

As Alaska talks showed, the US' attitude to China and the world is outdated. When will it realise this?

- America's approach to China is binary, deep-seated and transparently hegemonic. Washington can't seem to see that the world has moved on

- China is not perfect but it stands for multipolarity under the banner of the UN, not a US-led 'rules based order' that represents a minority of the world's peoples

Michael Pembroke

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

The United States has far more to gain from cooperation with China than it will achieve by confrontation. Fortunately, Antony Blinken, the new US secretary of state, is not a biblical literalist like his predecessor Mike Pompeo.

But underlying the American opening statement at the recent China-US talks in Anchorage, Alaska, was a fundamental misconception of the state of global play in the 21st century. The world has changed. The US is no longer the undisputed global leader; it no longer commands the respect and credibility it once had; it will soon cease to be the largest and most dominant global economy; and it has ceased to enjoy military primacy in the Indo-Pacific.

The beginning of the change can probably be dated to the first US air strike on the outskirts of Baghdad on March 20, 2003, which missed its target. The misconceived Iraq invasion, like so many US interventions before it, was not authorised by the United Nations and served to diminish, rather than enhance, peace, security and stability in the region.

To paraphrase noted US economist Jeffrey Sachs, president George W. Bush's call to arms – “You are with us or you are against us” – can now be seen for what it was: simple, simplistic and antiquated.

Far wiser were the words of senator William Fulbright, the longest serving chairman in the history of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Fifty

years ago, he warned his fellow Americans that they “should accept the world as it is, with all its existing nations and ideologies, with all its existing qualities and shortcomings”.

This is China’s point. It is not perfect. It acts far more harshly towards its citizens than most Western countries. But China stands for multipolarity under the banner of the 193-member UN, not a US-led “rules based order” that represents a minority of the world’s peoples motivated by a sort of cold war mentality.

Unlike the US, China does not send invasion forces around the world; it does not seek global military domination; it does not seek to export its ideology or its system of government; it does not seek to transform other countries in its own political image, and; it does not intervene militarily in other countries’ affairs or conduct regime change operations in foreign states.

As Indian-American journalist Fareed Zakaria once wrote: “For America to continue to lead the world, we will have to first join it.”

The American approach to China is binary and deep-seated. It is transparently a euphemism for the continuation of American hegemony – involving US troops in more than 170 countries, about 800 overseas military bases and a defence budget greater than the next eight or nine countries combined, including China. But this approach is old school and Washington does not see it. The world has moved on. The Cold War is over. China does not see itself as being in a long-term ideological struggle with the US.

There is no longer a great divide between two great blocs of countries that adhere to profoundly antagonistic and incompatible ideological precepts. There is just diversity and difference, and contrasting approaches to organising society. Many forms of folly and malevolence masquerade as democracies; and many people in undemocratic regimes are prepared to forgo freedoms that we regard as fundamental in exchange for economic prosperity, social security and the opportunity for generational improvement.

The best form of leadership is by example. America must get its own house in order. The reality is that America’s values are neither universal nor exceptional. More often, the world is appalled by the American values on display on our television screens – systemic racism in institutions of authority and policing, appalling gun violence that should simply not be tolerated, unacceptable poverty, gross inequality, an unfair health system and failing social infrastructure.

These are “human rights” in a civilised society. There was force in the

rebuke by Yang Jiechi, China's top diplomat, in Anchorage: "The US does not represent the world. It only represents the government of the United States." He also said: "Whether judged by population scale or the trend of the world, the Western world does not represent the global public opinion."

It is worth noting that the population of China is four times that of the US. It is almost double that of the "West", consisting of the US, Canada, Britain, western Europe and Australasia. And the population of Asia, at 4.5 billion people, is three times that of China.

As China has said many times, it wants no confrontation, no conflict, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation with the US. It is a formula for success if America has the wisdom and humility to accept it. It will make the world a better place, it will make all countries more prosperous, and it will improve lives.

There are many areas that are ripe for cooperation between China and the US, and many areas where their economic competition can only advance the interests of humanity.

Michael Pembroke is a writer, historian and a former jurist. His latest book is *America in Retreat – The Decline of US Leadership: From WW2 to Covid-19*, which was released this month in the US. The book was published in Australia in 2020 under the title *Play By the Rules*