



China must see past its own hype of an America in decline by Zha Daojiong

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Talk of the US being on the decline is back in vogue. This time, China features more prominently – if not solely – in the follow-up question: which country is going to benefit? My answer is different: it's certainly not China that will benefit.

Arguably, the first round of sentiment claiming that the United States was in decline emerged in the wake of the Arab oil embargo on the US and its allies in 1973. A little more than a decade later, Japan's rise to be number one in economic affairs helped bring back the questions about America's relative place in the world. However, in both instances, the US managed to have the last laugh.

How does China feature in the current mood in the US about America's place in the world? It is not as if China has behaved as OPEC did in October 1973. Quite the opposite; in fact, Chinese economic growth is helping to power the global economic recovery.

Nor is the Chinese presence in US society even close to that of the Japanese in the mid-1980s. To many US geostrategic thinkers, the crux of the issue is that China, unlike Japan back then, has failed to meet US expectations of evolving to become a "like-minded" country, in either domestic or foreign policy.

To make matters worse, China is simultaneously at odds not just with the US but most of its Asia-Pacific allies on maritime territorial and a host of other diplomatic and geostrategic issues in the Middle East and Africa. To be sure, China is decades away from competing on an equal footing with the US on military terms, if indeed that is ever attainable. But it does seem capable of making the US look hollow when Washington offers to defend its Asian allies against a not-so-thinly-veiled threat.

China abounds with jingoistic rhetoric about a declining US, particularly in the wake of the collapse of a number of large banks in 2008. But it would be a serious error, not to mention profoundly risky, for China to promote domestic and foreign policy choices based on that shallow premise. One should remember that, in the past half century, the US has managed to rejuvenate its economy, regain social cohesion, and maintain its influence in setting standards in global economic and military affairs. Indeed, the very fact that rhetoric about the US in decline has resurfaced in US society is, in itself, a sign of strength, starting with brutal self-reflection.

One risk for China is that if it does indeed conclude that the US is on a path of decline, it may then think the time has come to design domestic political and economic policies in a purportedly unique Chinese way. China's top leadership is correct to remind the country that reform is a never-ending process. As to how to reform, China can learn from the US. If anything, what comes across as US pressure or seemingly excessive demands ought not to be dismissed as unwanted intrusion.

Chinese analysts can better serve their country by publicly admitting that policy ideas from the US, not just finance or export opportunities, have contributed positively to China's prosperity.

Another risk, more so for the Chinese thinkers considering the country's foreign policy choices, is to continue triangulating the geostrategic situations in China's neighborhood and beyond, with the US seen as that ever-present third party. It is self-defeating to believe that now the US is on the decline, China can afford to be less mindful of possible repercussions in policy choices toward another country.

For China, the US, and the other party, it is useful to bear in mind the saying that it takes three legs to keep a stool stable. In other words, to avoid a downward spiral in regional security dynamics, it is essential to ditch the thinking that one party's loss means an automatic gain for the other two. Each pair of countries should learn to work out their differences by themselves.

Whether the US is in decline is really more a matter of perception than fact.

At the end of the day, what happens inside the US – and in China for that matter – will dictate whether it thrives or falters, more than any outside influence. What really matters is that both China and the US learn to accept some level of unpredictability about the future and proceed to interact with each other.

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