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

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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."

Denny Roy, Senior Research Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that "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."

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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strategic problems rivaling those created by a super-strong China. The region remembers the Japanese invasion of China during the Pacific War and the dangerous bravado of an insecure China during the early years of CCP rule. An economic or political collapse in China would cause turmoil in the countries on China's periphery. China has recently become such a global economic engine that a Chinese downturn could threaten the underpinnings of national and regime security in other Asian states. So an outright US policy of trying to prevent China's rise would result in the worst of both worlds: China would rise anyway, and the new, stronger China would be an unambiguous adversary of the United States.

In fact, it is a caricature to see US policy toward China as simply an effort to undercut a potential rival. Americans harbor two additional generations-old instincts toward China. One is to increase bilateral trade, working toward fulfilling the imagined potential of China to serve as a market for US products and services. The second is to "lift up" China by sharing what Americans see as blessings: originally Christianity, now democracy. This may be called arrogant or condescending, but it is not ill-intended, contrary to the view of some Chinese that Americans cynically use democratization as a means of weakening other states to perpetuate US domination. These US impulses to build up China coexist with fears that a burgeoning and possibly revisionist "communist" super-state might threaten the interests of the United States and its friends in the region. The result is a hybrid US policy toward China that includes deep economic engagement and encouragement of Chinese participation in multilateral institutions alongside diplomatic and military "hedging" that aims to deter China from following certain courses of action.

To be sure, US strength and leadership in the region prevents the Chinese from doing everything they wish. Washington insists that a Taiwan Strait solution must have the assent of Taiwan's people and that China should not be allowed to force its will upon other claimant nations in the South China Sea territorial disputes. But neither is the United States able to fully implement its agenda because of Chinese opposition. Chinese diplomatic and economic support for North Korea, for example, thwarts US-sponsored efforts to pressure Pyongyang to turn away from its criminal behavior. On balance, even with the United States as the strongest strategic actor in the Asia-Pacific, China is already accomplishing its most important goals of economic development, increased security and enhanced leverage both within the region and globally.

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US policy toward China is more accommodation than containment. President George W. Bush stated in 2002 that the United States intended to keep its "military strengths beyond challenge" by any other country. Bush's Quadrennial Defense Review in 2006 outlined that the United States will "ensure that no foreign power can dictate the terms of regional or global security" and would dissuade "any military competitor from developing . . . capabilities that could enable regional hegemony or hostile action against the United States or other friendly countries." China went ahead with developing these capabilities anyway, including the DF-21D "carrier killer" anti-ship ballistic missile designed to keep US naval task forces from intervening in western Pacific military conflicts against China's wishes. Having failed to dissuade China from pursuing a massive buildup of modernized military forces, Washington changed its approach to calling on the Chinese for more "transparency" in the intentions behind this buildup.

China is thriving and winning under the auspices of a regional order allegedly designed to maintain American preeminence. Indeed, the path is clear for China to gain greater regional leadership by working within the established rules if China's relative economic growth continues. Good international citizenship—demonstrated by adherence to norms widely accepted within the region, rather than aggressive pursuit of narrow Chinese interests—will enhance China's regional leadership position, while the opposite will engender resistance from regional middle and smaller powers. Ironically for its detractors, US hegemony leaves the door open for a successor and does not legitimize attempts by a decaying hegemon to hang on for too long, should that day arrive.