

The default power

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Josef Joffe

Every 10 years, it is decline time in the United States. In the late 1950s, it was the Sputnik shock, followed by the "missile gap" trumpeted by John F. Kennedy in the 1960 presidential campaign. A decade later, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger predicted a world of five, rather than two, global powers. At the end of the 1970s, Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech invoked "a crisis of confidence" that struck "at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will." A decade later, academics such as the Yale historian Paul Kennedy predicted the ruin of the United States, driven by overextension abroad and profligacy at home.

Declinism took a break in the 1990s, but by the end of the Bush administration, it had returned with a vengeance. This year, inspired by the global financial crisis, Mr. Kennedy revisited the arguments he had laid out 20 years earlier. "The biggest loser is understood to be Uncle Sam," he wrote. Chronic fiscal deficits and military overstretch were finally doing in the United States, he argued, and the "global tectonic power shift, toward Asia and away from the West, seems hard to reverse."

But the history of declinism shows that doom arrives in cycles, and what comes and goes, logically, does not a trend make. Today, as after past prophecies of imminent debility, the United States remains first on any scale of power that matters — economic, military, diplomatic or cultural — despite being embroiled in two wars and beset by the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The question, then, is, how well can the current declinism stand up to this enduring reality?

The breathtaking rise of China is at the center of contemporary worries. This argument is not about the absolute decline of the United States now but about its relative loss vis-à-vis China later — the United States is supposedly doomed because China's economy has been growing at three times the rate of America's and therefore will surpass the United States in terms of output sometime in the next several decades.

Life, however, is not linear. China's uninterrupted double-digit growth rates are of a recent vintage, essentially since 2003. Estimates that China's economy will grow by 6 percent in

2009 are a cautionary tale. China's growth has dropped by half from a historical high of almost 12 percent in 2007, which serves as a warning that its miraculous growth is foreign made — China is a place where the rest of the world essentially rents workers and workspace at deflated prices. The Chinese economy is extremely dependent on exports — they amount to around two-fifths of G.D.P. — and hence vulnerable to global downturns. In fact, China's exports have plunged by 26 percent this year.

But power is not just a matter of growth rates. What, then, makes a country great? A large population, a large economy, and a large military are necessary but not sufficient conditions. What puts America in a league of its own?

For one, the world's most sophisticated military panoply, fed by a defense budget that dwarfs all comers and gives the United States the means to intervene anywhere on the planet. And current figures show the U.S. economy to be worth \$14.3 trillion, three times as much as the second-biggest economy, Japan's. The United States also comes out ahead in terms of per capita income, with \$47,000 per inhabitant.

But there is even more: an unmatched research and higher-education establishment.

Another aspect of national power is a warrior culture. The United States still has one, as does Britain. But Europe — although it bests or equals the United States in terms of population, economic size, and military might — no longer has the mindset that once made it the master of the world.

The United States is the default power because there is nobody else with the requisite power and purpose. The default power does what others cannot or will not do. It underwrites Europe's security against a resurgent Russia. It chastises whoever reaches for mastery over the

Middle East. Only the default power has the power to harness a coalition against Iran. It guarantees the survival of Israel, but at the same time, the Palestinians and the Saudis look to the United States for leverage against Jerusalem. Is it possible to imagine China, Europe or Russia as a more persuasive mediator? No, because only the United States can

insure both the Arabs and the Israelis against the consequences of misplaced credulity.

Gainsayers will still dramatize China's growth rates as a harbinger of a grand power shift. But as the 21st century unfolds, the United States will be younger and more dynamic than its competitors.

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