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US Power/US Decline and US-China Relations

Wang Jisi

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Wang Jisi Interviewed by Zhao Lingmin

In this interview, Wang Jisi, Dean of International Studies at Beijing University and a leading Chinese specialist on international relations, tackles the question of the end of US hegemony and US-China relations. The interview, conducted prior to the October financial pandemic in the US and globally, and prior to the election of Barack Obama as president, ranges widely over China as a rising power, the United States and changing world dynamics. While rejecting the very premise of a US-China alliance, pointing to reactionary US policies in Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. Noting US hypocrisy as in its embrace of Saudi Arabia while speaking of human rights, and pointing to fundamental US weaknesses, Wang nevertheless makes the case for US-China cooperation and challenges the view that the US is in ineluctable decline as a global power. ms

Wang Jisi

The United States Has Not Declined

Nanfeng Chuang (NFC): Since the start of the Iraq war, there has been incessant talk of the decline of the United States. What is your assessment of that, and how do you see the international position of the United States at present?

Wang Jisi: The theory of the decline of the United States is not something that has just appeared in the past few years. In 1946, Mao Zedong said that the American imperialists were a paper tiger. At the time a series of events occurred, such as the launch of a satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957 and, in the 1970s, the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War and the de-linking of the dollar from gold, there were invariably people around the world who predicted the decline of the

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United States. There was the rapid development of the Japanese and West German economies at the end of the 1980s and in 1991 the United States asked its allies for money to fight the Gulf War, and at those times theories about the decline of the United States also abounded. Following the Iraq war, there has been an abrupt decline in the soft power of the United States, and at present there is also the sub-prime mortgage crisis, so there is really nothing strange about some people being pessimistic about the United States.

In the United States, leftists such as [Immanuel] Wallerstein are forever trumpeting the decline of the United States. The problem lies in the question of what is the standard for measuring the decline of the United States? Actually, when you compare the current situation in the United States with different periods in its history, the conclusions one reaches are different. Compared to the situation around 1945 when it was at the summit of its power, the United States today has certainly declined, and that is the comparison that Wallerstein makes. Compared to the Nixon and Carter eras, the strength of the United States today has increased. Compared to the Clinton era, the relative position of the United States has also declined. When one summarizes the situation in various quarters, it is very difficult to conclude that the United States has at this point begun to go downhill. My sense is that the United States today is still traveling along a flat mountain top, but flat mountain tops are also uneven. As for how extensive this flat area is, no one knows, but there really is no reliable basis for saying that at this point the United States has had a setback from which it cannot recover. To date no country has been able to constitute a comprehensive challenge to the United States, and there is no question that its position as the only superpower will continue for 20-30 years.

Wang Jisi is coeditor of the seven volume World Politics. Views From China

Viewed from the perspective of the national might of the United States, its hard power in the areas of economics, the military, and science and technology have actually increased, and the sense that everyone has that the United States is already in decline mainly stems from the decline of its soft power. In that regard, other than the effects of international factors such as the Iraq war, etc., the more fundamental reason involves some domestic factors in the United States.

Along with the ever-increasing diversity of its races and cultures, the ethnic cohesiveness of the United States is declining. In his book Who Are We, [Samuel] Huntington has expressed that concern. The Enron incident a few years ago and the sub-prime mortgage crisis most recently both show that there is a major problem in financial oversight in the United States, and that the relationship between the government and big business is too close. In addition, with regard to domestic politics, the conservative forces in the United States are extremely powerful, leading to a political

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imbalance domestically. As to whether or not the United States has the ability to correct this, we will get an inkling of that following this year's presidential election.

Worth mentioning is the fact that, although the United States has encountered numerous difficulties, other countries have not benefited much from that. Under the sub-prime mortgage crisis, the global economy has been encumbered. Economically, the relationship between China and the United States is one of mutual dependence, and it is not the case that they are undercutting each other. The upswing in China's power over the past few years really is not the result of a decline in the power of the United States, and similarly, none of the factors resulting in a decline in the soft power of the United States and its unsightly reputation were created by China.

NFC: So, what are the intrinsic values that are supporting the international position of the United States? What is unique about the United States?

Wang: First there is the simple and uniform value that holds society in the United States together, that is, the so-called "American dream," and Americans, regardless of whether they are far left or far right, or of what race or language, all identify with this ideology. Second is the rule of law and democracy. We are opposed to the United States exporting its social system, but we should acknowledge that its system has promoted the country's development and power. Because of the domestic success of the United States, as some people around the world see it, democracy, freedom, and the rule of law of the United States are worth imitating, and this gives the United States formidable soft power. And third is the development of civil society in the United States. The emergence and development of Hollywood and Silicon Valley are results which reflect social initiative. The soft power of the United States does not rely primarily on promotion by the government, but rather on the wellsprings of vitality and competitiveness in US society.

Society in the United States is even more powerful than the government. This is its primary unique feature, and it is also an important aspect of why many countries believe that the United States is not easy to deal with. In that sense, the relationship between China and the United States is essentially one between a country and a society. As far as the Chinese government is concerned, simply having dealings with the administrative authorities in the United States is far from sufficient. It is also necessary to emphasize contacts with its Congress, business circles, the media, think tanks, labor unions, and religious circles, etc., to get them to understand China, and this is a very arduous task.

NFC: At present, anti-American feelings are very intense in many places around the world. What is the reason for that?

Wang: One reason is the reactionary policies of the United States. In Palestinian-Israeli relations, the United States has been partial to Israel for a long time, and this is the source of anti-American feelings in the Middle East. The situation in the Iraq war, with the large number of innocent casualties, is still to this day very unstable, and it is difficult even for the Americans to state clearly whether there was more suffering during the Saddam era or today. The rise in anti-American feelings in Afghanistan and Pakistan stems from similar causes. The selfish and unjust positions of the United States with regard to the Doha talks and the Kyoto Protocol, and the drag on the world economy by the sub-prime mortgage crisis are also causes of the upsurge in anti-American feelings.

Another reason is that, if a given country has been the top dog for a long time, it is bound to incur opposition. As the expression goes, "those

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who stand out will be attacked by others." This is a structural problem resulting from being too powerful, and there is no fundamental way to resolve it. Furthermore, the bombastic behavior of the United States has exacerbated this situation. It is just as if, in a class in school, you are stronger than the others in every area to begin with, but also not the least bit modest, being fond of the limelight assures that you will not get along with others. Wherever the might of the United States is used, the character of individuals and the nation invariably becomes fairly widely publicized. I do not believe that a change of administrations in the United States can fundamentally alter their behavior.

At present, China is a rising power, and it will incur more and more criticism. We need to be aware that this is an inevitable phenomenon in the course of moving forward and respond by employing moderation, being level headed, and not publicizing it. Thus the pressure will be somewhat less. If you only read Chinese newspapers and web sites, you may feel that the entire Western media is commenting on or slandering China. Actually, if you observe the Western media carefully, you may discover that China is not at the center of various controversies or disputes. The present is, as far as China is concerned, a rare period of strategic opportunity. We must actively avoid becoming embroiled in the central maelstrom of world politics and concentrate on managing our own affairs well.

NFC: Quite a few people are extremely dissatisfied with the "policeman of the world" approach of the United States in which they meddle in the affairs of other countries everywhere. What is your view? In international society, in a condition in which there is essentially no government, is there an objective need for such a "policeman"?

Wang: There are two situations in which the United States has been called the "world's policeman." One is when they themselves want to interfere, for example, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the other is when other people want to get them to interfere, when the politicians in other countries want to use the United States to achieve their own objectives. For example, Georgia hoped that the United States would intervene in the Georgia-Russia conflict. Furthermore it believes that the United States has not intervened enough. When some countries hold elections, they take the initiative to invite the Americans to monitor it. There have been territorial disputes between Japan and South Korea, and there are people in both countries who hope that the United States will make an appearance to mediate things. It is very difficult to completely distinguish between these two situations.

To be sure, the world cannot do without a "policeman." When internal unrest in some countries reaches a certain level, it threatens the security of other countries and still requires a "policeman" to control things. But this "policeman" cannot be self-appointed. The peacekeeping forces dispatched by the UN Security Council are the "world's policemen" that are recognized by everyone. As for when and how they will intervene, the rules for that must be formulated by certain international mechanisms.

China as a Beneficiary of the World System

NFC: What is your assessment of "Pax Americana"? If the United States declines, what will happen to the world? And as far as China is concerned, what are the pros and cons of US hegemony?

Wang: The so-called "Pax Americana" does to a certain degree benefit international stability, but this is a peace achieved by power politics that has sacrificed the rights and interests of other countries. It is morally unfair, unjust, and is also very difficult to sustain for a long time. Speaking in theoretical terms, a multipolar world will be more just than a unipolar one, but

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it is certain that it will not be very stable. Is not achieving both justice and stability easier said than done? In a situation in which there is no better substitute, as far as China is concerned, the workable approach is to acknowledge the existing international order and, amid that, safeguard its own rights and interests as much as possible. This not only includes struggling with US hegemony, it also includes the other aspect of coordinating and cooperating with the United States, working together to deal with nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy shortages, and other such problems. This is also what we commonly refer to as "fighting dual tactics with dual tactics."

The United States' ability to maintain its leading position in the world in overall national power must have some lessons that other countries might learn from. For example, in some countries the ethnic, religious, and sectarian conflicts are very intense, and some ethnic groups are militating for independence. US society is becoming more and more diverse internally, and there are also several million to tens of millions of Muslims, but there have been no real threats of national break-up or religious clashes. The United States always wants to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, but other countries also want to intervene in US affairs. For example, sending people to the US to lobby Congress, and the public in quite a few other countries has taken a position supporting the election of Obama, etc. However, the United States does not worry much about other countries discussing its domestic affairs.

The decline of the United States is just a matter of time, and when it does decline, there will have to be an adaptative process in the world. At present the United States has financial problems, but very few countries are experiencing schadenfreude at this, and rather welcome the "saving of the market" by the United States government. Obviously, the slide of the US economy has more minuses than pluses for many countries. One expression of the decline of the United States would be a reduction of its military presence overseas, and also the inability to use coercive means to prevent nuclear proliferation. A possible consequence of that would be that Japan would have to develop an independent military force, or even equip itself with nuclear arms. North Korea and Iran may, because of a decline in the US threat, abandon their programs to develop nuclear forces, but it is even more likely that they may not hesitate to accelerate their development of nuclear forces. The military outlays of the EU would also have to undergo large-scale increases in order to keep unstable situations from developing in the Middle East and Western Asia following the decline of the United States. And Russia would strengthen its influence over Eastern Europe and other former Soviet Union regions.

Dangers Associated With the Decline of a Great Power

In sum, the decline of a great power -- and particularly a precipitate decline -- is invariably accompanied by an increase in new instabilities and imponderables. In the 1970s, China viewed the Soviet Union as the greatest security threat, and at the time naturally looked forward to the decline of the Soviet Union. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the actual decline or even the disappearance of the Soviet Union, we "felt ambivalent about that." The pros and cons for us of a decline by the United States require careful analysis, and furthermore until that day it will also be very difficult to achieve a clear accounting of that. At present, the overbearing attitude of the United States has incurred quite a bit of enmity, and everyone believes that it is the greatest source of injustice and instability in the world. However, assuming there were no United States in the world, would things definitely be just and stable? History is unending. In 1945, German and Japanese Fascism were wiped out, but the world was not

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stable and fair because of that. At present, the most important thing is to strengthen the establishment of international mechanisms to constrain the power politics of the United States and also see that some other factors that undermine stability are held in check.

Recently, the National Intelligence Council in the United States drafted a report evaluating the world situation and the position of the United States in 2025, seeking out scholars in some other countries to provide comments. This report predicts that there will be a relative weakening of the position of the United States, and that the world is moving toward multi-polarity and the center of global wealth is shifting from the West to the East. On one hand, we can say, aha, even the Americans recognize that they are done for. On the other hand, this country dares to face the decline in its own position squarely, and furthermore also actively invites those from other countries to comment on this. This in and of itself illustrates that they have the desire to and possibility of correcting their mistakes.

NFC: US diplomacy has a strong ideological coloration, but as quite a few Chinese see it, the stress on the values of "democracy and freedom" by the United States is nothing but a fig leaf to conceal their own self-interested objectives and is extremely hypocritical. How should we view this contradiction?

Wang: This question involves whether or not we believe that things such as ideology, values, and religious faith really exist. 80% of the people in the world are religious, with the majority of those who are not being in China. China has no tradition of religious faith, and the "Cultural Revolution" actually resulted in a sense of disillusionment by many people with regard to ideology. Accordingly, in China today, many people feel that ideology is false and hypocritical, that it is a tool that is used to package interests and cover up other objectives. Therefore, quite a few of us doubt that the Americans really have any faith. Actually, this is a projection of our own disillusionment toward all ideologies -- that there is no faith in the world, only interests.

I believe that, for most Americans, their faith in religion and belief in the ideology and values of the United States are real. However, there certainly are leaders and politicians who use the sincere faith of the Americans to serve their own selfish interests. We can criticize the values of the United States, and we should also point out that they are absolutely not "universally applicable," but we should not deny that the Americans truly believe in this and practice it. As far as the foreign relations of the United States are concerned, ideology and interests are tightly joined and inseparable, with ideology being realized, as are interests. It supports the democratically elected government of Georgia, the Georgian government is also pro-American, and the realization of democracy there is also the realization of US interests. In the eyes of the United States, Russia is not democratic. And the attitude of the United States toward South Korea, Japan, and China's cross-strait relations also has the same causation.

Of course, there are times when the ideology and interests of the United States are separate, and there also is a double standard. Saudi Arabia is really not democratic in the eyes of the Americans, but the United States has important interests in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi government is friendly toward the United States, so the United States does not attack Saudi Arabia, but Iran. However, in overall terms, countries that are close to the United States in ideology are also fairly close to the United States in interests, and their attitude toward the US is also fairly friendly. Accordingly, the United States must continue to stick to its values in its diplomatic relations.

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President George W. Bush and Saudi King Abdullah

'Avoid Grandstanding and Focus on Self-improvement'

NFC: In recent years, China has pursued the diplomatic strategy of "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement" (tao guang yang hui). Quite a few ordinary citizens feel that, on the diplomatic and territorial fronts, China has conceded too much, so this has reached the point where it should be abandoned? How should a balance be achieved between diplomatic policies and the feelings of the people?

Deng Xiaoping

Wang: The reason why Deng Xiaoping proposed "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement" in the early 1990s was because at that time the Soviet Union had already collapsed, there were dramatic changes in Eastern Europe, and "there were dark clouds bearing down on the city and threatening to overwhelm it." So some third-world countries wanted China to come forward and become a leader, and some people in China had similar judgments and ideas. When, at that time, Deng Xiaoping proposed "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement," it was to remind our countrymen to first do a good job of managing our own affairs, rather than becoming a leader internationally.

At present, although China's national might has increased greatly, problems involving internal development and governance are still very serious, and I believe we must adhere to the concept of "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement" Whether or not we continue to use that expression is another matter. If one does a good job of managing one's own affairs, external affairs are relatively easy to manage. However, external censure or not getting along should not be a pretext for abandoning the principle of "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement." I believe that at present, when we talk about "avoiding grandstanding and focusing on self-improvement," we are referring to continuing to avoid confrontations with the West, and we also must insist on avoiding overestimating our own power, being modest in front of developing countries and dealing with various international contradictions prudently, making our international environment a bit more relaxed, the road a bit wider, and the obstacles ahead somewhat fewer.

As far as a powerful country is concerned, there is a considerable contrast in the conclusions arrived at when it views itself and when others do so. The Chinese people view the world with a moral vision, believing ourselves to be altruistic and that we are peace loving, and therefore the stronger we are the better it will be for the world. The problem is that others really do not view things this way, and there are quite a few people who believe

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that if you become powerful, it is a threat to me. This is the "security dilemma" that is invariably encountered by all major powers historically, and the Chinese must have a sober understanding of that.

As for the problem of the feelings of the people, nothing can be done about it. Ordinary people in just about every country in the world believe that their own government is weak toward other countries. Some people in France criticize Sarkozy for being too weak toward China; people in Pakistan criticize their government for being too pro-American, and so on. One of the basic reasons for this is that the interests involved between countries are extremely complex, and compromises and negotiations cannot be avoided. Furthermore, these often must be done in private, and therefore it is very difficult to conduct diplomacy in a democratic and open manner. Take Sino-US relations for example. The United States makes demands on China with regard to the North Korean and Iranian problems, and may make concessions to China on the Taiwan strait and other such problems. This benefits both sides. However, this involves a tacit understanding, and cannot be acknowledged openly by US officials.

On the level of personal morality, an individual may use methods such as shedding one's blood and throwing down one's life or engaging in demonstrations or protests to uphold national interests, but the highest morality of the leaders of a nation is to safeguard the overall interests of the state, and they cannot be ruled by emotion and "gallantly rise to the occasion" or "sacrifice themselves to save someone else" as an individual can. In the past, our diplomacy was often demarcated by ideology and was influenced by sentiment or emotion, but now we are stressing national interests, which is progress. The leaders of a country must consider national interests with the overall situation in mind. Necessary compromises and concessions may sacrifice limited interests, but there also may be benefits and rewards. One cannot simply proceed from a partial perspective in saying that the concessions are too great, nor can one always decry compromises or concessions as being weak or traitorous.

Toward a US-China Alliance?

NFC: With regard to Sino-US relations, there are two well-known positions. One is that China should become an ally of the United States and, along with the United States, manage the world. The other is that it should meet [the US] head on and should not compromise too much. What is your assessment?

Wang: China and the United States can cooperate, but cannot be allies, because the gap between the two countries is too great with regard to ideology, social systems, and national interests, so there is no basis for becoming allies. The bottom line is that China and the United States should not be enemies -- neither enemies nor friends. China cannot accept being led by the United States, but the two countries can communicate with regard to ideas. China is also pursuing such universal values as human rights and rule of law, it is just that China demands the right to determine the approach and speed of the pursuit.

At the same time, when faced with external pressures and suspicions, there is really no need for us to be over anxious. Actually, in some respects external pressures on China are beneficial and help in promoting a resolution of domestic problems. For example, with regard to the problems of intellectual property rights (IPR) and food safety, the Chinese government stepped up law enforcement after the United States expressed an opinion. This was not "conceding too much" to the United States. Rather it was something that we should have done to begin with. By the same logic, should we not protect the environment? And should we not promote democracy?

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I do not endorse the idea of "managing the world together" with the United States. This idea overestimates our power and position. Furthermore, it is wishful thinking. In addition, with the image of the United States around the world being this bad, wanting China and the United States to "manage the world together" is tantamount to asking us to serve as a scapegoat for them.

NFC: Some commentary holds that China's diplomacy tends to "apply stopgap and piecemeal solutions," and even more responds to incidents in a passive manner, but lacks a long-range strategy and philosophy. What is your assessment?

Wang: Actually, compared to quite a few countries, China's diplomacy involves even longer-range calculations and strategy. Many people like to make a comparison with the United States, which has a comprehensive national strategy, and every few years they put out a national security strategy report and a defense evaluation report, etc. Relatively speaking, China's strategy is more akin to a principled position. This is related to our cultural and political traditions and does not mean that the Chinese government has no long-range considerations, or when studying specific policies only considers moral principles for the purpose of making public pronouncements. The national situation in China is more complex than in any other country. The national security of the United States is narrowly conceived, and their national security strategy basically ignores problems of domestic political stability. Nor do they have any difficult problems similar to ours with regard to Taiwan, Tibet, nationalities, and religions. Moreover, their national might is far greater than China's. Even so, the United States has no way to map out its actions based on its national security strategy. When Iran makes trouble, they move to punish it. And when the situation in Afghanistan or Pakistan deteriorates, they rush in to put out the fire. This is "applying stopgap and piecemeal solutions." Given the fact that China's internal and external environments are so complex, stopgap measures and piecemeal solutions are inevitable. I do not deny the importance of a "grand strategy," but at present there is no strategy that we could come up with, however much we rack our brains, that would be able to cover all aspects of our national interest, so we can only determine priorities in a general manner.

People all pursue the perfectly logical impulse to make complex things simple and design a strategy that appears to be crystal clear. On the surface it may appear very fine, but often it cannot adapt to ever-changing reality, and if implemented poorly may even lead one astray. There was a time when our diplomatic thinking was quite simple, all right: The clear-cut adversaries were the United States and the Soviet Union -- or the "two hegemons" -- and we supported whoever opposed our adversaries. Everyone has seen the consequences of that. Today's China can no longer rely on this kind of fixed mental framework to deal with complex challenges, but can only deal with each case on its merits in keeping with the specific situation.

Staff Reporter Zhao Lingmin's interview with Wang Jisi appeared in the Nanfeng Chuang, a Guangzhou-based journal whose English title is For the Public Good, on October 8, 2008. The article was posted at Japan Focus on November 16, 2008.

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