

The Power of Unintended Consequences: Strategic Naïvety, China and the End of the US Empire

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Abstract

The decline of major global empires has frequently rested upon an act of strategic naïvety. Such an action or decision, although innocuous at the time, results many decades later in those empires collapsing. History is punctuated by examples of great powers that have misjudged the intentions of a rising power, leading to a highly adversarial relationship. Such unintended consequences can be seen in United States policy towards China, which has allowed Beijing to emerge as a clear competitor that is threatening to usurp US hegemony. This article considers these dynamics across seven major empires, dating from ancient Carthage circa 814 BC to modern day Pax Americana. By connecting the past to the present, we find that comparable acts of strategic naïvety by other empires are now increasingly evident in current US-China relations, and which have often occurred for similar reasons.

Keywords: China, United States, great powers, imperial decline, empire, strategy

THE DECLINE OF major global empires has often rested upon an act of strategic naïvety. Such an action or decision, although innocuous at the time, results many decades later in those empires collapsing. Such unintended consequences can be seen in United States (US) policy towards China, which has allowed Beijing to emerge as a clear competitor that is threatening to usurp US hegemony. Many other empires have displayed such tactical short-sightedness, which has planted the seeds of their own destruction. History is punctuated by examples of great powers that have misjudged the intentions of a rising power, leading to a highly adversarial relationship. Connecting the past to the present, comparable acts of strategic naïvety have frequently occurred for similar reasons present in current US-China relations.

The main reason for acts of strategic naïvety is the blind pursuit of wealth, mainly through the opening of new markets and trade routes. This pursuit is commonly supplemented with the belief that being an empire will necessarily mean taking the lion's share of any new-found fortunes, thus maintaining its pre-eminence. Second, there is the conviction that cooperating with any competitor will result in the rival being assimilated into existing power

balances, thus acting to preserve—rather than destabilise—an empire's existing regional or global order. Third, is an inability to extrapolate sufficiently the impact of an act of strategic naïvety into the future. This is regularly clouded by a sense of innate superiority by the empire that it holds a fundamentally unassailable position. This last point belies a repeated unwillingness by the most powerful countries to learn from their own histories and those of others, which are peppered by examples of such myopia and their disastrous consequences.

Although the nature of the international system has evolved over the last few thousand years, it fundamentally rests upon the fluctuation of material power between the world's foremost powers. The persistence of this ongoing competition and need for dominance underlines the interconnection of different empires over time. It also shows how the actions of different empires at their peak, and the unintended consequences that they facilitate, continue to resonate across history. This article considers these dynamics across seven major empires, dating from ancient Carthage circa 814 BCE to the modern-day *Pax Americana.*, and by doing so yields lessons for the future trajectory of both the US and China.

The Carthaginian Empire

Strategic naïvety, rooted in the belief of one's own superiority and positive precedents in a bilateral relationship, is almost as old as recorded human history. One such example was Ancient Carthage's naïve approach to relations with the rising Roman Republic in the fifth to third centuries BCE. While many know of the Punic Wars, a contest lasting over 100 years between the two states for hegemony in the Mediterranean Sea, fewer recall that for hundreds of years prior Carthage and Rome were allies. The two signed at least three treaties of friendship in 509, 380, and 279 BCE. For most of this period, Rome was the weaker partner in both military and economic terms and entered into these agreements under duress, hard-pressed by continuing wars of expansion with other city-states across the Italian Peninsula.¹

Throughout this tumultuous period in Rome's history, Romans could count on useful grain imports from Carthage to alleviate poor harvests and on the vastly superior Carthaginian navy for maritime protection. Under the 279 BCE treaty, Rome and Carthage entered into an alliance against Epirus, which harboured expansionist designs on Roman Italy and Carthaginian Sicily. As wartime allies, Carthaginian ships interdicted Epirus' reinforcements in the Adriatic Sea, while Rome wore down the Epirot army in a series of battles in southern Italy. Despite this fruitful alliance, less than twelve years later they would find themselves at war.

At the root of Carthage's eventual defeat in the Punic Wars lay the city-state's ignorance towards changing dynamics in the western Mediterranean over the preceding centuries. Until their alliance, the merchant families of Carthage viewed Rome as just one of many, roughly equal Latin city-states. Rome was also a valuable commercial target for metal exports, an industry in which the Carthaginians dominated by virtue of their trade networks' ability to connect the Mediterranean to the few known sources of tin. Lost on the Carthaginian elite was that Rome had created a military machine superior to any prior Latin

or Greek polity.² As each decade after the initial 509 BCE treaty brought Roman conquests in Italy, Carthage could have supported some of Rome's early adversaries, though demurred for the sake of commercial opportunity and faith in their various treaties. Such was Carthaginian trust in Rome that the vast majority of its military forces were deployed in Spain rather than in Sicily at the time of the Roman attack that initiated the Punic Wars in 264 BCE. This conflict culminated in Rome's sacking and demolition of Carthage in 146 BCE.

The Byzantine Empire

Strategic naïvety does not always result from overly optimistic assumptions towards an erstwhile ally. Rather, great powers can often commit grave errors by assuming that the policies previously used to defeat or manage an adversary will continue to be effective without modification. The Byzantine Empire's mishandling of the Rashidun Caliphate, ruled by the Prophet Muhammad's four successors from 632–661 CE, is an example of this phenomenon. Byzantine emperors from the fourth to sixth centuries were disinterested in the Arabian Peninsula, being more concerned with security challenges in the Balkans and Anatolia. Yet, continuous raiding by Bedouin groups, coupled with the participation of Arab tribes on the side of a Byzantine rival, the Sassanid Empire, in several wars, necessitated a shift in policy.³ The Byzantines opted to divide and rule; picking a specific tribe and providing it with sufficient military and financial aid so as to contain threats emanating from Arabia.

The Ghassanids, an Arab Christian tribal confederation located across modern Syria and Jordan, was the last such Byzantine vassal in the seventh century. With minimal investment from Constantinople, the Ghassanids possessed sufficient strength to bribe, co-opt, extort, or militarily suppress any of the tribes that threatened the Trans-Arabian trade that connected the Byzantines to Southern Asia.

²N. Bagnall, *The Punic Wars: Rome, Carthage, and the Struggle for the Mediterranean*, London, Pimlico, 1990, pp. 321–335.

³R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2001, pp. 48–101.

¹B. D. Boyos, *Unplanned Wars: The Origins of the First and Second Punic Wars*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1998, pp. 5–27.

This approach began to fail when in 629 the Ghassanids, in keeping with their role as the Byzantine's security guarantor, assassinated a Muslim emissary, which prompted the Rashidun Caliphate to send a retaliatory expedition. Though the Muslims lost the resulting Battle of Mu'ta, the Ghassanids required substantial Byzantine military forces to repel the attack. Moreover, unlike previous raiding parties that disintegrated after the death of a leader, the Rashidun Caliphate forces withdrew in good order following the elimination of their commanders.⁴

Despite this noted change in their adversary's capabilities, the Byzantines did not dramatically alter their strategy. Instead, the empire contented itself with the waning ability of the Ghassanids to protect themselves from attack. This approach proved to be inadequate when one of the Prophet's companions raided Byzantine Syria in 632. Nor did the Byzantines allocate any resources to affect the later Al Rid-dah (Apostasy Wars)—a series of conflicts between the Rashidun Caliphate and the remaining non-Muslim tribes in Arabia from 632–33—during which the caliphate was vulnerable. The continued failure to change their strategy or further bolster their Ghassanid vassals left the Byzantine Empire unprepared when the Rashidun Caliphate returned intent on conquest in 634. On this occasion, they crushed the combined Byzantine-Ghassanid forces in several confrontations.

The Venetian Republic

Several centuries later, another instance of strategic naïvety involved the Venetian Republic's (*La Serenissima*) approach towards the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. After 1381, Venice was emerging as a hegemon in the Mediterranean region, having defeated its main rival, Genoa, and gaining mercantile supremacy in the Adriatic, Aegean and Black Seas.⁵ Much of Venice's wealth came from exploitative trade with the ailing Byzantine Empire,

which by this point relied on the Venetians for its financial solvency and maritime defence. As the Byzantines' military defeats at the hands of the rising Ottoman Empire mounted, and as one by one the Levantine trade nodes within the region fell into Turkish hands, the Venetians were surprisingly unconcerned. Instead, *La Serenissima* believed that it could maintain its dominant position by cultivating a cooperative relationship with the rising Ottomans.

This cultivation was based upon three assumptions. First was that the Ottomans would remain a terrestrial military power and would not seriously contest Venetian control of the sea. The 1422–1430 Siege of Thessalonica proved otherwise, when Sultan Murad II raised a navy to cut off the city from resupply and wrestled the city from Venetian control. The second assumption was that Venice's critical contributions to the Ottoman economy as shipbuilders, navigators and merchants would dissuade competition and conflict between them. This proved to be a demonstration of naïvety, as well as hubris, as the Venetians needed Ottoman grain far more than the Ottoman economy required goods from Europe or Venetian naval expertise. Throughout the 1400s and 1500s, the Ottoman Empire periodically initiated wars against Venice upon the flimsiest of pretexts, yet *La Serenissima* never wavered from the belief that it was an invaluable part of the Ottoman economy.

The final assumption was that, following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the experienced Venetian diplomatic community in the city would manage the Ottoman's territorial expansion. This would guarantee Venice's privileged trading position. The reality was that Venetian diplomats and their families were hostages whose captivity instead restricted *La Serenissima's* ability to respond to Ottoman aggression. The role of the *bailo*, the chief Venetian diplomat, declined as Ottoman power vastly eclipsed that of Venice and it was replaced by more worthy states across Europe and Asia. Venice's naïve belief that the Byzantine Empire would be replaced by a similar supplicant was its undoing and by the beginning of the sixteenth century *La Serenissima* had lost its status as a great power, ironically becoming reliant on

⁴W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 71–86.

⁵F. C. Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic*, Baltimore MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, pp. 188–199.

increasingly one-sided trade with the Ottomans for its survival.⁶

The Mughal Empire

The example of the Mughal Empire's trusting approach to the East India Company (EIC) in the eighteenth century is particularly applicable towards the modern issue of the US and China. In both, the status quo power presumed itself superior to all challengers, while the rising power amassed strength and learned the weaknesses of its hitherto superior. The first century of Mughal-EIC relations, from roughly 1601 to 1707, seem to confirm the former's dominance. For most of this period, the EIC was the weakest European power on the Indian subcontinent, dwarfed by the Portuguese State of India and the Dutch East India Company. All were clearly subordinate to the Mughals, which boasted a 4.5 million-strong army and an economy that accounted for about a quarter of all global production and trade.⁷ By comparison, the EIC was overwhelmingly reliant on the Royal Navy for maritime protection and had only a modest semi-professional force for land defence. From this basis, the perception at the Mughal court was that European powers lacked the capabilities sufficient for conquest and were useful as feuding intermediaries that granted access to trade with Europe.⁸

And feud they did—the EIC, Portugal, and the Dutch Republic fought multiple, predominantly naval, battles in the seventeenth century. While victorious over Portugal, the EIC performed poorly against the Dutch at sea, reinforcing the Mughal belief that the EIC presented no significant threat. After defeating the EIC in the 1686–1690 Anglo-Mughal War

and forcing its leaders to prostrate themselves before the emperor, the Mughal Empire had justifiable confidence in its ability to manage British intentions.⁹ The Mughals clung to this belief in their innate superiority vis-à-vis European powers until their defeat by the EIC at the 1757 Battle of Plassey, which ended Mughal dominance on the Indian subcontinent. Central to the EIC's overwhelming victory was their recognition that without capable land forces of its own, it would be vulnerable to Mughal authorities, and so vowed to create a standing army. By 1750, the EIC fielded a military, trained in the tactics of the European military revolution and staffed by seasoned British and Indian soldiers.

The other major development was the EIC's awareness of the weakening of the Mughal government's central authority. Over the eighteenth century, the *nawab* Mughal governors amassed sufficient wealth and power so as to no longer require protection from the empire, whose security guarantee was dubious in the wake of its difficulties in putting down Maratha and Sikh rebellions in the early 1700s. The EIC exploited the divisions of the Mughal Empire—promising one *nawab* protection against another in return for economic and territorial concessions. Weak or destitute *nawabs* also surrendered their holdings to the EIC, which in turn defended its acquisitions with an army that swelled to roughly 18,000 members by the mid-eighteenth century. The Mughal Empire neither revised its assessment of the EIC's capabilities, nor contemplated developing a merchant fleet of its own. It was thus unable to end its dependence on Europeans for transoceanic trade and so was unable to abate its loss of sovereignty over the latter 1700s.

The Comanche Empire

The North American continent has also experienced acts of strategic naïvety. By the late 1700s, the Comanche Empire (*Comancheria*) had won great power status by carving out a territory consisting of modern day Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico out of the northern frontier of New Spain. The 1785 peace

⁶E. R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Baltimore MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, pp. 23–40; D. M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 358–380.

⁷A. De la Garza, *The Mughal Empire at War: Babur, Akbar and the Indian Military Revolution, 1500–1605*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, pp. 5–21.

⁸A. Phillips, *How the East was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest, and the Making of Modern Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 22–44.

⁹J. Wilson, *The Chaos of Empire: The British Raj and the Conquest of India*, New York, Public Affairs, 2016, pp. 27–55.

treaty between the Comanches and the Spaniards was more the latter's recognition of Comanche military supremacy and an attempt to end Comanche raids, than an agreement between peers.¹⁰ From the 1790s, merchants from the US began arriving in the American Southwest, bringing guns, metal goods, clothing and later luxury items like coffee and sugar in return for Comanche bison and horses. The Comanches welcomed these merchants, who labelled themselves fellow 'natives' and 'brothers' to the Comanche people.¹¹ The period from 1800 to 1840 witnessed an outpouring of goodwill between *Comancheria* and the US, underpinned by the lucrative weapons trade along the Santa Fe Trail. So strong were mercantile contacts that some American gunmakers served alongside Comanche forces during their wars against other Native American tribes.

The Comanche Empire's strategic naïvety towards the US is most evident in two incidents that should have prompted a strategic shift. The first was the implementation of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, during which time Comanche chiefs witnessed thousands of Native Americans—who had been defeated in battle and displaced by the US east of the Mississippi River—settling on the edges of *Comancheria* territory. This visceral reminder of American territorial ambitions prompted no change in Comanche strategy. Instead, the Comanche Empire maintained close relations with the US and allowed Washington to mediate conflicts between themselves and the displaced tribes in 1834 and 1835.

The second episode was the US's annexation of Texas in 1845. Prior to this event, the Comanche Empire continuously raided Texas, both while it was a Spanish province and as an independent republic. It did so in order to ensure a steady supply of cattle and slaves for its economy. After the annexation, the Comanches trusted the friendly US to maintain peace on *Comancheria's* eastern frontier while they refocused their raids on Mexico. Comanche attacks on Mexico in the 1840s were

so devastating that they directly contributed to the relative ease of the US's victory in the Mexican-American War of 1846–48. However, what the Comanche Empire failed to perceive was that the incorporation of the adversarial Texans into the American body politic had changed and essentially rebalanced US-Comanche relations. After defeating Mexico, the US's federal government turned on the Comanche and supported the campaigns of the Texas Rangers to conquer *Comancheria* and resettle Comanches on reservations from the 1850s through the 1870s. Faced with American advantages in demographics, industry and martial capability, the Comanche Empire paid for its strategic blunders with the collapse of its independence.

The Dutch Empire

An additional example of strategic naïvety centers on the strategy of the Dutch Empire towards the Empire of Japan in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For over two hundred years prior, the Dutch had been the sole Western power permitted to trade and interact with Tokugawa Japan. Initially restricted to purely mercantile pursuits, technological and cultural exchanges followed in 1720 when Shogun Yoshimune lifted the ban on non-religious Western books. Dutch scholars visited Japan and opened schools and brought knowledge of aviation, electricity and chemistry to the Tokugawa court.¹² Dutch merchants profited greatly from the *Rangaku*, the period of exclusive interaction between the Netherlands and Japan, while various shoguns rewarded them with exemptions from the harsh penalties used against other foreigners in the country. Such was the strength of Dutch-Japanese ties that the former informed the shogunate of the US's intention to force Japan to trade with Western powers a year before the arrival of the 1853 Perry Expedition.

Following the opening of Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century, the last shoguns and the Emperor Meiji turned to the Dutch to help accelerate their military modernisation. The first steamship and the first screw-

¹⁰T. W. Kavanagh, *The Comanches: A History, 1706–1875*, Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, pp. 110–113.

¹¹T. R. Fehrenbach, *Comanchies: A History of a People*, New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2010 [2003], pp. 263–277.

¹²T. Jackson, *Network of Knowledge: Western Science and the Tokugawa Information Revolution*, Honolulu HI, University of Hawaii Press, 2016, pp. 99–105, 164.

driven ships in the Japanese navy were gifts from the Dutch Empire, which also built and staffed the first naval academy in Japan at Nagasaki that trained some of the founders of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Other fruits of this relationship included the creation of the first factories, shipyards, hospitals and laboratories in Japan. With the support of the Dutch and other European powers, the newfound Empire of Japan embarked on a dramatic expansion in power, eventually eclipsing all other states in the eastern Pacific with successful military campaigns against China, Korea and Russia.¹³

The Netherlands' strategic naïvety was rooted in their belief that these mutually beneficial and longstanding ties would preserve Japan as an ally in the Pacific. The Dutch clung to this fiction despite stark reminders of Japan's hunger for resources and its territorial acquisitions in Taiwan (1895), Korea (1905), Germany's Pacific colonies (1914) and Manchuria (1932). Over the course of 1900–1940, the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), charged with maintaining control over the oil and rubber-rich Dutch East Indies, undertook few preparations towards readying the islands for attack by Japan. Thus, at the outbreak of hostilities, the KNIL was still a colonial policing force with 30,000 lightly armed troops, rather than a fully equipped military. The Royal Netherlands Navy did not have capital ships stationed in the Pacific during the prelude to war, content instead to have smaller surface combatants in the vicinity to protect trade. So lackadaisical was the Dutch approach that they opted largely to transfer the defence of their own colony to US and British leaders in the neighbouring Philippines and Singapore, respectively. The Dutch government, exiled owing to the German occupation, would only declare war on Japan after Tokyo's invasion preparations had already begun and only then at the urging of the US and Britain. After a three-month long campaign, the Japanese seized the Dutch East Indies from one of their oldest allies and held what would then become Indonesia until the end of World War II.

¹³E. J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945*, Lawrence KS, University Press of Kansas, 2009, pp. 2–33.

Pax Americana

Dating from the 1972 US-China rapprochement, Washington's strategic naïvety stemmed from the belief that supporting China in liberalising its economy in the 1970s would lead to the democratisation of its domestic politics. By extension, Beijing would then adopt universal Western-centric human rights, marking the triumph of the liberal international order. It was foregrounded, in October 1971, by the US facilitating the admission of the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the United Nations General Assembly and expelling Taiwan. This act gave Beijing a permanent veto seat in the UN Security Council and a key systemic power in international affairs. It also conferred legitimacy upon the modern PRC and the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which had come to power in 1949.

Initiated through meetings between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong, this approach intrinsically argued that 'by integrating China into the international order, it will be socialized into the international norms of behavior while increasing their stake in the current system'.¹⁴ This integration into Western-dominated and US-constructed international institutions and organisations would not only help China to become a 'responsible actor'. It would also serve to constrain Beijing's threat to the wider liberal international order, neuter China's threat as a great power competitor and leave the US's primacy unquestioned. As the global system's premier gatekeeper, US leaders explicitly enabled this process, which sought to contain China within the core global power structures that it had created.

Instead, over the next fifty years, such support allowed China to amass world-leading economic power, and between 1980 and 2020 China's GDP grew 77-fold, whilst the US's grew 7-fold.¹⁵ Such seismic growth placed China at the fulcrum of the global financial system and created considerable interdependencies between Beijing and the

¹⁴D. Byman, R. Cliff and P. Saunders, 'US policy options towards an emerging China', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1999, p. 427.

¹⁵World Bank Data, 'GDP (PPP)', 2021; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US>

global economy. As a result, virtually all the world's great and middle powers, including the US, and all of Beijing's neighbours, came to have China as their largest trading partner. Despite such dramatic growth, China's authoritarian political regime remained intact and emboldened, unthreatened by liberal democratic influences. This fusion has instead led to an authoritarian-capitalist system that diverges from the liberal economic ideal and has showcased to other autocratic leaders that economic development does not need to come via political democratisation.

In more recent decades, this economic strength has translated into considerable institutional prowess, including Beijing's creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which are giving China the ability to invoke normative change within the international system. In concert, these groupings are challenging 'the exclusivity of Western-created international organizations and are reorienting the international order along more China-centric lines'.¹⁶ In turn, China's military spending also increased 22-fold from 1989 to 2020, whilst that of the US rose 2.4-fold and acts to protect Beijing's autonomy, whilst further serving to challenge wider US hegemony.¹⁷

Rather than validating US policy beliefs, China's rise has thus instead shattered them, which is acting both as a catalyst for the US's imperial deterioration and as a stimulus for Beijing's counter challenge. Despite the best of intentions, Washington finds itself in a position whereby its global empire—and more importantly, the perception surrounding that empire—is in seemingly terminal decline. Moreover, this decline is being accompanied by the global ascent of China, the very competitor that the policies of the last five decades were meant to prevent. On virtually all great power measures—be they economic, military, diplomatic—such a correlation is apparent and is, furthermore, accelerating, which is heightening this system-changing

phenomenon. Such unintended consequences are the hallmarks of the latest historical case of strategic naïvety: not only do they invert the US's attempts to contain China, but are so tectonic that they now announce the waning of the very empire that this approach was meant to protect and sustain.

Learning From the Past

The US is not the first and nor will it be the last empire which thought that its colossal power had the capacity to subsume and incorporate all rivals into its global vision. Such a belief has been common across many empires, as has been both carrying out an imprudent act of strategic naïvety and the unintended consequences that any such act has brought. Notwithstanding the obvious difficulty of predicting the future, it is evident that history does provide us with enough examples—and some useful hindsight—to temper contemporary policy making. At the very least, history identifies particular warnings for empires of any age and the consequences to be experienced when such warnings are ignored.

From the cases above, we can draw useful analogies for how Washington's strategic naïvety will eventually pan out. Such consequences will be one or more of several possibilities for the US:

- increase cooperation with China while remaining ignorant to its larger ambitions (the Carthaginian Empire);
- continue deterrent strategies that no longer apply given China's power parity with, and in cases superiority to, the US (the Byzantine Empire);
- become wholly economically dependent upon China (the Venetian Republic);
- rely upon capabilities validated in the last systemic war (World War II) that currently grant the US an advantage, rather than grow proficient in new technologies (the Mughal Empire);
- endure an internal collapse and be absorbed into a China-led world order (the Comanche Empire); or
- ignore the challenge from China until the balance of power has shifted decisively in Beijing's favour, thereby providing China with the opportunity to accelerate US decline (the Dutch Empire).

¹⁶C. Ogden, *The Authoritarian Century: China's Rise and the Demise of the Liberal International Order*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022, p. 145.

¹⁷Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database, 2021; <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

Any such trajectories—or a combination of them—could be the final unintended consequence that marks the end of this US empire. Whilst it may be too late for Washington to learn such lessons, these observations underscore how the teaching and learning of history (and not just after 1945) is vital for sustained success in global affairs—both for our leaders and those who advise them. In 2016, Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson called for a US Council of Historians and pertinently noted Thucydides' erudite observation that 'the events of future history ... will be of the same nature—or nearly so—as the history of the past, so long as men are men'.¹⁸

More tellingly, appreciating the lessons of history is also something that is actively done by China, whose leaders keenly study and learn from the past. Informing both their origins and their trajectory, as Harvard's Tony Saich has noted, 'for the CCP, history is the future', and is not simply a past to be ignored at any cost.¹⁹ Notably here is that across the many Chinese empires of the last 2,000 years—the Han (202–220), Tang (618–907), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties—Beijing has been less prone to acts of grand strategic naïvety. As such, China's supremacy in East Asia has historically been temporarily disrupted by three groups: Central Asian tribes, Japan and the European great powers. In each instance, the dynasty in question did not suffer from naïvety. Rather, China's rulers correctly labelled each entity a threat, yet periodically failed to counteract them owing to issues of capability. Over time, China then found the correct strategy to manage, if not outright defeat, its opponents.

In these ways, by the eighteenth century, China had largely pacified the Central Asian threat by culturally assimilating its elites and

later by sowing discord within tribal confederations through intrigue. To address the military imbalance with Imperial Japan, both the Nationalist and Communist parties of China obtained funding, weapons and soldiers from the West that enabled China's eventual victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Not until the late twentieth century did Beijing devise a way to achieve parity with the West, ironically by applying some of the same strategies that worked against the Mongols and Japanese. Today, the CCP binds foreign business elites to China via cheap labour, assimilates different peoples into its culture through Confucian Institutes and conducts espionage to obtain technologies that allow its industries to compete with US and European conglomerates.

Such actions may explain why these four *Pax Sinicas* persisted over 1,250 years, a portent that suggests Beijing not only produces much more successful empires, but that China's coming hegemony may last far longer than the outgoing *Pax Americana*. However, it is equally important to note that imperial decline once begun is rarely fixed in its outcome. Ancient Rome—from which Washington derives much of its political culture—experienced several inflection points in its history during which it was vulnerable to collapse or foreign subjugation. Its transitions from monarchy, to republic, and to empire, took place amidst existential challenges from the Etruscans, Carthaginians and Parthians, among others. In each case, it overcame these challenges. For these reasons, rebirth in the case of the US remains possible, if not probable, given the importance of its financial institutions and dynamism of its scientific community, which are still the envy of China. Such efforts would benefit from recognising the naïvety that has guided American strategic thinking in the post-Cold War era and its unintended consequences buoying the danger emanating from the Chinese Empire.

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¹⁸Quoted in G. Allison and N. Ferguson, 'Why the US President needs a Council of Historians', *The Atlantic*, September 2016; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/09/dont-know-much-about-history/492746/>

¹⁹Quoted in V. Ni and H. Davidson, 'Summit of political elite opens in China as Xi eyes extraordinary third term', *The Guardian*, 8 November, 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/08/xi-jinping-to-lay-out-vision-for-chinas-future-and-past-at-key-meeting>