

Al-Qaeda distracted the US from the real threat to its dominance

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When the planes hit, America was at the peak of its power, and seemed set to lead the world. Americans, and many others around the globe, were convinced that America was on the threshold of a new American Century, better than the last.

They expected that America's economic dynamism, military power and ideological magnetism would fix the world in its orbit. People spoke, in all seriousness, of a new Rome. Ten years on, that seems a distant dream. America may never recover the glad confidence it lost that day. That is Australia's loss, too.

The prospect of unchallenged American global leadership held bright hopes for Australia, as well, and the different futures now opening before us seem darker and more dangerous by comparison.

So we were right to feel that we were witnessing a turning point in our history, as well as America's. The challenge then, and now, is to understand exactly why.

The September 11 attacks did not themselves destroy the vision of a new American century, nor did the misguided global war on terror.

It has been undermined instead by much deeper, stronger trends, the remarkable shift in power between West and East. But the errors of the war on terror did make these trends much harder to manage. Washington made four big mistakes. It exaggerated al-Qaeda's importance, seeing it as a fundamental challenge to its vision of a US-led global order.

It persuaded itself that this challenge could be defeated by political change in the Middle East driven by large-scale military operations.

It overestimated its ability to conduct such operations. And it ignored, until very recently, the real challenge to its global role - the challenge from China.

It is a little hard now to credit that for several years after 2001, serious and respected policymakers and political leaders argued that al-Qaeda posed as big a threat to the international order and America's place in it as Nazi fascism and Soviet communism had done in their times.

This was always absurd. One could never compare the threat posed to America by Islamist terrorism and the threat posed by the Soviet Union in the Cold War. And yet wise people in America did just that. They mistook al-Qaeda's pointless crime for a challenge to America's survival and predominance. And they believed that if they defeated al-Qaeda they would secure America's place in the world.

Second, they believed that al-Qaeda and similar movements could be defeated by political transformation in the Middle East driven by US armed force.

We live today with the lingering legacy of that illusion in Afghanistan. The question now is why anyone ever believed it. The answer may have a lot to do with the desire to validate the pre-9/11 vision of American leadership by demonstrating American power. One suspects this was an opportunity to show the world that America had the power to defend its position against all.

Third, they believed that America could subdue Iraq and rebuild its political system to suit American interests. This reflected a simple misunderstanding of the nature and limits of American military power.

America has been formidable at sea and in the air, and it has unrivalled ability to destroy other countries' conventional armies.

But it has little capacity to control others' territory and populations, or to shape their political institutions.

Fourth, and most seriously, for nearly a decade America ignored the real challenge to its dreams of global leadership. Future historians will find it hard to explain how the world's most talented country could for so long have persuaded itself that the collapse of two skyscrapers in America told us more about the distribution of world power than the construction of 20,000 in China.

Only since 2009 have Americans begun to wake up to the significance of China's rise. Today we speak of this as the Asian Century, because of the way China's growth has shifted the locus of world power. America now has no chance of unchallenged global leadership, because its primacy in Asia is under threat. It faces instead a hard and unwelcome choice: either accommodate China as an equal partner in Asia, or commit itself to a dangerous and costly strategic competition against a truly formidable adversary.

None of this was caused by September 11, or by the war on terror. China's challenge would have emerged anyway, as long as its economy and ambitions grew. But the way America responded to the attacks has nonetheless made a big difference to the task America now faces as it at last recognises, and strives to come to terms with, China.

First, America is economically weaker than it would otherwise have been. The war on terror has cost trillions, and significantly deepened the fiscal crisis, which will limit American options and policies for a long time. Second, it has exhausted America's armed forces, especially its land forces, which will take decades to recover. Third, it has damaged its credibility as a strategic actor - the hard-won sense that American leaders could be trusted to use the great force at their disposal sensibly.

Fourth, it has damaged their confidence. Americans will look back on the past decade as one of failure, and that will make it harder for them to deal with the big choices ahead.

Perhaps, above all, it has cost them time. For 10 years America has been distracted from the real challenge to its vision of global leadership. Over this decade China's power has grown to the point that America now has far fewer options, and much harder choices, about its future. Australia's choices are harder now, too.

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