

## **Author Q & A with Michael L. Levin**

### What is the central idea of this book?

A major war with China sometime in the next five to twenty years seems very, very likely. Moreover, if Russia sides with China, China could very well win. Russia seems to hold the cards, and its president, Vladimir Putin, has shown himself to be a master at exploiting Russia's leverage in every sphere. Russia and China are cooperating at an unprecedented level at a time when American military might is stretched thin. The U.S. is also burdened with massive debt, and is exhausted by the war in Iraq, so now it is particularly vulnerable to China's rise.

### What makes your book relevant?

China is by far the greatest strategic threat facing the U.S. today. This may not be apparent now because the U.S. is so focused on the war on terror, but it will become so soon, and will remain so for decades. A key component of this threat is the Chinese-Russian partnership that has been developing over the past fifteen years. A significant portion of *The Next Great Clash* is devoted to understanding the evolution of Sino-Russian relations. Imagine an anti-American alliance consisting of China, Russia, and most of the Muslim world. This is a perilous threat – much greater than the war on terror – and yet no one is talking about it. Nonetheless, a China – U.S. duel for primacy is well underway.

### Is war with China inevitable?

Yes, it is inevitable. All of the transitions from one great power to the next have led to a major war, except the transition from Great Britain to the U.S., and that is mainly because of the cultural and linguistic affinity between the two countries. No such affinity exists between China and the United States. The Chinese believe that their time has come and that the West is in decline. Through the course of its history, America has shown itself to be quite clumsy in its dealings with China.

### What makes you specifically qualified to cover this topic?

I was a Russian studies major in college, and I first visited the Soviet Union as a graduate student in 1984, of all years, where I spent a semester at the Pushkin Institute in Moscow. When I returned to the U.S., I entered a graduate program in international business. I figured that way I'd be able to circulate more freely in Russia – if I ever found a way to return – than if I worked for the government or as a journalist. Since the school didn't offer Russian at the time, I enrolled in their Chinese language program. I've always been fascinated by the different paths of development taken by Russia and China, and decided that I'd do whatever it takes to develop a specialty in this area.

### What brought you to this topic and what interests you about it?

I admit that I was initially attracted to these countries because, at the time, they were out of bounds, or forbidden, and so it was exciting traveling to forbidden places and nosing around, talking to people. I also sensed that sooner or later, China and Russia would have to open up, and so I just wanted to be ready when they did. I never expected that it would happen the way it did – with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then the fall of the Soviet Union. My first trip to China was right after Tiananmen...

### What are some of your key experiences in Russia and China?

One of my jobs in Russia involved setting up an office in Nizhny Novgorod, a city that used to be closed to both foreigners and Soviets. All traffic in and out of the city was closely monitored because of its proximity to one of the Soviet Union's secret atomic cities, Arzamas-16. I was working on a U.S. Department of Commerce project to set up business centers that served U.S. companies interested in investing in the area. I am proud to say that we put together the first English-language guide to Nizhny, a city that had been almost hermetically sealed until 1991. I also worked for a Russian IT company in Moscow that was on the verge of bankruptcy. At the time, I was the only foreigner in a group of about 80 employees – and so had a unique opportunity to learn a great deal from my colleagues – who, when I came on board, hadn't been paid for six months.

In China, I worked for the publisher of *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and so I had a chance to travel all over the region and to meet with business and political leaders. I also had the incomparable research tools of *The Journal* at my disposal. It is at this time that I started to develop the ideas that led me to write *The Next Great Clash*.

### With America's overwhelming advantages in almost every sphere, do the Chinese even stand a chance?

China's alliance with Russia protects its northern flank so the U.S. would have to attack from China's east coast – across the Pacific Ocean. Even if the U.S. did use nuclear weapons, almost 70 percent of China's population – about 800 million people – lives in rural areas.

Although the U.S. far outspends China's military and has an incomparable technological advantage, China has its vast population that is used to deprivation and sacrifice. China is all fired up because its time has finally come, and China's Communist Party excels at mobilizing the people. Just watch the upcoming Summer Olympics in Beijing...

China also has an arsenal of new and untested methods of warfare: it can flood the financial markets with its vast horde of dollars; it can zap military satellites; it can commandeer the information highway and impose a global Great Firewall to contain the media.

### What to watch for now?

In March 2008, Russia and Taiwan will hold presidential elections – although in Russia's case, it looks as though Putin will appoint a caretaker president until he can run again for a third term. Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-Bian, will be stepping down in March after serving two terms. There is speculation that Chen, a lame duck, will ratchet up tensions between China and Taiwan, and that China's response will be muted because it is hosting the Summer Olympics in Beijing. Based on appointments to China's nine-man Politburo Standing Committee at its 17<sup>th</sup> Congress in October 2007, President Hu's control of the party apparatus appears tenuous and so less moderate factions within China's leadership may counsel against restraint if Chen pushes too far. Wisely or not, none of the U.S. presidential candidates has addressed the question of Taiwan's independence – nor have they been asked about their policy toward Taiwan in any of the televised debates.