

Grand Strategies of Declining Great Powers: Will the United States Become the Next Hegemonic Great Power that Shatters?

Tianyang Mu^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Political Science, University College London, London, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

a. zctqtmu@ucl.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the 21st century, the US has been recognised as the superpower and the strongest country in the world. Will the US keep powerful or decline like the great powers in history? Intending to answer this question, this essay has three sections. Section one reviews the history to show why great powers usually decline. Section two conducts the comparison and research to analyse the speciality of the US compared to the other great powers. Finally, section three concludes why the US will not fall for a certain period and advise the grand strategies for the US.

Keywords: Grand strategy, Great power, Power decline, The United States

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the US is the strongest country in the world, and its complex and soft power may be more potent than Rome and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. Especially in the post-World War II period, US's influence was more well-speeded than the Soviet Union, and the US had played an optimistic and active role in world politics [1]. Even though there are many criticisms against the United States, the policies and strategies adopted by the US are successful in maintaining its power and influence. After the Soviet dissolution, the margin of power, such as the military and economic power that the US possessed, made it potentially the most powerful nation in the modern world [2]. However, the US still confront both domestic and external threats that might hinder its continuation of world dominance status. Under the fear of unfriendly states' possession of weapons of mass destruction, in recent decades, the US increased its military spending on campaigns such as the war on terror to protect its homeland security and deter aggression [2]. Apart from maintaining military power, the rise of China and domestic issues, including left-right division on major political issues, also threaten US's influence maintenance.

Some scholars predict that US dominance will continue to the 2030s [2]. In today's turbulent world, we wonder what grand strategies the US should adopt to continue its power expansion rather than experiencing power decline. Will the US become another hegemon power that shatters within the next few years? Before concluding, we should first study the reasons behind the decline of various great power and then analyse why the US will not follow their old path. This essay will include three sections. In the first section, I will examine the reasons behind the decline of some extraordinary

powers in history. In the second section, I will illustrate the comparisons between the US and other great powers. Last but not least, I will examine the grand strategies already adopted by the US and some future grand strategies that could be adopted to maintain its power and global influence.

2. Why Did Excellent Power Fall

Many great powers have risen, and how many have fallen throughout human history. The rise and fall of modern great powers are mainly associated with the economic efficiency and productivity of the state to aggregate and use resources to promote its overall interests [3]. Just as the power transition model indicates, such power resource accumulation helps the state develop and expand its influence worldwide, eventually reconstructing the international order [3]. The state that makes the most effective use of its productivity would be capable of becoming the hegemon. At the same time, war or other aggression is most likely to outbreak when the states' military, political, and economic capabilities are balanced or when smaller-sized great powers are unsatisfied with the current international order and wish to reshape power distribution [3]. Therefore, it would be essential for the hegemon to keep its power supremacy to deter the potential aggressors.

At the same time, warfare contributes to one state's expanding influence and development. By gaining triumph, states could possess the local territory, people, and natural resources and spread their culture. Due to the mutual dependence between wealth and military strength, the result of battles and wars is strongly associated with states' economic performance and use of productive resources [4]. With good economic performance, countries could easily bear the cost of large-scale armaments [4]. However, when excessive resources are diverted from wealth development to military goals, such as expansionary territory conquest and wars, the benefits of external expansion could also weaken the power and influence of the state [4]. When states pursue expansionist strategies that only serve to undermine their security, they are acting in an excessively competitive manner [5]. The state will succumb to self-encirclement when its expansionist activity sparks conflict with a solid opposing coalition [5]. During the colonisation era, at the end of the 15th century, with the opening of new routes, Portugal and Spain took the lead on the road of colonial expansion. France and the UK joined to share a slice of cake with the Scramble for Africa in the 1870s, when various imperial powers wanted to possess natural resources for their industrial development, such as oil and diamonds [6].

However, these external expansions and conquests over the foreign territory came with expenses. Indeed, overextension is the common pitfall of empires, and the root cause is domestic coalitions [7]. Having overseas colonies brought obligations to great power themselves, including their reliance on foreign resources and markets and the need to send troops and arm forces to protect the integrity of colonies from another foreign conquest or prevent the uprising from the colonized [4]. While at the same time, the rivalries between great powers became increasingly intense, with each wanting to expand their influence globally, the competition for both global market share and military force added burdens on great powers [4]. It became increasingly difficult for great powers to be the only and the long-standing global hegemon. With the defeat of Spain's "invincible fleet" by Britain, the colonial rules of Spain and Portugal were gradually broken [8]. The oppression encountered by the American people and the corrupted Spanish society and cultural and political system led to an uprising in various Spanish American colonies, eventually making Spain lose most of its colonies [9].

3. The Speciality of the American Case

Compared with other superpowers in history, the road to the prosperity of the United States is different.

The United States rose in the second half of the 19th century [4]. The civil war solved the problems of domestic unification and the system. At the end of the 19th century, the United States exceeded

China and approached Britain, the number one power in terms of economic aggregate [10]. When the wheel of history came to the 20th century, the rapid development of science and technology and the differences in growth rates among countries led to the redistribution of power among countries [11]. The two world wars weakened the power and influence of great European powers, which the United States and the Soviet Union seized the chance to rise. In the second half of the 20th century, after the cold war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States became the only superpower in the world.

In more than 200 years of development, the state system of the United States has been constantly repaired and improved. Especially after the civil war, the US accelerated its human rights process, and the growing middle-class population made American society unprecedentedly stable. Compared with previous great powers, the United States also belongs to the modern state system and is a free democratic country. There is almost no possibility of national division. With a unique error correction mechanism [12], the US could respond to major crises and adjust the strategy direction accordingly, which helps it rapidly resume failed activities such as over-expansion and adjust its strategies in the correct direction. Some pessimistic viewpoints previously concerned the cost of the US's external and internal affairs: the war on terror campaign, nuclear threats, the involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan war, threats from emerging countries like China, and domestic issues like the long-lasting impact of the financial crisis [13]. The COVID-19 crisis further intensified such concern. However, in recent years the US has intentionally adjusted some of these strategies. For instance, the US ended the long war on Iraq and Afghanistan in 2013 and 2021, respectively. After spending billions to support the Afghan security forces, the US military engagement in the country's most prolonged conflict came to an abrupt and deadly end with the collapse of the Afghan government [14]. Although some people are unsatisfied with such an incomplete ending, the US abandoned an impossible mission and its strategic direction of over-expansion. As a result, we prevented more casualties and costs.

For its economy, the United States has continuously adopted an open and fair market within its economy, with promoting competition as its primary objective to ensure a liberal and accountable economic system [15]. The source of the economic power of America is the relatively free market system. Per Adam Smith's inference, the economy is better driven by the invisible hand of the market, not by the government [16]. Although there have been several economic crises, learning the lesson of excessive indulgence, economic development has always rebounded rapidly. This had been evidenced in the 2008 Financial Crisis and the Covid outbreak. The economic growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measurement remained at 2.7% and 5.7% in 2010 and 2021, respectively, after a negative ratio in the previous year [17]. Since the Bretton Woods system was established in 1944, the US dollar has become the world currency; a financial power based on the dollar was established after decoupling the dollar from gold in 1973. All countries worldwide, including China, have complementary interests with the United States [18]. This indicates that even if China's economic aggregate exceeds that of the United States, the United States will not decline.

Since the birth of nuclear weapons in 1945, the world's major powers have successively possessed this terrorist killer. However, the emergence of nuclear weapons did not intensify the world war. On the contrary, it set shackles and restrictions on the actions of all countries. Under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), no countries apart from the five countries that possess nuclear weapons are allowed to invest in them [19]. Without the threats of nuclear proliferation, the US could retain its position as the most powerful military hegemon with most nuclear weapons. This is also an important reason why World War III did not break out in a short time after the end of World War II. Therefore, the United States is unlikely to decline through a fierce war when it feels secure enough. Based on the unipolar political theory, the power advantage of the United States may be lasting. However, it may cause frequent conflicts and need to adapt to the economic growth of its

main competitor: China [20]. In short, the superiority of military power has brought significant benefits, but it is not a pure benefit.

4. Grand Strategies to Prevent the Decline of the United States

Above, we have analysed the reasons for the decline of various European great powers. Through comparison, we believe that the United States still has institutional, cultural, and economic advantages. At the same time, China's rise is accompanied by close cooperation with the United States, so it is not necessarily a hostile threat to the United States [21]. Therefore, the United States does not necessarily decline, and we have formulated the following grand strategies to prevent the United States' possible decline.

Although the United States has absolute advantages in foreign affairs and security. Even so, it still needs to be optimised and adjusted according to the world's situation with challenges. Art introduced various grand strategies adopted by the United States within history, including dominion, collective and cooperative security, isolationism, containment and collective engagement [2]. In recent years, the US still confronted domestic problems and external threats from various emerging powers, which could potentially back its choice of increasing military spending.

However, security shall not be the only final goal of the US's grand strategy. As stated by Art, the United States shall not only concern with its homeland security and protecting its interests [2]. Self-protection shall be the primary foundation of one country's grand strategy [2], but it should not constitute the entire goal of the United States. Instead, the collective security and interest maximisation for the US and its allies shall state as the optimal goal of the future strategies of the United States. The economic advantage of the United States is based on the scale economy provided by the clustered manufacturing industry and the geometric growth rate provided by high scientific and technological innovation. Therefore, from the economic aspect, the US shall maintain its dominant position within all technological realms.

The continuation of technological innovation is particularly crucial. Especially in the IT industry, although the rising competition from some emerging powers like China did put some pressure on the US, the grand strategy for the US is still to maintain and continue its international leadership in the technology industry [22]. The technological innovation in the United States is not fast enough to support rapid economic development. In the final analysis, all kinds of economic problems in recent years, including the subprime mortgage crisis, are related to the insufficient development of technology. In the previous era of significant development, it was the technology to guide the direction of capital investment. If there were sufficient technological development in those years, not all the capital would likely flow to the subprime bond market. Cooperation with the European allies represents specific strategic importance to the US. It shall not only isolate itself from the competition with its European allies but also persuade them to join in and share the collective interest in developing the IT industry [22].

5. Conclusion

The history of the world is vast. Some great powers have risen, and some have declined. From Spain, Napoleon, France, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain to the United States, the rise or decline of these great powers can inspire us. This paper summarises the alternation of great powers in history and also focuses on analysing the reasons for their decline. It also compares them with the United States and points out the uniqueness of the United States and the impact of rising international competition on the United States. Through research, the conclusion is clear that the United States is different from the declining powers in history. It has a perfect democratic system, a developed market economy, leading science and technology, and a robust military force. In addition, the United States

has a solid ability to correct errors and has a restraint mechanism for the government. What is particularly important is that the United States adherence to the rule of law and justice has made it gain the support of the majority in many domestic and international affairs.

Although the United States is also subject to certain opposition at home and abroad, in response to these oppositions, it has tried to adjust its domestic and foreign policies and has the strength to confront them. Therefore, all these are why the United States can remain strong and not decline for a certain period. However, there are indeed many crises in the United States. Although they will not become a decisive threat in the short term, they still need to be highly concerned and improved. Based on this, we put forward the grand strategy of the United States and gave full and feasible suggestions from the domestic, economic and military aspects of the United States. It is hoped that this will help world development and peace.

References

- [1] Lundestad, G. (1986). *Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952*. *Journal of Peace Research*, 23(3):263-277.
- [2] Art, R., (2003). *A Grand Strategy for America*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.
- [3] Organski, A., and Kugler, J. (1981). *The War Ledger*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Kennedy, P. (1987). *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York, Random House.
- [5] Kupchan, C. (1994). *The Vulnerability of Empire*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.
- [6] Michalopoulos, S. and Papaioannou, E. (2016). *The Long-Run Effects of the Scramble for Africa*. *American Economic Review*, 106(7):1802-1848.
- [7] Snyder, J. (1991). *Myths of Empire*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press
- [8] Froude, J. (2011). *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada (Vol. 12)*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Arnade, C., Whitaker, A., and Diffie, B. (1960). *Causes of Spanish-American Wars of Independence*. *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, 2(2): 125–144.
- [10] Otte, T. (2007). *The China question : great power rivalry and British isolation, 1894-1905.*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [11] Rich, N. (1992). *Great power diplomacy:1814-1914.*, New York, McGraw-Hill Education.
- [12] Bitner, R. (2008). *Greed, fraud & ignorance*. LTV Media.
- [13] Lieber, R. (2012). *Power and willpower in the American future*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Zucchino, D. (2021). *The U.S. War in Afghanistan: How It Started, and How It Ended*. [online] *Nytimes.com*. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/article/afghanistan-war-us.html>> [Accessed 7 September 2022].
- [15] The White House. (2021). *Executive Order on Promoting Competition in the American Economy*. Executive Order (EO) 14036. Washington, D.C. [Online] Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/07/09/executive-order-on-promoting-competition-in-the-american-economy/> [Accessed 1 September 2022].
- [16] Smith, A. (1977). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations.*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- [17] The World Bank. (2022). *GDP growth (annual %) - United States*. [online] Available at: <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2021&locations=US&start=2007>> [Accessed 1 September 2022].
- [18] Steger, M. (2003). *Globalization: A very short introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [19] The United Nations. (2022). *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>> [Accessed 4 September 2022].
- [20] Monteiro, N. (2014). *Theory of Unipolar Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- [21] Mahbubani, K. (2020). *Has China won? The Chinese challenge to American primacy.*, New York, Public Affairs.
- [22] Atkinson, R. (2021). *A US grand strategy for the global digital economy*. Policy Report, Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF).