

IPA/We're at war/8-10-19

We're at "war" with China, and we're losing

By Jim Nowlan

For millennia, war was how you did economic development. Today, economic and technical dominance are how you do war, and right now we're losing something akin to a modern "war" with China.

When I first arrived in Shanghai 15 years ago, to serve as a "foreign expert" (visiting professor) at Fudan University, one of China's best, I took a stretch-the-legs Saturday morning stroll along a street outside my guest quarters.

I came upon a gaggle of little kids in neat uniforms, gathering outside what was obviously a school building.

Later I asked my host professor about this. "Oh, of course, our children all attend school every Saturday morning, until noon."

Indeed, Chinese children not only attend school about 210 days each year (versus our 174 days), but for an hour longer each weekday than in the U.S.

Chinese and other Asian youngsters are hungry to learn and become rich (exhorted by their parents).

How hungry? During my first teaching gig at Fudan, I took an early morning 6:30 a.m. walk around the campus with my "assistant teacher," graduate student Gu Yu. We walked by a group of maybe 20 young people, standing before the doors of a campus building.

“Who are they, and why are they standing there?” I asked. “Oh, they’re students. They’re waiting for the library to open.”

The Chinese government is pouring huge amounts of money into education. More Chinese are now enrolled in their universities than Americans here. Scores of thousands additional Chinese attend university in the U.S., sucking up knowledge from our best schools, which they apply upon their return to China.

And, as China has four times more people than we have, it is but arithmetic to note that China has more honor students than we have students.

Over the course of three “foreign expert” visits to China, I also saw first-hand how fast the economy has been growing. On my first visit, my host professor rode to campus on a bicycle from her family’s apartment. Five years later, she came on a motorized bike. Yet another five years (2015) and she drove to campus in her Mercedes.

So what, readers might say? Let their economy dominate the world. We can become another Switzerland, relatively small but still wealthy and comfortable.

The Chinese have, however, grudges to bear, and repay.

Chinese history is measured in thousands of years. School students learn to revere the Ming, Qing and many dynasties, going back to pre-history. During much of that time, the Chinese were, or certainly thought they were, at the center of the world, with all others merely barbarians. Indeed “China” means “the Middle Kingdom,” the center of the earth.

That is, until Western nations humiliated China to the quick 150 years ago. For half a century, Europe and the U.S. chopped the Middle Kingdom into “concessions” for commerce, one for each foreign power.

If you can believe it, Western nations, especially the British, literally forced debilitating opium on the Chinese people. This enriched Western traders, all against the opposition of China’s aggrieved, but helpless (at the time) emperor.

For the Chinese, a century and a half back is but yesterday. The Chinese are very proud and plan, I think, to even the score.

The Chinese model of state-supported capitalism may not be ideal for the long haul, yet it is effective at focusing huge investment at present in education and science/technology research. Here in the U.S., in contrast, we focus too much of our treasure on expensive, exotic medical therapies that might keep old geezers like me kicking for an extra few months.

Scholars have been sounding the alarum since at least 1997, when Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro penned “The Coming Conflict with China.” Yet, today, while the Chinese as a nation lean forward in their chairs, you might say, eager and hungry to succeed, we seem to lean back in ours, reflecting on past glories.

I am not a Trump fan, yet in his ham-handed way he appears to get the message.

The U.S. needs to recruit the best and brightest from around the world, who may not think much of us but find our political-economic system attractive. We also need to mount another “moon shot” investment program for science and technology. Otherwise, the Chinese will race past us, as they are already doing in some fields.

We're at "war," and we're losing.

---

For many years, Nowlan was a senior fellow and political science professor at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. He has worked for three unindicted Illinois governors and publishes a weekly newspaper in central Illinois.