

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The battle of the fading hegemons



ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

ALMOST a decade ago, China bulls like Martin Jacques and I predicted the rise of the People's Republic at the expense of a declining United States. Today,

with the two superpowers unabashedly jostling for hegemony—their trade war being just one sign of this—it is time for a fresh assessment.

It is tempting to view the US-China rivalry as just another superpower transition in a long line going back to the classical shift of power from Athens to Sparta. But this case is different.

Traditionally, a strong rising power has challenged a weakening incumbent, making the outcome preordained. The only question was whether the transition would be peaceful or violent.

This question also applies to the US-China struggle. But the outcome is far from inevitable, because the powers of both the aspirant and the incumbent are eroding—albeit in different ways.

Let's start with the more obvious case of America. Previous predictions of US decline were based on unfavourable domestic economic and social trends such as slowing productivity growth, declining social mobility, and worsening income inequality.

In recent years, however, America has faced the additional problem of a precipitous decline in its soft power, which Joseph Nye defined as a country's ability to get others to want what it wants. Today, that soft-power currency, more valuable than the dollar itself as a source of US hegemony, has been debased beyond recognition. US global leadership is now associated with disastrous wars, repudiation of the collective commitment to address climate change, sabotage of the global trading system, and unravelling international security arrangements.

In addition, America has damaged



its own political institutions. It currently has an erratic and unbalanced president, a gerrymandered Congress, a politicised Supreme Court, and a system of rulemaking rigged by the elite. Over the past century, US institutions often inspired awe and invited emulation in much of the world. Now, they have become an object of mockery, while the 2008 global financial crisis similarly tarnished the American model of finance-driven, winner-take-all capitalism.

Moreover, whoever wins the 2020 presidential election will find it hard to restore the lustre of US political and economic institutions, owing to America's deep polarisation and entrenchment rather than attenuation of adverse economic trends. This raises increasing doubts about America's ability to project its power externally.

What about China? If the Chinese economy remains on track, it will challenge US economic supremacy in the medium term. However, the risks of a Chinese economic derailment have increased, as domestic debt has climbed to vertiginous and unsustainable levels while export opportunities have shrunk.

Perhaps most worryingly, Chinese President Xi Jinping has—bizarrely—turned away from the private sector-led growth model that served as the country's transformational golden goose for over four decades. As a result, China's economic prospects seem far less bright than they did a few years ago.

Because China is an undemocratic and closed society, its hegemonic rise has always been hobbled by a lack of soft power. In an attempt to rectify that deficiency, China launched the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) to promote the international transfer of its impressive expertise in building infrastructure effectively and expeditiously.

At the same time, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to challenge international financial institutions that it (and many other emerging powers) regards as increasingly discredited by outdated governance mechanisms. As if to reinforce that view, the US and Europe have yet again asserted their monopoly on control of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, respectively, through an undemocratic process that was established 75 years ago. Although there have been no formal objections to the recent changes of leadership at both institutions, this has not gone unnoticed in the rest of the world.

Tragically, however, all of China's

accumulation of soft power is being fatally undermined by its political and strategic turn under Xi. The cult of personality has returned, anti-corruption campaigns often target political opponents, and Chinese actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang reek of political repression.

Even the BRI risks turning sour as participating governments struggle under the weight of huge Chinese loans. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magical realist novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, the defaulting Caribbean dictator repays his "Gringo" creditors by giving up the sea, piece by emerald-green piece. In the real world, acquiring land, natural resources, and sea lanes could prove China's undoing as a debt collector.

In short, in the current struggle for global pre-eminence, China is depleting its accumulation of soft power, while America is as well—and losing its economic strength in the process.

This hegemonic rivalry thus differs sharply from previous historical episodes. From the Athens-Sparta transition to the handover from the United Kingdom to the US in the twentieth century, the challenger's credentials were undeniable. It was as if a young, vigorous boxer were challenging and defeating a flabby, middle-aged opponent.

Today, by contrast, China and America look like two tired boxers who go at each other for 15 gruelling rounds, not to determine who will stay upright, but rather to discover who will be the first not to go down. With such wannabe and reigning hegemons, is it any surprise that the world finds itself in a leaderless and rudderless drift?

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The last and the ludicrous



NAVEED MAHBUB

HATS off to the Ministry of Public Administration for taking the bold step of introducing paternity leave. Better be clear though about the cap on the

number of such leaves, else we will have a population explosion 2.0. I hope the private sector follows suit, but given the work pressure there, guys will need the paternity leave simply to become fathers. The Australian Cricket Board has thus perhaps mandated 12 months of paternity leave for its players with full pay. Tigers, hold off—if you raise this as your 12th demand to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), the Eden Gardens test may just end up being represented by our under 18 boys.

This test match, by the way, is bound to be star studded even in the stands. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is scheduled to be present, raising the fear that during the drinks break, she, as part of a Freudian Slip, may chide our boys like the Soup Nazi in *Seinfeld*: "No water for you!"

With Eden Gardens, all eyes are also on Sourav Ganguly's grand entrance into the powerful officialdom of Indian cricket akin to his getting off a chopper in style at Purbachal Future City. BCB is rightfully optimistic that it can reap



Bangladesh cricketers celebrate after sending Virat Kohli back to the dressing room during a Bangladesh-India cricket match.

PHOTO: REUTERS

benefits from Sourav Ganguly's new role as the President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI)—getting to hear in pure Bangla everything that is no different from the past.

Nevertheless, one can't help but get a sense of nearness from someone who

speaks the same language contrary to something that hasn't worked with Didi. That (Bangla) is perhaps why we felt proud by the headline "Bengali wins the Nobel Prize in Economics."

But old habits die hard as we were also quick to dig up the past of Dr

Abhijit Banerjee as having served time for 10 days in Delhi while a student. If he is an inmate turned laureate, so be it, as many would applaud the other way around, i.e., a laureate turned inmate in the case of a lady who went wrong somewhere down the line.

So, being sandwiched by these two Nobel Laureates originating from 45-minute flight time away, what have we done lately to celebrate? Hey, we have, yet again, made it to the top of the charts. This time, it's on the list of countries with the slowest internet speed. With a "whopping" 5.7 megabits per second, we are ranked 10th in the world on sloth ranking. Yet, the social media warrior in Bangladesh remains undaunted. For he is there, despite being shackled by 5.7 megabits per second, to efficiently spread rumours at 5.7 gigabits per second and with zero bits of error. He has shunned the October 16 World Spine Day for not possessing that part of the anatomy which this day is about. He believes in the gospel sent by the messiah called Facebook Messenger. If this digital messiah tells him Donald Trump has given up his Chicken McNuggets for celery sticks, he will believe. He simply can NOT just sit on that holy message, but must forward it to five other people immediately, lest something bad happens to his right toe in the next seven days. He has done it again, as Bhola has proved, being the fast to judge and the furious to react, proving in turn that he, in essence, is the last and the ludicrous, when it comes to applying common sense...

Naveed Mahbub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

QUOTABLE Quote

MOTHER TERESA
(1910-1997)
Roman Catholic nun

Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Slugger Stan
- 7 Urban fleet
- 11 Broad way
- 12 Scads
- 13 Henry VIII and family
- 14 Minute
- 15 Bow of film
- 16 Defy authority
- 17 Palm's place
- 18 Angry rant
- 19 Flair
- 21 Future flower
- 22 Cake kept in a dish
- 25 Scoundrel
- 26 Flight part
- 27 Ducks

DOWN

- 1 Tennis competition
- 2 Throat dangler
- 3 Rental choice
- 4 Sequentially
- 5 Mystique
- 6 Trumpeter Elgart
- 7 Supply food for
- 8 Cave raider of story
- 9 Studied
- 10 Did salon work
- 16 Washer cycle
- 18 First family of 1910
- 20 Places last
- 22 Munich setting
- 23 With consequences
- 24 Best
- 25 Shoot again
- 28 Cars' scars
- 30 Cartoon genre
- 31 In shape
- 32 Hard-hearted
- 34 Tempo
- 36 Train unit

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	L	L	S	A	C	C	R	A
E	V	I	T	A	L	A	Z	E	S
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott