Drop the Fallacy: The United States Is Not Blocking China’s Rise

BY DENNY ROY

Many Chinese believe the United States is attempting to prevent China from becoming a great power that could challenge US preeminence in the Asia-Pacific region. They allege that the United States seeks to "contain" China or "check China's rise." Some analysts outside China agree. Australia's respected strategic thinker Hugh White, for example, argues in a recent Lowy Interpreter blog posting that while the US government claims to be defending international norms, in fact the "rules" of the US-enforced order include China "accepting American primacy" and "abandon[ing] its aspirations for a larger regional role."

The idea that the United States will not allow China to "rise" is wrong. It is also dangerous, adding an unnecessary layer of tension into US-China relations as these two countries work through a difficult transition in the regional power structure. The truth is that under the "hegemony" of a regional order sponsored and enforced by the United States, China's economic, technological and military rise has been virtually unabated. China is becoming a great power even amidst the Chinese claim that they are being "contained."

It is a preference, but not a vital interest, of the US government that China does not become either a strong military power or a rival for regional leadership. Nevertheless, Washington is not actively opposing the rise of China. The regional security order the US helped to build up and continues to maintain includes certain features that are at least partly intended to deter or defeat possible PRC uses of force in contravention of US wishes. Yet this US-led order does not prevent China from becoming a great power. Economic cooperation with the United States massively increases China's wealth accumulation, economic growth and technological advancement. The United States would not and could not forcibly prevent its security partners from accommodating China and following Chinese rather than American leadership. Governments currently friendly towards the United States are free to discontinue defense cooperation, withdraw from their alliances, and evict US bases.

Even if one assumes that US policy in Asia has no motive other than its own selfish promotion of US preeminence, Washington has good strategic reasons for rejecting a policy of trying to prevent the rise of China. First, other governments would not join in. All of the Asia-Pacific countries want to do business with China and none wants to unnecessarily spoil a profitable bilateral relationship. Without the support of other states, a US attempt to contain China would be untenable. Second, attempted containment would antagonize China, ensuring long-term hostility toward the United States. The US government clearly tries to avoid such antagonism whenever possible, seemingly taking to heart the notion made famous by Joseph Nye that if China is treated as an enemy, then China will become an enemy. Third, simply attempting to weaken China would create
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