

TOM SWITZER

“What China’s rise and America’s decline could mean for Australia”

Tom Switzer is the executive director of the Centre for Independent Studies, a public policy research organisation based in Sydney operating since 1976. CIS promotes free choice and individual liberty and defends cultural freedom and the open exchange of ideas. Through its research scholarship and public events, political leaders are encouraged to put in place sound policies to grow the economy, spread prosperity, allow more education choice and protect and defend intellectual freedom.

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In his address, Tom’s theme was, because we lived for so long in a unipolar world that was dominated by our closest ally and because East Asia was so peaceful during that period, Australians came to think it was forever.

It was hard to imagine great-power rivalry ever returning to this region.

But that world has gone away, mainly because of China’s rise, which we helped fuel.

The Sino-American rivalry is likely to be the defining feature of international relations in the century ahead and it’s mainly going to take place in our neighbourhood.

He concluded this is not a welcome development by any means, but it is our future.

In developing the above conclusion, he noted relations between Australia and China have not been so dismal since before reopening ties with Communist mainland half a century ago. In the past year, in response to Canberra’s implementing foreign interference laws, rejecting the Huawei 5G network bid, and calling for an inquiry into the origins of Covid-19, Beijing has launched an unprecedented economic retaliation against our export industry, with bans imposed on barley, beef/lamb, wine, cotton, lobster, timber and coal.

Many think all would be well if only Canberra toned down its rhetoric, restored a dialogue and rebuilt trust with Beijing. Many Australian academics, business leaders and former diplomats place the fault on either Washington’s hawkish policies or inept Australian diplomacy.

This line of thinking is unsurprising since so many of us came of age in the post-Cold War era, what the prominent American columnist Charles Krauthammer called in 1990 the “unipolar moment”, when the bipolar cold war was replaced by a unipolar world in which the US had no serious rivals and was ideally situated to help shape a rules-based liberal

international order. In 1989, the distinguished American political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared “the end of history”, heralding a liberal and democratic epoch, which was likely to bring peace and prosperity all across the planet.

Although Krauthammer and Fukuyama had their critics, their theses profoundly shaped Western public discourse about international relations for the first 25 years after the Cold War.

It was widely believed that the old zero-sum game of power politics (where one country’s gain is another’s loss) was rapidly giving way to a new world of utopianism of mutually beneficial dependence. Many in the West longed for a perfect, harmonious world, free of conflict and evil, a “global village. A more interdependent world, it was assumed, would mean peace and harmony.

This history helps explain the West’s deep engagement with China following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From an Australian perspective, it made perfectly good sense. The developing extensive trade relationship helped make Australia prosperous. Many assumed that China’s integration into the liberal world order would help turn it into a liberal democracy and make its rise strategically more peaceful.

Regrettably, things didn’t work out as planned. We’ve been mugged by reality.

The Pax Americana that dominated world affairs since the end of World War Two no longer exists.

Witness America’s costly Middle East misadventures that damaged US credibility and prestige, apart from the large loss of lives.

Witness America’s foolish policies towards Russia – especially expanding NATO up to its border – which antagonised Moscow and pushed it closer to Beijing.

Nor is democracy triumphant: according to Freedom House, last year was the 15th consecutive year of democratic backsliding, with 64 nations experiencing a loss of liberties. Far from witnessing the triumph of democracy at the end of the Cold War, the world has experienced what the Stanford scholar Larry Diamond has called a “democratic recession.”

As for China, the love affair with the West is over. With the rise of China, unipolarity has morphed into bipolarity, which means the return of great-power competition.

Having emerged from two centuries of economic and military weakness to finally master sophisticated Western technologies, a more authoritarian China is growing rapidly and converting its economic might into strategic clout.

Far from becoming a responsible stakeholder in world affairs, a hyper-nationalist China has used the Covid-19 crisis to expand its reach and influence and to threaten the status quo.

Witness its escalating defence spending, its build-up of military outposts in the South China Sea, its persistent cyber-espionage, its huge disinformation campaigns, its “wolf warrior” threats to sovereignty, its intimidation of Taiwan, its takeover of Hong Kong, and so on.

China’s definition of its vital national interests is growing along with its power – and it is busily trying to build an expansive sphere of influence in East Asia, on which its future security and prosperity depend.

From Beijing’s standpoint, it makes good strategic sense to challenge American pre-eminence in East Asia. This raises alarm bells among Australians across the political spectrum, not to mention people across the Indo-Pacific region.

Washington will go to great lengths to contain Chinese expansion, probably regardless of who is in the White House.

The only bipartisan policy consensus in Washington these days is China: Biden and Trump, Democrats and Republicans are on a unity ticket against China.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his confirmation hearings said that President Donald Trump “was right” to take a “tougher approach to China.”

If China continues to grow, the security competition in East Asia will become more intense. What is likely to make this rivalry even worse is that Beijing is not good at winning friends and influencing people. It appears to have no sense of the importance of “soft power”, as the “wolf warrior” diplomacy of China’s ambassadors makes clear. This heavy-handed behaviour is seen by many as a threat to the sovereignty of countries in the region, including Australia.

It is not surprising that many Australian friends of China desperately want to repair relations with Beijing. After all, China accounts for about 40 per cent of our export wealth and the continued deterioration in relations between the two countries is likely to hurt our post-virus economic recovery.

At the same time, many Australians continue to believe that Australia is still able to finesse our dilemma, effectively sit on the sidelines and enjoy the best of both worlds: unconstrained trade with China under the US security umbrella.

They continue to believe a new US-China trade deal or a rapprochement between Beijing and the new Biden administration will spare Canberra difficult choices.

But they’re talking the language of a different era. The return of harmonious relations is not on the cards.

Today's China, notwithstanding its own limitations and internal weaknesses, shows every sign of wanting to overthrow the US-led security system in the region. Remember Beijing wants a blue-water navy to project power across the world to protect its Belt and Road initiatives. Note this is a popular regime pumped up on nationalism and overwhelmed with resentment growing out of "the century of national humiliation".

American staying power in Asia is for real: the question is whether a US-led coalition pursues a strategy of containment, or one of "engaging and constraining" China. It is sobering that peace never proves permanent, while security always trumps prosperity in international politics.

A Lowy Institute poll shows that 77 per cent of Australians think we "should do more to resist China's military actions in our region, even as it affects our economic relations".

None of this is to deny that there will still be substantial trade between China and all its security rivals, including Australia.

However, there are likely to be limits on that economic intercourse, especially regarding sophisticated technology.

Earlier Tom reflected on the severe challenges from Covid-19 faced by Australia, whilst comparing with Belgium (11 million peoples, 21,000 deaths, struggling with numbers of health workers, teachers, police etc), US (440k deaths), Britain 105 k deaths), despite some having harsher lockdowns than Melbourne. For Australia, the past year's health (almost 1 k covid related deaths) and economic troubles are given perspective when compared with deaths suffered by previous generations during war 62k, Spanish flu 12k, and the Great Depression.