

Pragmatism not American Militarism is the answer

By Michael Pembroke

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Just as most Australians probably do not wish to see the 'Americanisation' of our police services – through excessive militarisation, more powerful arms, more sophisticated equipment and battlefield tactics – so we should resist the call to arms from the anti-China enthusiasts in Washington.

There is no getting away from the fact that China is the principal engine of the world economy. Bloomberg reported in 2019 that China accounted for one third of global growth. The International Monetary Fund projected that by 2024, China's contribution to global growth would exceed 28 per cent – while that of the United States would fall from 13.8 per cent to 9.2 per cent. The Covid-induced global recession will alter the numbers but is unlikely to change the trajectory. It is more likely to increase the disparity. China is also by far Australia's largest trading partner – almost three times larger than the United States. And it has now replaced the United States as Australia's top research partner. Our East Asian neighbours all have China as their largest trading partner. They have their disputes and differences with China, not the least being those that relate to the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands. But every one of them wants an accommodation with China that will permit them to coexist in relative peace, despite those differences. None of them desires military confrontation with China.

Yet it is a very different story in far off America. You cannot get into the room in Washington unless you subscribe to a dire, dyspeptic view that advocates a new war (not necessarily cold) with China; that calls for America and its allies to draw the battle lines and engage in a great Manichean struggle that will define the next century. China is labelled as an 'adversary', a 'strategic enemy' and a 'revisionist power' in the US National Security and Defence Strategies. President Trump's close advisor, Peter Navarro, is the author of books that include *Death by China* and *The Coming China Wars*. And his secretary of state, the evangelical Mr Pompeo, recently raised the rhetoric to surreal and dangerous levels, effectively calling – not for the first time since 1945 – for regime change, and describing conflict with China as one 'between freedom and tyranny'.

This is the most destabilising aspect of Washington's twenty-first century world view – its relentless and unwavering anti-China conviction. It has some adherents in the corridors of power in Whitehall, Ottawa and Canberra but less elsewhere. It is far from a universal view. Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, spoke for many when he told an audience of foreign and defence ministers at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue: 'This negative view of China has permeated the US establishment. It is not confined to the White House or the Administration, but is shared widely by Congress, the military, the media, academics and NGOs too'. He added: 'Those inclined to a more positive view of China have been marginalised'.

Washington's negative view is fuelled by a nativist fear that a new world is coming into being – one being shaped in distant lands and by foreign people; that American leadership is under threat; and that the United States will cease to be the dominant force it once was. All of those things will happen. But fear is a corrosive that searches for blame and results in denial. Strategic distrust of China has become an American national security and defence policy, just as strategic distrust of Soviet Russia prevailed during the Cold War.

But as the Cold War scholar and China specialist Odd Arne Westad has reminded us, there is no irreconcilable ideological divide between China and the United States, as there once was with Moscow. Soviet ideology was inherently opposed to any long-term coexistence with the West. By contrast, Chinese society 'is more similar to American society than Soviet society ever was'. And for the vast majority of Chinese, 'communism is simply a name for the ruling party rather than an ideal to seek'. The Chinese people are 'interested above all in getting ahead in their competitive, market oriented society'. They recognise that globalisation is an opportunity, not a loss of sovereignty.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made the same point:

China may be communist in political structure, but ^[...]_{SEP} it has adopted market principles in many areas. The Soviets sought to overturn the world order. But China has benefitted from, and by and large worked within, the framework of existing multilateral institutions. During the Cold War, the Communist bloc sought to export Communism to the world. But China today is not attempting to turn other countries Communist.

And unlike the former Soviet Union, China is more integrated and connected with the world, including the United States, than almost any other country. Soviet Russia's economic links outside the Soviet bloc were negligible; it refused to join the world economy. By contrast, China will continue to be the largest contributor to the world's growth by a substantial margin. Most of the East Asian nations, in particular China, are positioned to fare better and recover faster from the pandemic than the rest of the world.

Slaying the dragon will not work. We should be cautious of the judgment of the United States and sometimes sceptical of its motives and interests. Pragmatism, strategic realism and sensitivity are called for – not Washington's moral judgment and binary analysis. Australia should model restraint and moderation; keep a cool head 'when all about are losing theirs'; and put our own interests in East Asia first.