

We Won't, We Won't Rock You: The Decline of U.S. Primacy and the Rise of the Rest

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The United States must recognize that its era of primacy is in relative decline. As other states rise, the economic and military dominance that the U.S. had previously held will gradually diminish. America must learn to react to this changing global system and make smart policy decisions in order to safeguard the continuation of its influence. By acting multilaterally and strengthening the Western order, the U.S. can ensure that it plays a large role in the determination of the new international order. As the era of American hegemonic comes to an end, it must look to globalize itself just as it globalized the rest of the world.

Since WWII and the end of the Cold War, the United States has enjoyed the privileged position of being the world's only superpower. As such, it has dominated world politics; holding the largest economy and the largest military in the world. However, that superpower status has begun to be threatened. With the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil combined with the relative decline in the U.S. economy due to crippling deficits and increased government spending, the U.S. is in relative decline. Faced with the "Rise of the Rest," the age of American unipolarity is coming to an end. Where it once held economic and military dominance, it is likely to lose both as increasing globalization allows more states to become internationally competitive. In order to remain an influential actor in world politics and ensure the strength of the Western system, the U.S. must act multilaterally with other Western states.

The Theory of Continued U.S. Dominance

To understand the relative decline of the United States, one must first understand the theories behind the notion that the United States will retain its status as the sole superpower and why those theories are inherently flawed.

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2002) argue that in the wake of the Cold War, the U.S. emerged in a unique position as the only dominant world superpower. While others might contend that the terrorist attacks of 9-11 demonstrated both American vulnerability and the build-up of global anti-American sentiment, Brooks and Wohlforth argue the opposite. In fact, the United States' "response to the attack—which showed its ability to project power in several places around the globe simultaneously, and essentially unilaterally, while effortlessly increasing defense spending by nearly \$50 billion—only reinforced its unique position (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002)." They argue that the United States will remain the world's sole superpower because it holds a multi-dimensional power advantage over all other states due to the fact that it remains the world's largest military power as well as the largest economy.

According to Brooks and Wohlforth, American military and economic dominance provide the U.S. with a unique hegemonic status over the rest of the world. Their argument in favor of American dominance focuses on four central points, the first of which is that other powers are not likely to emerge that could check American power. The United States holds comprehensive power; it is both large and wealthy, unlike previously unsuccessful hegemonies. All of its potential "challengers are either one or the other (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002)" and it is therefore unlikely

that there will be a convergence of world powers against the United States. Even if China, the closest potential competitor, could close the gap in GDP, “the gaps in the two states’ other power capabilities—technological, military, and geographic—would remain (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002).” Secondly, the military power of the United States is not dependent on any other state. Even though the U.S. economy is becoming more closely interconnected with the economies of other nations due to globalization, its military is entirely independent and therefore its national security strategy is not contained.

The third argument in favor of continued American hegemony is that the U.S. holds a unique position in world politics that enables it to act completely unilaterally. Unlike other nations, the United States does not have to work through multilateral institutions in order to maintain its international reputation. Embedded institutions, like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, were created by the U.S. and ultimately serve American interests. This leads to the final leg of Brooks and Wohlforth’s argument—that the United States does not need to follow international norms in order to support its legitimacy and maintain international order. Most international rules were made at least jointly by the U.S. and, as a result, the rules generally favor its national interest. Even if the United States were to step outside international norms, no country is powerful enough to enforce sanctions against it. Counterbalancing the U.S. would prove too costly for any one nation and no state can change its economic behavior towards the U.S. without severely damaging its own economy.

While the United States’ military is the largest in the world, it also “leads the world in exploiting the military applications of advanced communications and information technology (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002)”. Furthermore, it has been able to support this military preeminence with only 3.5% of its GDP. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the American economy “surpasses that of any great power in modern history (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002)”. The U.S. GDP, totaling approximately \$14.58 trillion in 2010, dwarfs that of its competitor BRIC nations—Brazil’s \$2.09 trillion, Russia’s \$1.48 trillion, India’s \$1.73 trillion and China’s \$5.93 trillion (The World Bank, 2012). In addition to holding the largest economy, the U.S. has also taken the best advantage of globalization. Not only is it the destination for scientifically trained foreign workers, it also attracts more than one-third of the world’s foreign direct investment (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002). Finally, American economic and military dominance is rooted in technological dominance. By holding preeminence in these key areas, Brooks and Wohlforth argue that no other nation can rival the power of the United States.

The Flaw in the Theory and the ‘Rise of the Rest’

Although the arguments formed by Brooks and Wohlforth seem very convincing at first, further analysis reveals that the arguments in favor of continued American hegemony are overly simplistic and fail to take into account the complicated and multidimensional nature of world politics.

The first error that Brooks and Wohlforth make in their argument is to overestimate the power of the U.S. hegemony. Though the United States is powerful, other states like China, Brazil and India are rising, both militarily and economically. As these states rise and become more powerful, the U.S. will become less able to form the world after its own image. Additionally, the American hegemony thesis ignores the importance of interconnectivity in a globalized world. Because there is significant interconnection across issue areas, any change in one nation’s foreign policy is likely to cause a chain reaction among other states. Thus, other states are likely to respond to unilateral military action on the part of the United States by adopting policies less favorable to American interests. Moreover, American tendency to act unilaterally can also cause serious problems for its foreign policy later on. Unilateral action reduces the pool of voluntary help from which the U.S. can hope to draw from in the future. Foreign perception of the misuse of American power

encourages other states to work with one another to check American power. Ultimately, the United States will be unable to continue its misuse and exaggeration of power as other states rise.

Finally, because their analysis overemphasizes U.S. supremacy, the foreign policy position that Brooks and Wohlforth assume has drastic implications for the United States. First, by emphasizing the freedom of the United States to act unilaterally and ignore international norms, they ignore the role that American hegemony plays in enforcing these norms. If the U.S. were to set an example to not comply with international laws and norms, other states would assume that they could do the same. The United States played a major role in the establishment of laws and agreements which often, if not always, comply with American interests. By not following these norms and encouraging others to do the same, America would undermine its own interests and increase the cost of enforcing the laws and agreements it wishes to see followed. Thus, by defying the laws it worked to establish, the U.S. would be encouraging other nations to do the same, undermining the legitimacy of the United States as a world leader and promoting resentment and anti-American sentiment.

In order to craft a successful and informed foreign policy, it is important to understand how and why U.S. primacy is in relative decline as well as the reasons for the rise of other states. David Mason (2009) points to the sense of American *carte blanche* or American exceptionalism as both the cause of America's success and its failure. Mason argues that while there is no denying the United States' current position of economic dominance, this wealth is deceptive and cannot be sustained. America's economic preeminence is "illusory because much of it has been purchased on borrowed money. It cannot be sustained for many reasons: because societal needs, like healthcare, Social Security, and infrastructure repair can no longer be deferred; because the sources for borrowing are beginning to dry up; and because the planet cannot sustain the ravenous U.S. appetite for goods and resources (Mason 2009)." The biggest consequence of living on borrowed money is the staggering federal government debt. According to *the CIA World Factbook*, public debt accounted for 69.4% of the U.S. GDP. That figure, however, is slightly skewed. If it were to also include "intra-government" debt, gross debt would increase by about one-third of the nation's GDP—leaving public debt to account for 102.7% of the nation's GDP (CIA World Factbook 2012).

Mason argues that America's debt is unrecoverable for many reasons. First, there is a growing sense of urgency in the U.S. surrounding internal problems, like poverty, Social Security and healthcare that require significantly expensive solutions. Second, the rising costs of energy are likely to increase along with the rising global demand for energy sources like petroleum. Third, as the dollar loses value in the international economy, imports that sustain the current American standard of living are becoming increasingly expensive. Finally, U.S. defense spending is trending upwards, accounting for more and more of the nation's GDP each year. Domestic manufacturing in the United States is rapidly moving overseas where it enjoys cheaper labor and less restrictive environmental laws. The "American consumer continues to gobble up huge quantities of imported goods, while the U.S. industry is producing very little that can be exported in return (Mason 2009)." As America produces less and imports more, it invites the rise of other states that will put an end to an era of American economic predominance.

Zakaria, Mason and Ikenberry agree that while the United States will continue to hold military supremacy over the world, the significance of that supremacy is relatively declining. First, the U.S. is beginning to discover "the limits of its military power in Vietnam, Somalia, and Haiti among others, and almost every case of U.S. military intervention in the post-war period, U.S. goals were not ultimately achieved (Mason 2009)." While America does still currently hold the largest and most technologically advanced military in the world, it has become increasingly unlikely that any military struggle will arise in this power struggle. David Ikenberry (2008) argues that "in the age of nuclear deterrence, great-power war is, thankfully, no longer a mechanism of historical change.

War-driven change has been abolished as a historical process (Ikenberry 2008).” This new great power war, rather, will take place in the realm of economics—where the United States is clearly in decline.

Americans, Zakaria (2008) argues, are at a competitive disadvantage in a globalized and interconnected world economy. By relying on their superpower status, Americans have allowed other states to learn their exclusive market practices and “they have not had to reciprocate by learning foreign languages, cultures, or markets (Zakaria 2008)”. Americans have never attempted to learn how to access other markets or other cultures. Americans’ inability to learn from others has had drastic effects on the United States. For example, the U.S. automobile manufacturing industry, which has been centered in Michigan for more than a century after the invention of the automobile in 1894, was moved to Canada in 2004. The reasons for this were not cheaper labor or reduced corporate taxes, but rather health care costs. If manufacturers moved their plants from Michigan to Ontario, the medical and insurance costs they were required to pay each worker dropped from \$6,500 to \$800 (Zakaria 2008). While this could have been changed very easily with a few policy adjustments, the political system in America has become so vitriolic and reactionary that any real change in policy is virtually impossible. Party politics and the factions that they cause have led to the virtual stagnation of policy progression. The sense of American exceptionalism and the relative inability of the political system to “fix its ailments” (Zakaria 2008) is what will really lead to the decline of the American economy through competitive disadvantage.

Zakaria argues that the economic and military decline of the United States is accompanied by the simultaneous rise of the rest. In 2005, “twenty-four of the world’s 25 largest initial public offerings that year were held in countries other than the United States (Zakaria 2008).” While the U.S. has historically held the lowest corporate tax rates in the world, these tax rates have been lowering across the globe, leaving the United States with the current highest global corporate tax rate. New, emerging powers like China, India, Brazil and South Africa have economies that are growing at a rate much faster than the U.S.’ modest 1.5% (Cia World Factbook 2012). In fact, by the year 2020, the purchasing power parity in China is expected to surpass that of the United States (Ikenberry 2008). As these powers continue to grow, they will not only realize that they have to power to increase their national interests in the international playing field and sequentially their international power; they will also capitalize and act on this realization. In addition to the rise of other nations, Zakaria points to the rise of non-state actors, like IGOs, NGOs, terrorists and drug cartels. The international system that we currently face is very different from previous models of international relations. The changing world system places much more emphasis on economic growth—of nations, corporations and people that have been most successful at adapting to these changes.

Faced with the relative decline of U.S. economic and military advantage accompanied by the rise of the rest and the changing world order, the United States must begin to make changes to its foreign policy. Rather than continue to previous Bush policy of preemption and unilateral action, the U.S. must begin to act multilaterally and accommodate the rise of the rest rather than remain in denial of its present situation. Strengthening the Western order by “reinforcing the features of that order that encourage engagement, integration and restraint” (Ikenberry 2008) will allow the U.S. to bond together mutually-interested capitalist democratic states in deeply-rooted institutions. The more open this system is to allowing the entrance of competitors, the more it will be in competitors best national interest to join it rather than fight it. Ikenberry asserts that while “it may be possible for the China to overtake the United States alone... it is much less likely that China will ever manage to overtake the Western order (Ikenberry 2008).” By strengthening multilateral Western alliances and accommodating the rise of new powers through cooperation, the U.S. can

influence how these new rising states are integrated in the new international system. In this way, the United States can maximize its influence in the new world order.

Conclusion

The United States must recognize that its era of primacy is in relative decline. As other states rise, the economic and military dominance that the U.S. had previously held will gradually diminish. America must learn to react to this changing global system and make smart policy decisions in order to safeguard the continuation of its influence. By acting multilaterally and strengthening the Western order, the U.S. can ensure that it plays a large role in the determination of the new international order. As the era of American hegemonic comes to an end, it must look to globalize itself just as it globalized the rest of the world.

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