

When Turn About Isn't Fair Play

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | October 6, 2004

Perry in Japan; Dewey at Manila Bay; the China Relief Expedition (Boxer Rebellion)—the West met the East “over there.”

Now, East—in the form of the Peoples Republic of China—seems about to meet the West in the persons of Louis-Jodel Chamberlain and Jackson Joanis. Should this particular meeting actually happen, it will be different from the previous East-West encounters in one important detail: it will happen “over here,” specifically, in the Caribbean—more specifically, in Haiti. It will come about because the unforeseen and unintended consequences of earlier decisions are finally emerging to upset the calculations of policymakers.

The Knowns and the Almost Forgotten

With Iraq and the U.S. election cycle dominating headlines, Haiti all but fell off the front pages until Hurricane Jeanne struck, killing more than 1,550 (with another 900 unaccounted for and presumed dead), 300,000 left homeless, and food, water and shelter in desperately short supply. For all the misery it has and is causing, however, Jeanne is not at the root of Haiti's latest problems in the way Chamberlain and Joanis are. In February 2000, these two and their followers seemed on the verge of seizing control of Haiti when the U.S. stepped in and “induced” a regime change. Economic activity plunged, rebuilding only slowly until devastated again by natural disaster.

Moreover, the country remains factionalized and heavily armed despite the presence of a UN peace-keeping mission numbering 3,000. UN commanders report armed clashes as people fight over distribution of relief supplies. And while overt combat is rare, many observers suspect that the more organized armed factions are merely standing back, waiting until closer to the elections to re-engage—violently.

In short, Haiti is the Western Hemisphere's chaotic if impoverished and smaller counterpart to Afghanistan and Iraq, just over seven months following the still-murky swirl of events that saw 300

Haitians die and President Jean Bertrand Aristide depart Port-au-Prince on a U.S. aircraft that finally deposited him in the Central African Republic.

Chamberlain, a notorious paramilitary leader, was one of two prominent anti-Aristide leaders with pretensions to the Haitian presidency. But advanced elements of a UN authorized, U.S.-led foreign military “coalition of the willing” were already at the presidential palace when the rebel forces arrived, thwarting an indigenous coup.

The 3,000 strong intervention force had one overriding goal: to provide enough stability for the new interim government to allow it to restore economic activity, reconstitute the police and justice systems, and prepare for elections in November 2005 that will bring a new government to power in February 2006. But time ran out. In late June, U.S. forces departed Haiti, handing peacekeeping duties to the UN Stabilization Mission (MINUSTAH) led by Brazil. Washington, battered by Iraq, was pleased to escape with no fatalities.

The Unintended

Since then, there has been good and bad news. A provisional administration was formed to govern the island and prepare for elections. In June, flooding killed an estimated 1,300 people and rendered thousands homeless. In July, a donors' conference pledged \$1.09 billion in “new money” to revitalize Haiti's economy. But the original goals of the intervention remain unachieved:

- **Stability:** Without a fair and open judicial structure, political stability is problematic if not impossible. On August 16, Chamberlain and Joanis were acquitted in the 1993 assassination of a pro-Aristide supporter. The trial, labeled a “sham” by human rights activists—only one of eight prosecution witnesses appeared, and he pleaded ignorance about the allegations of

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murder—was so controversial that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States sent a fact-finding mission to Haiti to determine if the judicial system is biased against Aristide supporters, whether the armed “chimeres” or members of his political party (Lavalas).

- Economic revitalization: While the favored few, as always, are better off economically, the vast majority of people in this most impoverished country in the Western Hemisphere still are suffering repercussions from February’s political collapse and from the rampant crime and violence that the police seem unable to control. Even before Hurricane Jeanne, the UN reported that 1.2 million Haitians relied on outside food assistance.
- Preparing for elections: The Haitian Provisional Electoral Council, which is charged with getting Haitians registered, providing voter identity cards, and creating a voter data base in preparing for the 2005 ballot, received nine million dollars in late August. The money was “left over” from a U.S. contribution to a 2000-2001 UN mission to Haiti.
- Physical security: With the country still divided and awash with weapons, factions of “demobilized” soldiers that contributed to the destabilization that precipitated Aristide’s downfall marched into two towns, Gonaives and Petit Goaves, confronting and arresting police and demanding that the Haitian army be reconstituted. Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue has demanded that all factions disarm by mid-September, a demand neither he nor the UN peacekeepers could enforce. The reason MINUSTAH cannot disarm the factions is a lack of resources: of the 6,700 military and 1,622 police authorized by the UN Security Council for MINUSTAH, only 2,750 troops and 365 police had arrived by the end of August. Some 750 troops from this force are helping distribute food and water to Gonaives and other areas hit hard by Jeanne.

The Unforeseen

And this is where China comes into the picture. For the first time, Beijing is set to participate in a UN peacekeeping mission by contributing an organized security unit—in this instance, 125-130 riot police.

What makes this move so interesting is that Haiti is one of only 26 countries worldwide that maintains formal diplomatic relations with Beijing’s “renegade” island-province of Taiwan. Many in Washington who support Taiwan’s independent stance as an evolving democracy see Beijing’s action as another inroad to the hegemonic 19th century “Monroe Doctrine” reoriented to the East.

The Chinese have made other “incursions” in the hemisphere:

- Chinese companies already have commercial footholds on both ends of the Panama Canal (Panama is another country that has formal ties with Taiwan) and is reportedly seeking other economic bases near “choke points.”
- Washington alleges that China secretly sent intelligence operatives and other military personnel to Venezuela, ostensibly to assist President Hugo Chavez against his political foes. China and Cuba collaborate on intelligence matters.
- The Organization of American States recently granted China observer status, and Beijing is planning a Caribbean-China forum to promote economic and trade cooperation.

As much as Washington might be uneasy about this first ever Chinese unit deployment in support of UN peacekeeping, it points to the reality of China taking initial steps in assuming a truly global role in the 21st century. Already, Beijing is affecting world oil markets as its energy demands mushroom. It is also facilitating the six-party discussions on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program that involve past and present superpowers.

In the 19th century, Euro-centric U.S. apologists of imperialism “traced” the gradual shift of dominant

empires from east to west to explain and justify U.S. expansion. As flawed as this theory was (and is), their vision seems a reality today as the U.S. stands alone militarily and still dominates world economics. But if history is any guide, this unipolar dominance cannot last. Whether empire moves west—to the real East—or some other direction, move it will.

That movement will be resisted regardless of who runs Washington. The danger in this is two-fold: resistance will be military and thus destructively unproductive, or it will persist for so long that most if not all possibilities for a cooperative “soft landing” will be lost. The result will be, as the 2003 Nobelist, John Michael Coetzee of South Africa noted about earlier imperial realms in slow decline, a U.S. bedeviled by one consuming thought: “How not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.”

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