategic vacuum. In no case is it clear what power or combination of powers might fill them.

Third, I can imagine that any combination of these futures could unfold simultaneously, which could deepen the vacuums and alter their dynamics in unpredictable and surprising ways.