

I remember so vividly where I was on September 11, 2001. I was transfixed in my bed in Los Angeles, watching the hypnotic horror of the Twin Towers collapsing after being hit by hijacked commercial aircraft. I also lived in New York, uptown from ground zero, so it was very personal. Many Americans can tell a similar story, as the indelible tragedy played out in real life and real time on TV sets across the country.

That singular event triggered the American “War of Terror,” which we assumed would be the defining theme of the early 21st century. But our assumption was wrong. It is not what happened.

The prevailing paradigm at the time was that radical Islamic fundamentalism was as if a metastasizing cancer, spawning numerous non-state terror groups, and that US national security strategy needed to shift instantly from big power rivalry, exemplified by the Cold War with the Soviet Union, to discovering and eliminating these small cells of religious fanatics.

Some in the West took up Samuel Huntington’s divisive idea of a “Clash of Civilizations” as the age-defining rubric, taking as fact that there is fundamental and inexorable incompatibility between national cultures

founded on political Islam and those founded on principles of liberal democracy. Some in Arab countries sought to exacerbate this simplistic and perhaps racist political framework by acts of terror, seeking to drive

Westerners out of Muslim lands or to goad Westerners into attacking Muslims lands in order to alienate Muslims and cause instability, thus enabling Islamic fundamentalists to overthrow and take over Arab countries.

In response, American strategy fixated on the supposedly “enlightened” if patronizing notion that if certain Muslim majority states could be converted

into Western-style democracies, even by force, then the spawning grounds of Islamic fanaticism would be subsumed by a modern Islam. In this way, terrorism would be greatly reduced. This US strategy was flawed on multiple levels. Western-style democracy was not suited to the cultural and religious traditions. Thus, tragically, American blood was spilled and treasure spent in failed missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military interventions caused much suffering and brought about no democracies.

The ignominious departure of US forces from Afghanistan is widely heralded as tolling the bell of America’s decline as the world’s

policeman. While the withdrawal process was chaotic and disgraceful, whether or not the withdrawal itself from America’s longest war will prove to be a good thing or a bad thing may depend on perspective.

The 20-years ago expectation that Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations between the Muslim and Western worlds would epitomize world geopolitics has been eclipsed. Big power rivalry re-emerged.

Perhaps the most direct refutation of the Clash of Civilizations theory is the Abraham Accords, which is forging a novel partnership between Israel and Arab-Muslim Gulf States that serves as a quasi-alliance against Muslim Iran, but that, more importantly, prioritizes modernity and technology in the heart of the Middle East.

As such, while Huntington’s theory helps highlight issues of culture in affecting geopolitics, it is overly simplistic and ignores diversities of culture. Thus, as an overarching political theory, the Clash of Civilizations has been rendered sterile.

If “No man is an island” as the English poet John Donne wrote, then certainly no country today can function well in isolation. None of humanity’s greatest problems – climate warming, pandemics, global poverty and inequality, nation-state and ethnic

confrontations, imbalanced economic development – can be solved by single countries acting alone. Moreover, no walls can be built, no borders can be sealed – figuratively or literally – that can prevent the problems of others from affecting all regions and peoples. The viruses of pandemics and the rising flood waters of climate change have no respect for national boundaries. The global commons has become fragile, and all countries, especially the largest, must cooperate to care for it. In today’s world, the real conflict should not be between opposing political systems or differing ethnicities, but rather between the forces of modernity, competence and development on the one hand, and those of ignorance, exploitation and oppression on the other.

By this calculus, China and the US should be sitting on the same side of the table. And this is why the cascading free fall in US-China relations is so counterproductive for both peoples and for all humanity – and why the recent phone call between President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping is a cause for hope.

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Ignorant forces who aim to exploit, oppress others chief culprits creating conflicts today

File photo shows a Marine walking in Afghanistan’s southern Helmand Province.
Photo: CFP

Blind insistence of power competition plunges US into lasting consumption of its strength

By Ling Shengli

The US has been continuously promoting the strategy of escalating major power games in recent years as it views China as a vital challenge. After the US withdrawal and debacle in Afghanistan, a growing number of observers tend to believe Washington will tighten its focus on Beijing.

They point out that US’ strategic contraction in the Middle East is aimed at shoring up core strengths to focus on China. As The New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman wrote with concern in his column, “What Comes After the War on Terrorism? War on China?” Apparently, the US needs to think carefully about its competition strategy of major powers.

When US President Joe Biden defended the “drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan” in July, he put it bluntly that Washington needs to “focus on shoring up America’s core strengths to meet the strategic competition with China and other nations.” Some analysts say that it signals that the withdrawal could be aimed at mobilizing major forces to launch a more violent attack against China.

The overall withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan indicates that the country has basically completed its global strategic adjustments. It means that the strategic competition between major powers has once again become the center of the US global strategy. Due to the move, the world is in danger of returning to the Cold War era.

For the US, it will have to invest more strategic resources to deal with its self-made fierce strategic rivalries with major powers.

But the US hegemony has been relatively weakened. As the gap between US hegemonic power and its goals gradually widens, the US will need to rely more heavily on its allies and partners to maintain its hegemony. But it is unlikely that US allies or partners will blindly follow Washington to check and balance Beijing. It means that Washington needs to mobilize more domestic resources to compete with other great powers. But in recent years, Washington has significantly prioritized domestic affairs.

Even though the strategic competition between China and the US has intensified,

both sides are keenly aware of the importance to prevent conflict. Despite all kinds of divergence shown, China and the US still have emerged with some consensus. On Friday, the Chinese and US heads of state had a phone conversation again after almost seven months. This once again demonstrates the consensus between the two sides on managing competition. For the US, to engage in a great power competition is time-consuming, costly, and of limited strategic effect. The strategy of competing to suppress will plunge Washington into long-lasting consumption of its own strength.

What is more dangerous is that the risk of conflict between them will also increase significantly as the tensions between

great powers continue to intensify. This will eventually undermine the US’ strategic strength and its hegemony.

The world will become more pluralistic in the future. The great power relations will not be able to completely dominate global affairs. The US’ belief in great power competition is clearly out of date. Washington needs to think about its strategy of great power competition with caution.

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