



Clashes of Empires: Historical Lessons for Understanding the US-China Rivalry

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has enjoyed a period of global hegemony and military supremacy, conducting foreign policy with the aim of keeping itself at the center of the global order born out of the war.

Of course, this dominance has not gone unchallenged. The Cold War was as much an ideological competition between two opposing systems as it was a traditional rivalry between great powers over economic access and political influence.

The United States “won” the Cold War in the sense that the Soviet Union fell apart; consequently, America found itself the undisputed top superpower with the authority to dictate the world order. In the 1990s, China was still a burgeoning power and Russia, in a mess and deprived of the vast empire it held when it led the USSR, was out of the way as a major challenger.

Drawing wisdom from the histories of empires, one finds that every empire inevitably comes to a head with another. Often, this conflict is between an established power and a rising power, and proves to be a decisive moment for each. When the rising power wins, it marks the turning point setting it on the path from regional power to major empire; for the established power, the loss typically marks the end, or the beginning of the end.

This was the case of the Punic Wars, which saw the older, more established Carthaginian empire square off against the rising Roman Republic for control of the Mediterranean.

What is interesting is that, unlike some other power rivalries (such as the aforementioned conflict between the U.S. and the USSR), Rome and Carthage had many similarities — they were not different systems of government or social organization, but rather both republics driven by an oligarchic base and supplemented by elections and popular assemblies.

In the case of the Punic Wars, then, there was less of the lip service to lofty ideology typical of so many conflicts today, in which politicians claim their nations are fighting for “democracy” and against “tyranny” — all a veil for underlying economic interests. Rome and Carthage, on the other hand, were open in advocating for their ambitions in the lucrative Mediterranean Sea.

Carthage, the North African city state located in modern-day Tunisia, was originally a Phoenician colony that over time became extremely wealthy and dominated the Mediterranean during its golden age in the fourth century B.C.



Luis Miguel



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Like the future Venetians and Dutch, Carthage was primarily a trade empire. Rather than being a single, unified state, it was a network of generally autonomous city states that were ultimately beholden to Carthage, which leveraged its legendary seafaring abilities to maintain a world-class navy whose duty was to protect the crucial trading posts and ports whose commerce kept the wealth flowing into the city.

In that sense, it can be said that the Carthaginian empire was similar to the American empire of today, which eschews the designation of “empire” altogether but nevertheless exerts power over other nations through promises of money and threats of sanctions and military intervention.

The Punic Wars ended with the burning of Carthage, the massacre of its population, and the annexation of its land by Rome, which in turn became the Mediterranean’s chief power and was on its way to becoming the famed and vast Roman Empire.

Another important and instructive example of the clash between a rising empire and a declining one for control of crucial trade routes can be found in the seven Ottoman-Venetian Wars, which took place at various points within a time span of 300 years, from 1396 to 1718.

The Republic of Venice was an Italian city-state known since the Middle Ages for having the best sailors, vessels, and ship-building infrastructure in the world. Due to the scarcity of local natural resources, the Venetian economy depended almost entirely on trade, leading the people of Venice to build an extensive maritime empire and a powerful navy capable of protecting it.

The Ottoman Empire, of course, was an Islamic Caliphate, spearheaded by the Ottoman Turks, which came to rule most of the Muslim world and made major inroads into Europe — including turning Constantinople, the former capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, into the seat of its own empire.

Although Venice at its peak in the 16th century had a population of only 180,000, compared to the 25-30 million in the Ottoman Empire during the same time period, victory in these wars over trade in the Mediterranean (specifically in the Aegean, Ionian, and Adriatic seas) was by no means a given for the Turks. On the contrary, the superiority of the Venetian navy made them favorites to win early on, and they scored some major victories, such as the conquest of the Morean Peninsula and the triumph at the battle of Lepanto.

Numerous of the most decisive Venetian defeats — defeats that spelled doom for the empire — were due to blunderous decisions by incompetent commanders, not the result of technological inferiority or a less-able rank-and-file.

In all this, there are lessons to be taken for the United States. For one, the rivalry with China is likely to end as it has for the established powers in ages past: A loss to Beijing would be existentially catastrophic for America and lead to its decline as a world power, perhaps even resulting in as transformative a shakeup as that which befell the Soviet bloc.

Second, the United States should not shy away from defending its legitimate interests; powers as diverse as Venice, the Dutch Republic, the Spanish empire, and the British Empire were prosperous and great so long as they were able to defend the commerce on which their societies depended. Once these states lost control of their trade routes, and the economic advantages this control gave their national industry, their wealth, prestige, and influence deteriorated.

Finally, keeping the military, especially the navy, in top form remains paramount. This not only means ensuring the armed forces have superior equipment and arms; it also means developing the best



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leadership, the best strategists and tacticians — which is difficult to do when you have the Biden administration firing capable servicemen for being too conservative while elevating transgenders.



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