

Policy Watch: The GWOT's Long-Term Cost

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Whatever the merits of how America pursues the Global War on Terror, America is also paying dearly for it in terms of human casualties as well as money spent on it and not other priorities.

These costs, of course, are both obvious and immediate. But are there other costs that may only become apparent over the long-term? A recent article by Ruksana Kibria, a distinguished professor of international relations at Dhaka University in Bangladesh, suggests not only that these costs exist, but also what they might be.

The article in question, "Strategic Implications of Bangladesh-China Relations," appeared Feb. 19, 2006 in Bangladesh's The Daily Star newspaper. First, however, it should be noted that except for its seacoast on the south and a short border with Myanmar (Burma) on the southeast, Bangladesh is surrounded by India to its west, north, and east. It is not surprising, then, that Bangladesh's primary security concern is India -- whose economic and military power have been growing steadily in recent years.

Prof. Kibria notes that India and the United States have recently grown closer. Since India is Bangladesh's principal security concern, and since the United States has become more closely allied to India, she sees Bangladesh as in need of an ally and identifies China as one in the short- and medium-term.

In the long-term, though, she sees China as growing far more powerful vis-à-vis the United States and India -- so much so that China will be able to "shape the regional security environment and assert its dominance."

At that point, she argues, "it would be problematic for Bangladesh to be reluctant about moving beyond the rhetoric of friendship and avoid the compulsions of a strategic alignment with China." In addition, she notes, Bangladesh "would have to be more attentive to China's political goals, and show deference to its geo-political interests, views and values." Even India, she argues, "is likely to 'buy peace' by acquiescing in China's political-economic-military preeminence."

But why would Bangladesh, and even India, have to do this? Why not instead ally with the United States against a China "expected to become a much more formidable adversary than the former Soviet Union ever was"?

Kibria does not see this as a likely possibility. For if, she notes, "the United States allows its resources to be drained by continuing to prosecute its unproductive, indefinite and costly war on terrorism, its economic power as well as its capacity for leadership may attenuate, resulting in the erosion of (the) U.S. political and military role."

In other words, if the United States continues to fight the Global War on Terror as it is now doing, Kibria does not anticipate that it will be strong enough to counter China. Other countries, then, will have to react to a rising China without significant American assistance. And in her view, since Bangladesh and even India will be unable to counter the rise of China, they will be better off seeking to accommodate and befriend it.

Some, of course, would call this appeasement. Maybe it is. But if others come to believe, as Kibria does, that America's prosecution of the global war on terror will only weaken the United

States over time, this will have profound implications for international relations. For the more governments that believe America will not be able to help them with their security concerns, the more that they may seek their security through accommodating powerful, undemocratic states such as China.

This would, of course, be bad for America since it would reduce -- or even eliminate -- its influence in countries that try to ensure their security through accommodating a rising China. But it could also be bad for them since, as history shows, powerful dictatorships are prone to exploit their less powerful "allies." Yet trying to make such an accommodation might appear not just tempting, but vital to smaller states if they come to believe (whether realistically or not) that America will be unable to help them.

I very much hope that Professor Kibria's vision of American power declining as a result of the Global War on Terror proves false. I fear, though, not just that her vision could come true, but that others will believe that it will come true and will act accordingly. That may well be the true long-term cost of how America is pursuing the Global War on Terror.

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