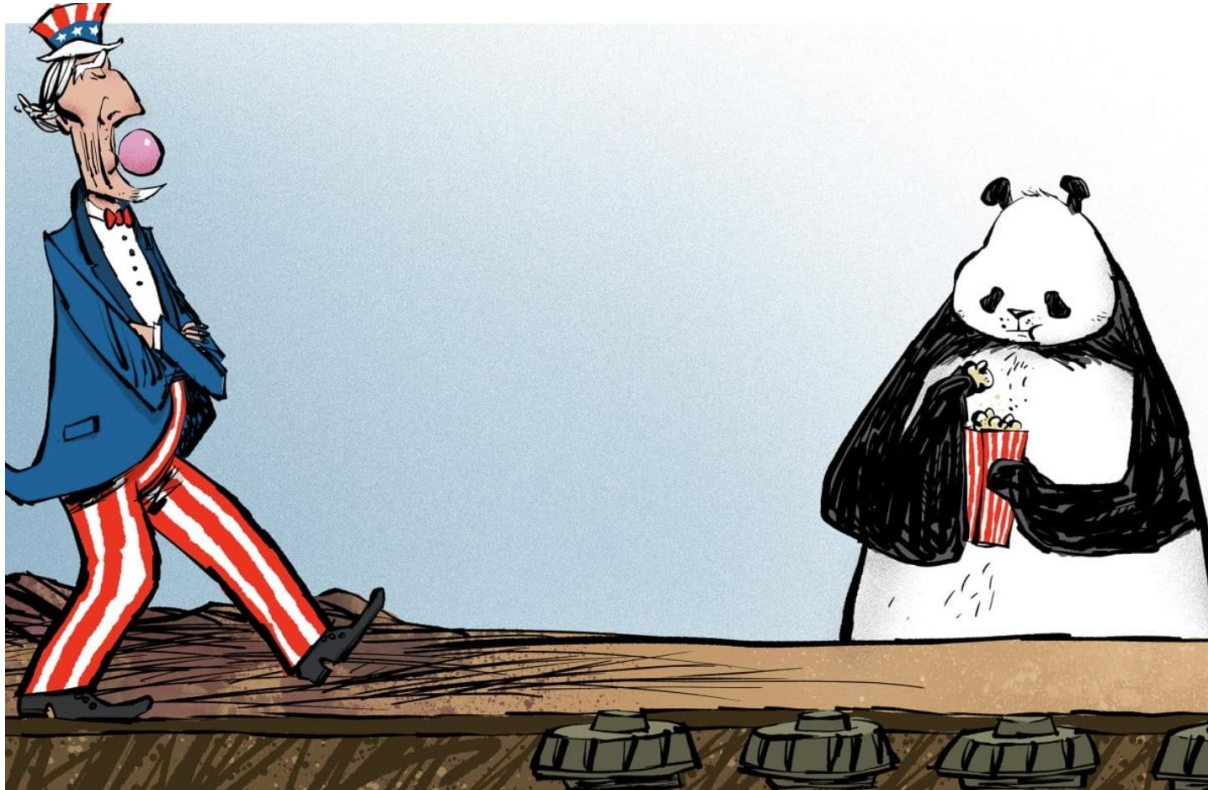


From Gaza to Ukraine, US risks imperial overstretch as China waits in the wings

Terry SU

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With US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin’s announcement last week of [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#) – an alliance to defend “freedom of navigation” from attacks by the Iran-backed Yemeni Houthi rebels on “Israel-linked” ships in the Red Sea – the Israeli-Hamas conflict in Gaza is in danger of a spillover that goes against America’s intention to focus on its rivalry with China.

The Biden administration has made it known that China is the [only rival](#) which possesses both the willingness and means to challenge America’s global supremacy and that the US will concentrate its efforts on that challenge.

For Washington to win the game of global leadership, one big way is to manoeuvre so that China gets into a war, one way or another, while the US remains aloof from one itself. This would best serve American interests, as seen from its masterful experiences in the early stages of the first and second world wars, and its sobering experiences during the [Korean war](#) and [Vietnam war](#) amid its global competition with the former Soviet Union.

Look around, however, and one will see that it is America that is effectively doing the fighting while Beijing looks on from the sidelines and profits from it.

In Ukraine, Russia is turning the corner in its war, with President Vladimir Putin ordering a bombardment of [Odesa port](#), in effect blockading Ukraine, while support for the Zelensky government from America and its allies is [losing steam](#).

As anyone who pays attention will see, Russia's war efforts have been resilient largely thanks to China's hefty industrial capabilities, which have been mobilised to shore up a Moscow comprehensively sanctioned by the American-led alliance. For proof of the indispensability of that support, one does not have to look far: [trade](#) between the two countries has climbed to a record high of US\$218 billion for January to November 2023 – up 26.7 per cent year on year – of which, tellingly, China's exports to Russia have grown 50 per cent.

Then America found itself stuck in the Middle East, from which it had sought to extricate itself to [pivot to East Asia](#). Attacks by Hamas on Israel in early October pulled the US back in, as it claims it had no choice but to [wholeheartedly support](#) fellow democracy Israel. The recent call for the defence of “freedom of navigation” in the Red Sea sounds like an equally compelling case for America to take action there.

Yet there should be no lack of conviction, even consensus, in Washington regarding provoking Beijing into a proxy war, to bleed and collapse it, as happened to the former Soviet Union. That this has not happened while America itself has been dragged into war after war in Europe and the Middle East is a thing of amazement.

Call it the curse of [hegemony](#). America has been the world's only superpower for the past few decades and this makes it hard for Washington not to see eruptions in key parts of the world as affairs it is compelled to take care of, both legitimately and responsibly. Add them all up, however, and you will see what Yale historian Paul Kennedy calls an “[imperial overstretch](#)”, a theme that his 1987 book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* examines.

Hence the grand paradox. Washington is keenly aware that going “multifocal” is the worst scenario when China is locked in the cross hairs as the issue that really matters. But that seems precisely the direction in which things are now moving.

My concern in this column has been Washington's relentless leaning on China, which might result in the contest turning hot by, say, a war over Taiwan in a not-too-distant future – be it in [2027](#) or [2030](#), as some have seriously conjectured.

Watching the [Joe Biden-Xi Jinping summit](#) in San Francisco in mid-November, however, one could not help but feel that both Washington and Beijing were serious in wanting to ensure their contest does not veer into conflict, so that their strategic competition remains peaceful till the end of the game.

What is happening in [Gaza](#) and the [Red Sea](#) is bringing up a variant version of that possibility. China is determined not to be enticed into a hot war in spite of Washington's [provocation over Taiwan](#) and, lately, over the South China Sea through the [Philippines](#), while America has become entangled in regional hotspots and is finding it difficult not to go deeper into them, never mind get out.

Will that spell a fate of “bleed and collapse” for America while the prospect of Beijing, determinedly detached from any geopolitical flashpoints, peacefully taking over world hegemony is in the offing?

This could be wide of the mark, admittedly, if Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Austin are to be believed. They have both said that America can “walk and chew gum” in dealing with challenges in Ukraine, the Middle East and East Asia simultaneously.

Or, as Biden said in a [televised interview](#) when asked if the wars in Israel and Ukraine were more than the US could take on at the same time: “No. We’re the United States of America for God’s sake, the most powerful nation in the history – not in the world, in the history of the world”. He added: “We can take care of both of these and still maintain our overall international defence.”

These assertions certainly impart an impressive sense of confidence. But then so did those of the decision-makers of the great powers of the past, covered by Professor Kennedy’s book on imperial overstretch, before they were confronted with sombre realities.

Terry Su is president of Lulu Derivation Data Ltd, a Hong Kong-based online publishing house and think tank specialising in geopolitics