

ESSAYS

Global Overextension or “Hegemonic Imperialism”? Differing Perspectives on U.S. Political and Military Involvement in Contemporary East Asia

A Book Essay on Chalmers Johnson's
Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire.

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

By Philip F. Williams

North American students of geopolitics and global conflict generally have a much firmer grasp of trouble spots in Europe and the Middle East than of bones of contention in East Asia. Due to both traditional historical ties across the Atlantic Ocean and sheer inertia, protracted conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and the Middle East have garnered much more North American media coverage than long-standing disputes across the Taiwan Straits or on the Korean peninsula. Yet since the end of World War II, the region where North American soldiers have tended to get bogged down in long and virtually unwinnable military conflicts has been East and Southeast Asia, not Europe or the Middle East. The United States could only manage to maintain the political status quo in Korea through a grueling military stalemate in the early 1950s, and departed in defeat from South Vietnam approximately two decades later. Well aware of the dangers of American military intervention on the East Asian mainland, former President Harry Truman wisely fired General Douglas MacArthur when the latter insistently called for widening the war against North Korean

aggression to include direct allied attacks on military bases in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Half a century of direct or indirect U.S. protection of Taiwan and South Korea from their militarily powerful communist rivals, the PRC and North Korea respectively, has helped set the stage for their impressive democratization.¹ As one-time dissidents who formerly suffered dearly for their opposition to previous authoritarian regimes in Taiwan and South Korea, Presidents Chen Shuibian and Kim Dae-jung now preside over governments that enjoy incomparably more depth of popular participation and support than the old-fashioned one-party dictatorships that still rule in Beijing and Pyongyang.² Beijing has experimented with public elections merely at the level of village governance; elections at the township level are projected to be phased in no earlier than 2005, which would still leave Beijing decades behind Taipei along the path of progress toward bona fide democracy, or what Deng Xiaoping once decried as “big democracy.”³ Notwithstanding the hopes for rapprochement in the wake of the summit between Kim Jung-il and Kim

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Taking a cue from historian Paul Kennedy's concept of "imperial overstretch," the East Asian policy expert Chalmers Johnson has penned a pungent and controversial critique of what he sees as the "imperial" hubris of overly rigid U.S. policies towards East and Southeast Asia even a decade after the end of the Cold War: Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire.

Dae-jung, Pyongyang's Stalinist leadership is more hidebound still, maintaining its firm control over what is arguably the world's most closed society and most rigid command economy—and one still plagued by recurring famines.

Although U.S. patronage deserves at least some of the credit for the past half-century's rise of multiparty politics and democracy in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, a number of contemporary trends in U.S. policy toward this region are very worrying.⁴ In the early 1990s, U.S. leaders seriously considered the drastic step of bombing a large North Korean underground nuclear facility to smithereens until alarmed opposition from the governments of South Korea and Japan and a special mission to North Korea by former President Jimmy Carter opened the door to a negotiated compromise solution.

Since the mid-1990s, a number of leading figures from both major U.S. political parties have downplayed warnings from both major allied governments and the world's mainstream scientific community in lobbying for the Pentagon's still hypothetical missile defense system—the dressed-up contemporary version of former President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (whose fanciful conjurings of massive space-based laser guns earned it the epithet of "Star Wars"). In the wake of the PRC's intimidating missile firings near key Taiwanese seaports just before the island's 1996 presidential election, the U.S. pressured Japan into signing on to its blueprint-stage theater missile defense (TMD) system, which is no more technically feasible than knocking down one bullet with another bullet—and which would almost surely catalyze the kind of dangerous global nuclear arms race that the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 has heretofore helped restrain.⁵

A pattern of increasingly reckless and high-handed behavior on the part of the self-styled "lone superpower" seemed to emerge in the late 1990s with the shocking and poorly justified 1998 U.S. missile attacks on a pharmaceutical factory in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, along with a mujahideen camp site in Afghanistan.⁶ And to the alarm of America's allies and even the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 1999 the U.S. Senate cavalierly rejected the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, in spite of assurances from the Pentagon that ongoing advanced computer simulations of nuclear explosions are wholly adequate tests of the U.S. nuclear arsenal's readiness. This hawkish move could perhaps be seen as an encore to President Bill Clinton's caving in to the rigid Pentagon demand that the U.S. refuse to sign the 1997 international covenant outlawing land mines unless a special exception were made for the Korean peninsula; the international

community could obviously not permit any signatory to attach such territorial escape clauses, and the U.S. thereby refused to sign.⁷

Taking a cue from historian Paul Kennedy's concept of "imperial overstretch," the East Asian policy expert Chalmers Johnson has penned a pungent and controversial critique of what he sees as the "imperial" hubris of overly rigid U.S. policies towards East and Southeast Asia even a decade after the end of the Cold War: *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*.⁸ "Blowback" is an old CIA term that refers to negative unintended consequences, especially in a military or intelligence operation, that somehow explode backwards in the very direction of the "sleuths" who concocted the scheme in the first place.⁹ Unlike the fringe of neo-Marxist academics who pen predictable and one-sided jeremiads against U.S. "imperialism" and "hegemony" in trendy academic journals like *Social Text*, Johnson's critique is quite level-headed and informed by a wide range of source materials, including documents in Japanese and Chinese.

Although Johnson is understandably critical of the recent triumphalist rhetoric that dubs the U.S. "the lone superpower" and "the indispensable nation," he is careful to voice measured praise for U.S. policy towards Europe, and seems favorably disposed to the leading role the U.S. has played in NATO for five decades.¹⁰ Nor is Johnson on a crusade to denounce various past American imperialist activities in Latin America or the Philippines—he acknowledges that the U.S. has in fact reversed many of its past interventionist policies there.

Johnson goes on to admit that terms like "hegemony," "empire," and "imperialism" have "often been used as epithets or fighting words," and carry overtones of racism and Marxist-Leninist connotations of callous economic exploitation. Johnson insists that he is not speaking of "empire" in this traditional ideological sense, but rather to reflect modern-day attempts by both the USSR and the U.S. to impose their "social systems" on "satellite regimes" within their spheres of influence.¹¹ To contrast these two spheres of influence, Johnson claims that all seven of the former Soviet Union's satellites were in Eastern Europe: East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Albania.¹² On the other hand, he places all of America's "satellites" in East and Southeast Asia, including present or past regimes in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Taiwan.¹³ Although many scholars would have reservations about the inclusion or exclusion of certain countries in Johnson's

ESSAYS

lists of "satellites" of the two great military powers of the latter half of the twentieth century, his warnings about what Orville Schell has aptly called American "global overreach" are well founded and worthy of serious consideration.

In chapters on Okinawa, South Korea, North Korea, China, and Japan, Johnson attempts to substantiate his argument that America's "imperial politics" in Asia mostly takes place "below the sight lines of the American public . . . within the military and intelligence communities," and thus should be characterized as "stealth imperialism."¹⁴ Johnson charges that the imperialist legacy of extraterritoriality was behind the three-week delay between the time the Okinawan police filed a warrant for the arrest of three U.S. servicemen who had abducted and brutally raped a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl on September 4, 1995 and the time that the American military authorities finally handed over the three suspects to the local police on September 29.¹⁵ While there is some cogency in Johnson's interpretation, it would be more accurate to invoke former Senator J. William Fulbright's critique of "the arrogance of power," which in this case has led the U.S. military to maintain its tacit conquerors' prerogatives in Okinawa far too long.

The agreements between the U.S. and Japanese governments should have been adjusted long ago to stipulate that U.S. service personnel who are served an arrest warrant for alleged criminal violations not directly related to their military duties should be handed over without delay to the local police and prosecuted by the local authorities. Such measures as these, along with a

gradual but significant downsizing of U.S. forces in Okinawa in line with the end of the Soviet threat, would likely receive a better hearing from the U.S. government than Johnson's charges of "colonization" and his call for a total and rapid U.S. withdrawal from Okinawa. After all, American military strategy for defending South Korea against a possible North Korean invasion is predicated upon rapidly reinforcing the relatively small contingent of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea with troops stationed in Okinawa.

To Johnson's credit, he adroitly summarizes a number of the reasons for the Okinawans' widespread dismay with *gobanken-sama* (honorable watchdog), the tens of thousands of American troops on dozens of U.S. military installations on the island: the firing of shells containing uranium-238 at local artillery ranges, increased crime, pollution, jet noise, worsened road congestion, the U.S. occupation of choice island real estate, and the lack of local government revenue from the tax-exempt American bases.¹⁶ In the face of a strong desire in both Tokyo and Washington to maintain the status quo in Okinawa, it is understandable that Johnson has resorted to rather militant phraseology like "colonization" and "imperialism"; the major problem is that many American government insiders and mainstream reviewers of Johnson's book will summarily reject his arguments on the basis of such fighting words instead of pondering his considered analysis of U.S. global overreach.¹⁷ He is on sounder ground when criticizing various hypocritical, ill-informed, or myopic aspects of U.S. policy in Okinawa and elsewhere in East Asia; his exasperation over the dearth of Asianists in high-level positions in the National Security Council and other crucial U.S. foreign policy and intelligence organizations is particularly worthy of note.

Johnson's chapters on China also contain much contrarian wisdom. He astutely points out that U.S. leanings toward adopting theater missile defense and extending its supposed "umbrella" to Taiwan represent a great danger to maintaining the near-term status quo in Taiwan and its long-term prospects for unification with a presumably less authoritarian China of the future.¹⁸ Like many Chinese dissidents and scholars of East Asian human rights, Johnson dares to address the issue of Tibetan statehood in a fair and historically informed manner, in contrast with "Sinophiles at many foreign academic institutions and ministries of foreign affairs, [who] continue to advise their political leaders that Tibet has always been a part of China, which is simply not so."¹⁹

Unfortunately, a problem arises when Johnson criticizes the PRC's "imperium over Tibet," including its "openly racist policy of state-sponsored Chinese emigration" to Tibet and the forced sinification of "what is left of the Tibetan people."²⁰ Decades of PRC propaganda and nationalistic scholarship have defined "imperialism" and "racism" as only something that other nations have done to China, never the other way around—the Chinese military invasions and occupation of Tibet in the 1950s and its military clashes with Vietnam in 1974, 1979, and 1988 seem practically immune to charges of "imperialism," especially with-



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in China. Establishment scholars and policy makers in China would be even more inclined than their American counterparts to dismiss such charges of "imperialism" out of hand rather than to re-examine the assumptions behind some of their more hawkish or harsh policies toward certain minorities or specific foreign governments. The substitution of more precise and ideologically neutral terms like "great-power domination" and "secretive policy formation and implementation" for loaded fighting words like "imperialism" and "hegemony" would enable an informed critique of great-power maneuverings in East Asia like Johnson's to gain the broader hearing that it deserves.

Instructors of undergraduate and high school courses dealing with modern East or Southeast Asian history or international relations will find *Blowback* a readable and well-argued contrarian perspective on U.S. policy towards this region. Johnson would be a good foil for major mainstream scholarly introductions to security issues and foreign relations between Japan and the U.S. (such as by Carol Gluck) as well as between China and the U.S. (as in David Shambaugh).²¹

Instructors need not assign all or even most of *Blowback*, for the majority of Johnson's chapters originated as journal articles, and thus can be profitably assigned and read in isolation, much like the numerous individual chapters in important anthologies like *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching* (co-edited by Gluck) and *The China Reader: The Reform Era* (co-edited by Shambaugh). An area specialist might limit the reading assignments to Johnson's chapters about either Korea or Japan, while a world historian exploring potential sources of global conflict in the twenty-first century might assign most or all of the book in order to contrast *Blowback*'s criticism of America's strong-arming its Western Pacific clients with the critique of rising PRC ultra-nationalism in Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*.²² In any case, *Blowback* is certain to provoke lively classroom discussion and challenge students to re-examine a number of common American assumptions about security imperatives in the Western Pacific region. ■

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NOTES

1. Although the U.S. government supported various authoritarian South Korean military rulers who occasionally committed bloody crackdowns like that in Kwangju during 1980, this has to be measured against U.S. prevention of a military takeover and spread of totalitarian rule over the south by the North Korean dictator Kim Il-sung. Chalmers Johnson's sweepingly harsh condemnation of U.S. actions in South Korea lacks balance in its preoccupation with the faults of the South Korean military rulers and neglect of the more dreadful actions of the totalitarian North Korean regime, which enforced a mind-numbing regimentation in society, and in the early 1980s dispatched a terrorist hit squad to Burma to successfully assassinate a number of high-ranking South Korean dignitaries on an official visit there. Although excessive military force was applied during the crackdowns in both Kwangju in 1980 and in Beijing (and Chengdu) in 1989, there was at least one major difference. The Chinese protestors were entirely unarmed, except for a few Molotov cocktails at the most lethal stage of the PLA's advance; but thousands of the Korean protestors in Kwangju seized rifles and a veritable fleet of military vehicles from local arsenals, and actually exchanged gunfire on a large scale with advancing government troops. See Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), page 25.
2. Chen and especially Kim served time as political prisoners. Kim narrowly escaped a death sentence, partly due to intervention on his behalf by the U.S. government. During an opposition political rally in the 1980s, Chen's wife was paralyzed from the waist down by a careening truck in a hit-and-run incident that appeared to be politically motivated.
3. Deng insisted that the sort of demands made in spring 1989 for what he called "big democracy" were beyond the pale for the PRC. The only acceptable move in this direction was what he called "small democracy," which in practice meant certain piecemeal reforms that did not threaten the Chinese Communist Party's absolute monopoly on political power in the PRC.
4. Admittedly, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) have long played a dominant role in Japanese and Taiwanese politics, respectively. However, the election of opposition party candidates to the top executive post (e.g., Hosokawa Morihiro and Chen Shuibian) stands in stark contrast with the situation in the PRC and North Korea, whose governments are completely dominated by the Communist Party and who severely punish anyone who even attempts to establish an opposition party.
5. With a couple of minor exceptions, actual tests of a prototype antimissile system have been failures. For one thing, cheap balloon decoys have readily lured the prototype antimissile missiles off course. Moreover, even though the Patriot antimissile missile served to boost morale during Saddam Hussein's firing of Scud missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War, the Pentagon and the U.S. media greatly exaggerated the Patriot's ability to intercept incoming Scud missiles successfully. Even on the relatively few occasions a Patriot missile hit and broke up an incoming Scud missile, the pieces of the Scud would generally still strike the ground near their intended target and cause great damage. Nor would the proposed missile defense system be effective against either cruise missiles or nuclear bombs stashed by terrorists in a car or truck. The only certain effects of an American missile-defense system would be the transfer of tens of billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars to military contractors, the initiation of a new nuclear arms build-up among non-allied powers such as Russia and the PRC, and an increasing tendency to look to the Pentagon instead of international cooperation and diplomacy for solutions to global security problems.
6. One of these U.S. cruise missiles fired in retaliation for the 1998 terrorist bombings of various U.S. embassies in Africa blew up in Pakistan instead of its intended target in Afghanistan. As Chalmers Johnson points out, there are

ESSAYS

- many less drastic ways of responding to terrorist attacks than immediate military retaliation, as can be seen by the international pressure on Libya to surrender the two suspects in the bombing of the Pan American jet over Lockerbie, Scotland. See *Blowback*, pages 10–11.
7. The distinguished retired American military leader, General Norman Schwarzkopf, publicly favored the 1997 international ban on antipersonnel land mines, to which 123 nations pledged their agreement in Ottawa. According to Schwarzkopf, land mines are outdated and clumsy weapons that are simply not needed in technologically advanced contemporary warfare. For more information on the controversy over America's refusal to join its allies in signing the land mine treaty, see Johnson, *Blowback*, pages 68–70.
 8. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).
 9. *Blowback* can occur in the wake of any powerful government's interventions abroad, but this CIA concept has been mostly used in connection with the U.S. See, for example, Larry Seims, "Blowback from Iraq," *Nation* 266.3 (January 26, 1998):6–7; Ronald Steel, "Blowback," *New Republic* 215.5 (July 29, 1996):23; and Mary Anne Weaver, "Blowback" (about the CIA's unwittingly creating militant Islamic terrorist groups), *Atlantic Monthly* 277.5 (May 1991):24–28.
 10. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright coined the quite undiplomatic term "indispensable nation" in the late 1990s.
 11. Johnson, *Blowback*, pages 19–20. One problem with Johnson's idea of the two "empires" imposing their social and economic systems on their satellites is that the palpable and often striking differences in social structure between the "empire" and its "satellites" would seem to diminish the imperial leaders' miscalculations or wishful thinking about the satellites' supposed conformity to the central social structures. However, Johnson's main point about the U.S. government's need for more well-informed area specialists in national security and foreign policy agencies is well taken.
 12. Johnson's categorization would certainly not satisfy many Europeanists, who would counter that Albania was an ally or client not of the USSR, but of the PRC, whose Maoist state-run media eulogized it as "the beacon of light in Europe." Albania's relations with the USSR were extremely strained, and Rumania's were not a whole lot better. Both Albania's Enver Hoxha and Rumania's Nicolae Ceausescu would have vehemently denied Johnson's claim that their countries were satellites of the USSR. Hanoi could be more accurately characterized as a client or "satellite" of the USSR beginning in the 1970s, when it leaned away from its historical enemy to the north, China—which responded in 1979 by launching a rather unsuccessful punitive military attack on Vietnam.
 13. There are also some problems with Johnson's list of U.S. "satellites." Thailand actually stands out in the region for its long and successful resistance of domination by any imperialist power, while a country like South Vietnam was extremely dependent upon U.S. patronage. In the 1980s, the Philippine government told the U.S. to withdraw from Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Station, and the Americans complied—not exactly what one would expect an "imperial" power to do in response to a demand from its "satellite."
 14. Johnson, *Blowback*, page 65.
 15. *Blowback*, page 43. Extraterritoriality, a practice quite widespread in East Asia during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, meant that a foreign national from a privileged nation (i.e., the West and Japan) who was accused of committing a crime in certain nations on the East Asian mainland would be remanded to the custody of his nation's consular officials instead of handed over to the local police or courts. Johnson is mistaken to claim that extraterritoriality is an "American invention," for it is actually an upgraded version of an ancient practice in China and many other countries with sizable enclaves of foreigners on their soil; see John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), page 200.
 16. Although the so-called "depleted" uranium in uranium-238 shells is less toxic than deadly uranium-235, the blasts from such shells nevertheless leave behind dangerous radiation that is easily detected by a Geiger counter. U.S. uranium-238 shells have provoked controversies after having been fired at Torishima Island west of Okinawa (*Blowback*, page 49), at a firing range in Puerto Rico, and at Serbian targets in Kosovo. The uranium-238 in such an artillery shell gives the explosion an extra "kick" that allows it to damage ordinarily blast-safe equipment or installations buried underground; the problem is that the radiation released in such a blast remains in the environment for thousands of years, and can cause chronic health problems in people exposed to it.
 17. For example, a recent highly negative review of *Blowback* in *Business Week* cites counter-arguments to Johnson's claims about the "eroding of the industrial foundations of the United States" as a result of the preferential trade relations it has extended to its Asian "satellites" (*Blowback*, page 186). To be sure, relatively positive reviews of *Blowback* have appeared in *Booklist* 96.9–10:839 (January 15, 2000) and *Publishers Weekly* 247.14:75 (April 3, 2000).
 18. Repeated PRC threats of a unilateral military attack on Taiwan in response to the latter's "indefinite delay" in agreeing to consultations on political unification with the PRC cast some doubt on Johnson's suggestion that nothing short of a Taiwanese declaration of independence would lead to military action by the PRC (*Blowback*, page 161). Johnson also understates the lengths to which the PRC's leadership under Jiang Zemin has gone to inflame ultra-nationalistic popular sentiments, as when it hid information from the PRC citizenry about how the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was a mistake for which Clinton and other foreigners had profusely apologized—and for which the bombing target selector had been formally reprimanded. As June Teufel Dreyer points out about the subsequent orchestrated vandalism to the U.S. embassy in Beijing in her astute critique of the book *Chinese Walls, Washington Whispers*, "The putatively indignant [PRC] rioters were bused to the American embassy [in Beijing] to retaliate, complete with objects to toss—their arrival being proudly shown on Chinese state television . . ."; see *Taipei Review* 50.4 (April 2000):52.
 19. *Blowback*, page 164. See also Cao Changqing and James D. Seymour, eds., *Tibet Through Dissident Chinese Eyes* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998). In the informative introduction to this book, Seymour states a fact that practically no foreign ministry official is willing to admit: "No ethnic Chinese government ever ruled Tibet until it was overrun in the 1950s by the Communists" (page xviii); the only two dynasties that ever governed Tibet from a capital in China were not Han Chinese, but rather the Mongols' Yuan (1279–1368) and the Manchus' Qing (1644–1911). Provided that history serves as a guide, if any country has a "claim" over Tibet, that country would be Mongolia, not China.
 20. *Blowback*, pages 164–5.
 21. See Carol Gluck, "Japan and America: A Tale of Two Civilizations," *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Ainslee T. Embree and Carol Gluck (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 798–809. See also David Shambaugh, "The United States and China: Cooperation or Confrontation?" *The China Reader: The Reform Era*, eds. Orville Schell and David Shambaugh (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 470–9.
 22. Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

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