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America's Patriotic Blinders

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The time has come to think the unthinkable: The era of U.S. dominance in international affairs may well be coming to an end. As that moment approaches, the main question will be how well the U.S. is prepared for it.

Asia's rise over the last few decades is more than a story of rapid economic growth. It is the story of a region undergoing a renaissance in which people's minds are reopened and their outlook refreshed. Asia's movement toward resuming its former central role in the global economy has so much momentum that it is virtually unstoppable. While the transformation may not always be seamless, there is no longer room to doubt that an Asian century is on the horizon and that the world's chemistry will change fundamentally.

Global leaders bear a responsibility to prepare their societies for impending global shifts. But too many U.S. leaders are shirking this responsibility.

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Last year at the World Economic Forum in Davos, two U.S. senators and a deputy national security adviser participated in a forum on the future of U.S. power. When asked what future they anticipated for this power, they predictably declared that the U.S. would remain the world's most powerful country. When asked whether the U.S. was prepared to become the world's second-largest economy, they were reticent.

Their reaction was understandable. Even entertaining the possibility of the U.S. becoming "No. 2" amounts to career suicide for a U.S. politician. Elected officials everywhere must adjust, to varying degrees, to fulfill the expectations of those who put them in office.

Intellectuals, on the other hand, have a special obligation to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable. They are supposed to consider all possibilities, even disagreeable ones, and prepare the population for prospective developments. Honest discussion of unpopular ideas is a key feature of an open society.

But in the U.S., many intellectuals are not fulfilling this obligation. Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested recently that the U.S. "could already be in the second decade of another American century." Likewise, Clyde Prestowitz, the president of the Economic Strategy Institute, has said "this century may well wind up being another American century."

To be sure, such predictions may well prove accurate. If they do, the rest of the world will benefit. A strong and dynamic U.S. economy, reinvigorated by cheap shale gas and innovation, would rejuvenate the global economy as a whole. But Americans are more than ready for this outcome. No preparation is needed.

If the world's center of gravity shifts to Asia, however, Americans will be woefully unprepared. Many Americans remain shockingly unaware of how much the rest of the world, especially Asia, has progressed.

Americans need to be told a simple, mathematical truth. With 3 percent of the world's population, the U.S. can no longer dominate the rest of the world, because Asians, with 60 percent of the world's population, are no longer underperforming. But the belief that the U.S. is the only virtuous country, the sole beacon of light in a dark and unstable world, continues to shape many Americans' worldview. The failure of U.S. leaders and intellectuals to challenge these ideas perpetuates a culture of coddling the public.

But while Americans tend to receive only good news, Asia's rise is not really bad news. The U.S. should recognize that Asian countries are seeking not to dominate the West but to emulate it. They seek to build strong and dynamic middle classes and to achieve the kind of peace, stability and prosperity that the West has long enjoyed.

This deep social and intellectual transformation underway in Asia promises to catapult it from economic power to global leadership. China, which remains a closed society in many ways, has an open mind, whereas the U.S. is an open society with a closed mind. With Asia's middle class set to skyrocket from roughly 500 million people today to 1.75 billion by 2020, the U.S. will not be able to avoid the global economy's new realities for much longer.

The world is poised to undergo one of the most dramatic power shifts in human history. To be prepared for the transformation, Americans must abandon ingrained ideas and liberate unthinkable thoughts. That is the big challenge facing U.S. intellectuals today.

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