

Calls for closer US tabs on China tech rise

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Concerns about China are no longer just about it being the ultimate base for companies seeking to produce goods at ever-lower costs. Wealthy nations must be vigilant of China's growth, not just as a cheap manufacturing base, but as a hotbed for some of the most talented scientists and engineers, many of whom have been trained at U.S. universities.

That's certainly the view of Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., who spoke at a Hudson Institute briefing Wednesday to launch its latest report on China. The senator said that given the number of Chinese students at some of the top engineering and science schools in the United States who often now return back to their home country, it was necessary to "not be complacent ... and work harder and smarter" in order to retain the U.S. edge over China.

Already, though, it may well be that the U.S. advantage over China is waning, if the number of people with doctorates in applied sciences can be seen as an indicator of things to come.

Of the 26,000 or so doctorates awarded by U.S. universities last year, non-U.S. nationals made up 32 percent of total recipients, with many from China and India, according to the National Science Foundation. In fact, of the total 1,186 physics doctorates awarded in 2004, Chinese citizens were awarded 185, followed by India with 34. Of course, until recently, the bulk of Ph.D.-wielding scientists remained in the United States in light of better employment prospects.

Of course, wariness about China's ever-growing potential has a precedent: neighboring Japan, which during the first decades following World War II was largely known throughout the world as a producer of cheaply made goods. Japan subsequently became an economic superpower that many governments feared or envied until the early 1990s.

So it is hardly surprising that China would be regarded as the next Japan. But unlike its neighbor, China not only has economic potential, it also has military might.

And it's that technological potential not just in business, but in the realms of defense and security that some gives some scholars pause.

China is "a high-tech superstate ... using technology for military purposes," said Ken Weinstein, chief executive of the Hudson Institute, adding that while the U.S. government is currently preoccupied with the war on terrorism, it needs to be vigilant regarding "challenges in defense" from the Asian nation.

Charles Horner, a contributor to the institute's report, entitled, "China's New Great Leap Forward: High Technology and Military Power in the Next Half-Century," agreed.

"The relationship between technology and power changes rapidly," and so there was greater need to follow more closely the technological developments occurring within China, instead of simply focusing on the manufacturing and trading of goods from the country.

"There is certainly a clarion call from China challenging U.S. advanced technology leadership, with important commercial, foreign policy, and national security implications. The U.S. response, at some point, will have to be addressed more seriously," argued Ernest Preeg in the report.

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