

Opinion **US foreign policy**

The US is not responsible for China's rise

The west struggles to understand that the rest of the world has agency of its own

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US secretary of state Henry Kissinger meets Deng Xiaoping in Beijing in 1974. The west might have postponed China's arrival at the top table, but preventing it outright was never in its power © AP

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

You will have seen it play out on the news so often as to become cliché. A bereaved person embarks on a crusade against whichever disease, crime or public safety hazard claimed their loved one. A campaign is set up. Donations roll in. What motivates their efforts is a sincere desire to spare others from the same grief. But so does a deep psychic need to claw back control. Having been done to and acted upon by a capricious world, the feeling of agency, however brief, soothes them.

Nations too have losses to process. Whether or not China ever surpasses it, the US has been bereaved of its 1990s unipolarity. It copes with the trauma by dwelling on what could have been done about it. If only China had not been [waved into](#) the World Trade Organization 20 Decembers ago. If only successive White Houses had not been so credulous in their dealings with Beijing. The recriminations go back to 1949, when, as some Republicans still fancy, the US “lost” China to communism.

On the surface, this self-reproach looks courageous and honest. In fact, it is the easy way out. The alternative is to admit that the much larger and older country was bound for world eminence (again) once it began to open up under [Deng Xiaoping](#) in the 1970s. The west might have postponed its arrival at the top table, at some cost. Preventing it outright was never in its power.

Impotence is more painful to own up to than guilt. The rest of the democratic world

market-friendly reforms. Second, doing so would have somehow only stymied China, and not the west, even though American and other companies gorged on [low-wage labour](#) there ever after.

If this were just academically wrong, it need not detain us. But there are political consequences to this fantasy. One theme that Donald Trump rode to the White House was that US elites were derelict and even complicit in China's rise. Presidents Bill Clinton, [George W Bush](#) and Barack Obama are still held to have sold out industrial America (but not credited for the cheap consumer goods that flowed into many of the same households from a trading China). The premise that a mighty China is some kind of aberration, and not just a regression to the historic mean, props up a lot of [US populism](#).

Progressives have their own version of this solipsism. A [vicious civil war](#) in the Arabian Peninsula? Blame western arms sales. Poverty in Africa? The Washington Consensus. Meltdown in Afghanistan? How dared we [abandon it](#). Even people of a liberal or centre-ground bent have persuaded themselves that Russia is autocratic because Kremlin-friendly magnates are allowed to buy up Mayfair. According to this view of the world, nothing bad happens anywhere that does not trace back to a western root. It is a stab at global consciousness that could not be any more parochial. It is a pretence of humility that is actually the most fantastical claim of omnipotence.

The west is forever confronting a harsh "truth" (how guilty we are) in order to duck a harsher one (how marginal we are). To deny that the rest of the world has a mind and will of its own was strange enough in 1949, when the US accounted for a large enough share of global output to at least aspire to shape distant events. To keep it up in [this century](#) is to live in a self-flattering delirium.

It also gives rise to a jarring intellectual contradiction in Washington. China hawks scold a generation or two of US leadership for enabling its rise. Mike Pompeo, while secretary of state, [seemed to wonder](#) if even Richard Nixon's recognition of the "red" state in 1972 was naive. The trouble with this surface toughness is that it suggests China doesn't have enough going for it to prosper under its own steam. If so, why the hawkishness? Why the eternal vigilance and military largesse? China cannot be an awesome century-long rival and an unwitting creation of soft-headed free-trade liberals all at once.

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