

January 9, 2017

War Gaming: Part I

(Due to Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Part II of this report will be published on January 23.)

One of the key elements of global hegemony is the ability of a nation to project power. Ideally, this means a potential hegemon needs local security. In other words, a nation that faces significant proximate threats will struggle to project power globally. As a general rule, it's easier to attack via land compared to the sea.

Rome's power base was the Italian peninsula. It only needed to defend the northern part of the land mass. Spain had a similar situation. The Netherlands was the global hegemon for a while but was always facing a land threat from France. Britain, being an island, was geographically ideal for superpower status; the last successful invasion of the British Isles was in 1066. Finally, the U.S. has managed to create an island effect on a larger land mass giving America more access to natural resources compared to Britain, making the U.S. a nearly ideal hegemon.

In Part I of this report, we will examine American hegemony from a foreign nation's perspective. In other words, if a nation wanted to attack the U.S. to either replace the U.S. as global superpower or to create conditions that would allow it to act freely to establish regional hegemony, how would this be accomplished? This analysis will begin by examining America's geopolitical position. As part of this week's report, we will examine the likelihood of a nuclear

attack and a terrorist strike against the U.S. In Part II, we will examine the remaining two methods, cyberwarfare and disinformation, discussing their likelihood along with the costs and benefits of these tactics. We will also conclude in Part II with potential market effects.

America's Geopolitics

The Americans are truly a lucky people. They are bordered to the north and south by weak neighbors and to the east and west by fish.

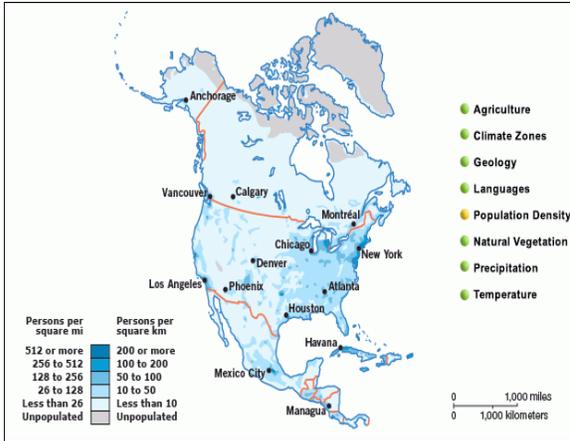
-- Otto von Bismarck



(Source: Wikipedia)

Although Bismarck's quote is accurate in terms of borders, this circumstance was less due to luck than design. Successive presidents took great care to expand U.S. territory in such a manner as to leave Canada and Mexico with less hospitable border environments. This can be observed on a map of North American population density. The map below shows population density in North America. Note the low

density along most of the Canadian/U.S. frontier as well as the lack of density along the Mexican border.



(Source: Wikipedia)

The U.S. pushed its northern border into areas that were less conducive to human development. Canada’s population mostly rests along the border with the U.S. and rapidly declines the further north one travels. The U.S. population is over nine times larger than Canada’s; Canada has 9.4 persons per square mile compared to 85.6 persons per square mile in the U.S. The opposite situation occurs with Mexico. Most of Mexico’s population lives in the southern parts of the state, with the northern desert region relatively unpopulated.

Essentially, the U.S. is surrounded by two neighbors that are no military threat and two oceans. Any nation attempting to launch a conventional military attack on the U.S. would not have any element of surprise. Attacking through either Mexico or Canada would be relatively easy to see coming and force the invader to cross difficult territory on the way to the battle theater. Coming by sea requires a long voyage that would likely be detected as well.

Since 1812, the U.S. has been able to engage the world without significant concern about

an attack on the mainland. Japan was able to successfully attack Hawaii and also capture islands that were part of Alaska. But, neither event was enough to seriously threaten the mainland. In the two world wars, the U.S. was able to launch sustained military operations against its enemies with little fear that its industrial base would be attacked.

The isolation of the U.S. makes it an ideal superpower. The U.S. can focus on power projection and use fewer resources for homeland defense. This gives America great power to influence the world and reduces potential enemies’ ability to prevent the U.S. from becoming involved in thwarting their goals.

So, if a foreign power wanted to dethrone the U.S., or, probably more likely, establish itself as a regional hegemon without U.S. interference, what attack options are available to such a power and what are the odds of success? We will examine four different options, assuming that a conventional attack isn’t possible, at least for the foreseeable future.

#1: Nuclear Strike

Since the U.S. used atomic weapons on Japan at the close of WWII, no other power has launched a similar attack. The world came close on a few occasions to a nuclear war—the Cuban Missile Crisis was a near miss—but, for the most part, global leaders have refrained from using these weapons.

During the Cold War, nuclear war doctrine evolved into one where the weapon became purely defensive. Essentially, nuclear powers can never be forced into unconditional surrender. If a nuclear power was facing defeat in conventional warfare, it

could prevent complete capitulation though a nuclear attack.¹

The primary concern of nuclear powers was to ensure that they had systems that would allow for a “second strike” capacity. Thus, if a nuclear power found itself facing a first strike, the goal was to have the ability to retaliate in kind. This model, known as “Mutually Assured Destruction,” required that no side could reliably win a nuclear exchange.

Nuclear powers usually have at least two of three delivery systems: missiles, submarines or bombers. A nation relying solely on land-based missiles could be vulnerable to a first strike. Usually, if a nation only has land-based missiles, they develop mobile launch systems that make conventional attacks on nuclear facilities more difficult.

The key deterrent to a first strike nuclear attack is the second strike response. At the same time, a full-scale nuclear exchange could have catastrophic effects on human life. The spread of radiation could poison the atmosphere. Some scientists theorize that even a modest exchange could trigger a nuclear winter that could have serious effects on the climate; recent studies have suggested it might even trigger a “little ice age.”²

The decision process for an American president is fairly straightforward if facing an attack from a major nuclear power such as China or Russia. One would expect a first strike of such magnitude that the ill effects would be global; thus, the damage to the global ecology would probably already be done, prompting an American president

to retaliate in kind. In addition, the desire for revenge would be very strong and likely bring a retaliatory second strike. Where the decision becomes difficult is if a minor nuclear power launches a limited nuclear strike on the U.S. The most likely candidate for such an attack would be North Korea. If the Kim regime launched a limited strike on the Western U.S., would an American president risk ending human life on the planet to retaliate, especially if he feared that China or Russia would defend North Korea? On the other hand, allowing the U.S. to be attacked without retaliation seems unlikely due to the loss of American lives and the precedent it would set that may encourage other smaller nuclear powers (e.g., Iran) to engage in their own limited strikes.

Overall, any foreign power attacking the U.S. with nuclear weapons is probably ensuring they will face retaliation that ends the existence of the attacking nation. Thus, this isn’t a likely option.

#2: Terrorism

Terrorism, a form of asymmetric warfare, is a constant threat. However, it has serious limitations as a strategy if used by a foreign nation state. Although terrorism can take many forms, the goal is to “terrorize” a population. If successful, the fear paralyzes a power and renders it incapable to respond to a foreign threat. In other words, a terrorist act can force a nation to focus inward, spend resources on security and perhaps change its foreign policy.

However, this tactic for a foreign government is risky. It can be a bit like bringing a knife to a gunfight. Terrorism generally won’t lead to a regime change. It harms the target and often can force the target nation to retaliate strongly. In other words, a nation can launch a terrorist strike

¹ This was the thesis of the “Doomsday Bomb” in *Dr. Strangelove*.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_winter

against the U.S. only to then find itself facing a significant conventional attack.

This is why terrorism tends to be the preferred tactic of non-state actors. Al Qaeda's attacks on the U.S. were a clear tactical victory. In fact, they probably succeeded far beyond expectations. However, the Bush administration reacted strongly with both conventional warfare and Special Forces, severely restricting the group. President Obama eventually attacked Osama bin Laden's compound, killing al Qaeda's leader.

There is a temptation for nation states to support non-state actors in attacking a superpower. However, even this cover has hazards. First, the state supporter of terrorism has to take great care to ensure that it has no obvious ties to the terrorist group. Otherwise, it invites retaliation by the superpower. Second, terrorist groups can be difficult to control. They usually have their own agendas which may not coincide with the state sponsor's objectives. Even Iran, who sponsors Hezbollah, has tried to guide

the group into fewer terrorist acts and toward a focus on political control in Lebanon and more conventional fighters in the Syrian conflict. This adjustment has not always been smooth.

Attacking the U.S. using terrorist tactics is a viable option. However, it has two serious drawbacks. First, it could invite a disproportionately harsh response. For example, we doubt the Taliban anticipated that the U.S. would oust its government because it didn't turn over Osama bin Laden. Second, it is highly unlikely that terrorism would either lead to a regime change in the U.S. or deter America from a key foreign policy goal.

Part II

Next week, we will examine the two remaining tactics for attacking a superpower, namely, cyberwarfare and propaganda.

Bill O'Grady
January 9, 2017

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