

US guarantees placed them in this predicament

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Canberra Times
18 April 2011
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In 500 years or so, when historians set out to trace the rise and fall of great powers since the end of the Cold War, a good part of the opening chapter might well be devoted to the contradictions of American primacy. There'll be plenty to choose from.

But perhaps the most vexing, certainly the most consequential, is the way United States primacy, an order built on the indomitable power of the United States and designed to entrench American dominance, facilitated the rise of a powerful and dissatisfied China, a peer competitor whose growing power would threaten the foundations of US primacy itself.

Having spent the past 200 years amassing power and thwarting challengers, how did the United States, at the dawn of its unipolar moment, suddenly become so frivolous? This is a big question. Yet as the Chinese Government begins flexing its newly acquired muscle, and as the collective reaction to China's rise graduates in many parts of the world from casual indifference to breathless hysteria, passing every stop along the way, it's worth reviewing the extraordinary confluence of factors that got us here.

It's important to remember that it didn't have to be like this. The sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War deprived US-China relations of their balance-of-power logic, leaving the United States facing a choice: With its alliances and forward deployment in place, and with events at Tiananmen Square in recent memory, the US could easily have recalibrated its Cold-War containment strategy, taking aim at China, an ideological rival and potential future challenger. Alternatively, the US could have dismantled its alliances, withdrawn from Asia, and kept open the option of returning only if China eventually emerged as a threat, too strong to be checked by a combination of Japan and other local powers.

It chose neither. Instead, the US has maintained its Cold War instruments of power but put them to very different use. Rather than using raw power to consolidate its gains, it has sought to entrench its leadership by becoming everything to everyone, most notably the guarantor of regional stability. This was, after all, the "the end of history" and, consequently, the supposed end of geopolitical rivalry as well. Besides, at that point China was so far behind its leaders barely holding on to power, much less threatening to dominate that renewed containment just didn't seem necessary.

If stability was the aim, US strategy has generally succeeded beyond all expectations. Over the past 20 years, the United States has reassured Japan, Taiwan and South Korea about China and North Korea. At the same time, it has reassured China and North Korea by keeping Japan, Taiwan and South Korea on a tight leash. But stability alone has not safeguarded American dominance. With the United States assuming the costs of security, ever greater flows of trade and investment have provided for an enormous level of economic growth and development, allowing China in particular to harness the extraordinary productive capacity of its massive population. Power continues to shift.

In Washington, this has not been a major cause for concern. The conventional assumption however ill-judged it now seems was that a powerful, prosperous and economically interdependent China would be satisfied with the status quo. As a "responsible stakeholder" China could be expected to eschew competitive behaviour because that would undermine an order which accorded, however imperfectly, with China's national interests. But China never did refrain from competitive behaviour it just went about it in a very smart way. Diplomatically and economically, China has made itself

indispensable to the US. Militarily, it made itself indomitable all the while keeping its head down, in accord with Deng Xiaoping's famous advice, taking full advantage of the US's preoccupation with the Middle East and central Asia. Having neglected relative power considerations for two decades, Washington now faces an inescapable strategic dilemma in Asia, though one it has barely begun to reckon with. Its twin goals in the region maintaining stability on the one hand and dominance on the other have become increasingly incompatible. It cannot maintain dominance without competing more intensively with China, yet it cannot compete with China without disrupting Asia's stability and enduring another long, costly and potentially very dangerous cold war which it may not win.

Such is the fate of sacrificial superpowers.

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