

Is the US plunging into '1

World Pol.

By Howard W French

The reflex to spend on the military in the United States in response to challenges of any or every kind is hard to cure, and may never be entirely overcome

ONCE upon a time, there was a superpower jealous of the unrelenting modernisation of its rival. Desperate to maintain some kind of parity, it spent and spent on its military — so much so that other needs went neglected, and it collapsed.

It may be time to update this tale, which like many fables has a strong element of truth to it, for today we could be reliving this story, albeit in surprisingly reconfigured terms.

For the next decade or two there will continue to be only one superpower in the world, the United States. China's rise to superpower status seems all but inevitable, but what is remarkable is that China is the country whose modernisation is unrelenting, while the United States, not even seriously challenged yet, appears tempted to follow the Soviet example.

Put another way, unless things are thought through more clearly, the United States could let insecurity undermine its self-confidence, plunging towards what the Chinese are fond of calling "an historical error".

This is why the latest Pentagon assessment of China's military strength, released last month, makes for such interesting reading. The 50-page report speaks of a China determined to achieve parity with the United States and to become "the pre-eminent power among regional states in East Asia".

One wonders, first, about the choice of language. What does the term "regional state" mean, for example?

And what, moreover, is unusual about China being the pre-eminent power in this part of the world — a position that has obtained throughout most of this country's long history?

More worrisome, though, is the thought that a report like this constitutes the opening elements in a drum roll intended to motivate the American taxpayer for a new round of military spending with a new putative enemy — or let's call it strategic rival.

The reflex to spend on the mili-

needs of the iron triangle.

The Pentagon document makes much of double-digit growth in Chinese military spending, but takes its time in making the point that the arms budget is growing more slowly than government spending overall. To be sure, China is no slouch in arms spending, committing \$35 billion to its military last year, or 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product, using official Chinese figures.

The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies gives a higher and probably more realistic estimate, putting Chinese military spending at 2.7 percent of GDP in 2003. This

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tary in the United States in response to challenges of any or every kind is hard to cure, and may never be entirely overcome. What is to be feared, though, as deficits mount and spending on other productive areas continues to be neglected, is that it could ultimately contribute to the country's downfall.

A paranoid would be tempted to suspect China of baiting the United States into an arms race — of using a classic game theory ploy to feign sweeping modernisation in order to get the Americans to overreact in ruinous ways. The problem is we've never needed encouragement to overindulge the

should be compared with American spending of 3.7 percent of GDP — a vastly larger GDP.

More interesting still is how China and the United States approach military spending. China, conscious of its daunting social needs, and more important, of the fact that "catching up" with the United States is not essentially a military endeavour, is building on the cheap. Advanced weapons systems are bought from Russia, rather than home grown. All sorts of things are cobbled together and reverse-engineered. Other items, like prohibitively expensive aircraft carriers, have

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been forgone altogether.

Contrast that with the Pentagon's penchant for extravagance on new weapons acquisition. Even where old weapons systems are concerned, self-denial often seems missing from the vocabulary.

As Leslie Wayne reported recently in *The New York Times*, even as America builds dubious new systems, like the \$200 million-per-unit C-17 Globemaster III cargo plane, Congress has prevented the retirement of old aircraft, from aging B-52 bombers to U-2 reconnaissance planes.

Space is often a proxy for military spending, and another area of

programme that is progressing brilliantly on a budget that wouldn't keep the whole of NASA functioning for a year?

NASA's budget for 2007 is \$16.8 billion. Officially, China has spent 19.3 billion yuan on space programmes of all kinds over the past 13 years. A dollar gets you roughly 8 yuan — unless you're in the space business.

The United States is planning for a China whose military strength will grow steadily in the years ahead. Taiwan, in particular, will remain a dangerous fault line, requiring both vigilance and consummate diplomatic skills on both sides.

But the question is whether the United States is wrong to understand that China's challenge is primarily military. It is in the realms of productivity, knowledge and ideas that the real jousting will take place over the next couple of decades.

In many ways, East Asia has still not emerged from the Cold War, with a Korea still divided, a Japan at odds with its neighbours over territory and history, and a China with a fast moulting economy and anachronistic political system.

Test China on the basis of its self-proclaimed "peaceful rise", to begin building a new security architecture in this part of the world that takes into account both countries' legitimate interests.

In the meantime, focus on modernising your economy, upgrading the skills of your workforce and polishing your ideas for the long competition ahead.

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traditional superpower competition. In this regard, the Chinese space programme provides another compelling example. There has been near panic in some Pentagon circles about suggestions by Chinese and American diplomats that the two countries should cooperate on exploration and research.

Voices warn about the risks of divulging precious, closely held technology. Here's a radical suggestion: embrace the Chinese request for cooperation so as to pry away one of Beijing's most valuable secrets. That is, how does China manage to put together a manned lunar exploration pro-