

# **Prometheus bound: How China's power is constrained**

## **By Geoff Raby**

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The more Australia positions itself as if there is only a binary choice between US or Chinese hegemonic influence in the region, the more likely conflict becomes. The first step in a foreign policy reappraisal is to recognise that the World Order has changed and there is no returning to the status quo.

The New Order is of course still evolving, but the old one has gone. It is also important to understand the New Order is not to our liking: it is one in which the US is less engaged in providing leadership and where authoritarian states are more influential.

The New Order has rules, many of which are administered by UN functional agencies in Geneva, such as dealing with civil aviation, intellectual property, refugees, health or maritime affairs. But there will also be new rules being made by newly emergent powers, mostly led by China, such as with the creation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. Australia needs to make itself an early participant in such processes so that we can help shape them to better accommodate our interests.

To avoid the binary, zero-sum calculus of a rising China in conflict with a dominate US that is resisting ceding strategic space and influence to China, it is important to understand the constraints on China's capacity to act and project power and influence.

When sitting in Canberra or Washington it is easy to slip into habits of thinking that simply take for granted that China's extraordinary economic development will convert directly into freedom to act decisively on its agenda and ambitions.

### **Constrained by history**

China is a "constrained superpower" – a "Prometheus Bound". Despite China's enormous economic weight and rapidly advancing military power, it is constrained in a way that the US never was during its ascendancy to global pre-eminence following the US Civil War.

China is constrained by history – it is still an empire with significant unresolved territorial issues inside its border, namely Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan and more recently Hong Kong.

It is constrained by its geography, having 22,000 kilometres of land borders to defend with 14 countries on its borders, many with which it has seen hostilities since the PRC was established, and in the case of its border with India are still live. Former secretary of state and national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, noted it was not until the United States settled its hemisphere could it project power globally.

China is further constrained by Japan and South Korea who are both US allies and would not subject themselves willingly to a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine for East Asia. With the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea, were China to press too hard, Japan and South Korea would have an excuse and a reason to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. China would be alarmed at such a prospect and would be most unlikely to act in such a way as to bring it about.

The rest of the near neighbourhood, with the exception of Laos and Cambodia, push back against China's efforts to groom them as latter-day tribute states. Even Myanmar is alert to this and uncomfortable with the prospect, though further sanctions by the West could bring about an outcome all would wish to avoid.

But most importantly, China is constrained by being utterly dependent on world markets to keep supplying it with all the resources it needs for its economic survival. China has always been a rich country in terms of natural (and human) resources. It is why it was not interested in trading with the European powers, which led to the 19th-century Opium Wars and China being forced to concede territory in the form of treaty ports and open itself to foreign trade.

The problem for China in the 20th century was there was a lot of Chinese. And while that did not matter much when everyone was poor, as incomes began to rise during the 1990s, China found it had to import more and more raw materials, energy and food to keep itself going. Up until the mid 1990s, China was self-sufficient in crude oil. Then it began to import oil, becoming a net importer until, by the end of the last decade, it became the world's biggest net importer of crude oil.

## **Finding solutions**

Far from wanting to close the sea lanes of the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca, China is utterly dependent on these shipping lanes. That it seeks to defend them is understandable, even if it is unwelcome. Its dependency on imported raw materials and energy is a major strategic vulnerability and constraint on its freedom of action. Were conflict to occur over Taiwan, for example, foreign powers could effectively cut China's supply routes.

In the case of the US, it had all the resources and energy it needed for its own development inside its borders. It only lacked people, and these it sucked out of Europe in big numbers. China will need to find its own accommodation with other powers and with its regional neighbours.

It will need to find solutions to many of its major problems through co-operating with other states, as it is already doing. Some of these issues will be in areas of the environment, water resources, food and resource security, nuclear non-proliferation, asymmetrical threats in everything from people smuggling and trafficking, to organised crime, narcotics, and possibly crypto-currencies. All of these security challenges which China, and other powers in the New Order, are grappling with provide opportunities for Australia to return to active middle-power diplomacy, to work with other countries that share similar concerns about specific functional problems and recognise that coordinated international responses are necessary.

In Australia diplomacy we once liked to use the phrase "working with like-minded" countries, but in the New World Order we will need often to have close relations and work co-operatively with countries that we don't like because they will be autocratic states with low regard for things we value greatly such as human rights, freedom of expression and free media.

If China is a threat to regional security and stability, then Australia needs to work more assiduously than it has been in developing its relations with each of the countries in the region, bilaterally and through various forms of regional cooperation.

Astoundingly, an Australian prime minister has not made a stand-alone, bilateral visit to Thailand since 1999. It is unlikely an Australian prime minister or foreign minister will make a bilateral visit to the Philippines under its current, democratically elected president because of his human rights abuses, but the Philippines is a front-line state against China in the South China Sea.

In any event, whether China is judged a threat or not, Australia needs to develop a hedging strategy with its neighbours. This will require a much greater diplomatic effort by Australia and one that is properly resourced. While defence spending is important, spending on diplomacy is crucial for advancing our security and wider interests. We cannot defend the continent from our defence budgets alone.

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