

HISTORY/POLITICS

America in Retreat: The Decline of US Leadership from WW2 to Covid-19

By Michael Pembroke

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Between 1947 and 1989, the US attempted to overthrow 72 foreign governments. Among the most notorious interventions was the CIA-led coup against Iran's democratically-elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, in 1953. Iran's oil industry was controlled by the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. When Mosaddeq nationalised the company, the British appealed for US support. The CIA orchestrated the overthrow of Mosaddeq and restored royal dictatorship to Iran. It safeguarded Western control of Iran's petroleum resources, but incited anti-American sentiment that erupted in the 1979 revolution and that contaminates the fraught US-Iran relationship today.

The history of the US since World War II is marked by a series of foreign interventions, including Vietnam (1963), Chile (1973), and Iraq (2003), that fatally undermined the principles of the rules-based order – a set of international codes and institutions – to which the US ostensibly subscribed. Ironically, the US was chiefly responsible for inaugurating this rules-based order. In 1945, the authority of the US was peerless. After it helped seal victory in World War II in Europe and Asia, the US assumed a central role in establishing the United Nations. But almost immediately, the US, as it overreacted to the threat of the USSR, compromised its values in pursuit of a ferocious ideological war.

Michael Pembroke's nimble, lucid, and succinct *America in Retreat* consists of two main parts: tracking how the US betrayed its international supremacy during the last 75 years and charting the unassailable rise of China since the turn of the century. Arguing that its dubious position as the global epicentre of Covid-19 encapsulates the current weaknesses of the US, Pembroke, a former Australian supreme court judge, insists that we're living through a post-American era and that the tectonic shift in power from the US to China represents the "defining truth of our times".

Under then-president Donald Trump, the US became the only country to withdraw from the Paris climate accord. For Pembroke, such resolute unilateralism conforms with how the US repositioned itself from world leader in 1945 to rogue state in the 21st century. It's an exaggeration, but it emphasises the extent of the country's volte-face. The US tendency to act unilaterally and to embrace military solutions when confronted with international political problems stems from its history of defining its national strength by its military prowess.

No country spends more on its military or exports more weapons than the US, and the country is a world leader in foreign military bases. Before World War II, the US had none. Now, stretching from Greenland to Australia, the US has approximately 800 foreign military bases. The US claims that its military presence helps make the world safer, but frequently, such as in the Middle East, it enflames local tensions.

In contrast, China's last major international conflict was the Korean War (1950-53). After 40 years of unrivalled prosperity, today China is the world's largest buyer of resources, exporter of goods, and trading nation. The outstanding symbol of China's upsurge is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Reminiscent of the Silk Road, the BRI is a colossal infrastructure project – involving overland corridors and maritime shipping lanes – that's expected to cost more than €900 billion. Incorporating 71 countries and stretching from Asia to Europe and Africa, the BRI is an ambitious attempt to enhance China's international influence.

Pembroke believes that China aims to be the world's foremost economic power rather than a principal political or military force. But scheduled for completion on the centennial of the founding of China's People's Republic in 2049, the scale of the BRI has sparked fears about China's expansionist agenda. Indeed, Pembroke's uncritical interpretation of the BRI is consistent with his unquestioning assessment of China's rise and underscores a persistent tension in the book: while Pembroke forensically exposes US flaws, he is almost silent on China's catalogue of human rights violations.

That caveat aside, Pembroke fashions a pertinent, largely persuasive thesis that balances a focus on recent events with a recognition of history's broader sweep. While the US was in the ascendancy for most of the 20th century and the West has dominated since the 1800s, China was the world's leading economic power for most of the last two millennia. Its time has come again.