

DECLINING US STATUS AS A SUPERPOWER: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORLD ORDER

*Muhammad Abbas and Hassan Jalil Shah**

Abstract

Since 1945, the US has been relishing the status of a superpower by following its interests through a no of means, including international order, global and regional security arrangements, and international organizations. Recently, emerging global powers have challenged the existing international order, whereas the US is on a declining trajectory. The US hegemonic obligations to use its preponderant power in global issues with the intent to cast events in its favour have brought an inevitable overstretch beyond its capacity. Furthermore. a visible shift in power centres, the backlash of political decisions, and economic recession are other factors that need to be studied. This paper, therefore, explores the highly debated and contested reasons for the US decline. While employing deductive reasoning through qualitative analysis, it evaluates the efficacy of existing international order, emerging multilateralism, and difficulties in obviating the attendant risks to US security and prosperity. Implications of a declining superpower and suggested course of action for Pakistan have also been discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Super Power, Hegemony, Multipolarity, Populism, International Order.

Introduction

The end of WW II brought an eclipse to the British Empire and led to the battle of ideologies in what is called as Cold War between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US. The Afghan quagmire saw the demise of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991; thus, bipolarity giving way to unipolarity with the US as the sole superpower having a monopoly over the unchallenged global system through blatant political, military, economic, and soft (cultural) power.¹ Huntington, while acknowledging the US superpower status, alluded to the transitional nature of this phenomenon and prophesized the emergence of multipolarity than an unbridled unipolarity.² The international political spectrum in the post-Cold War era had witnessed major transitions. These deviations can be attributed to globalization, the infotech revolution, the involvement of non-state actors, and the emergence of new regional blocks. The landmark event of 9/11 and its aftermath catalysed a titanic change to the US status as a superpower.

*Muhammad Abbas holds a MPhil Degree in Public Policy and Strategic Security Management. Dr Hassan Jalil Shah is an Assistant Professor at National Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Today, the US is confronting with a plethora of unsurmountable challenges. There is a gradual decline in US military, economic, political, and cultural influence. Strategic and political decisions have emasculated its unenviable position as a global hegemon. Similarly, the world is getting more vulnerable as it inclines towards redefining the world order.³ There are various rising powers in the military, economic, and political domains challenging the dominance and hegemony of the US in the international political structure. Whether the US is on a declining trajectory or otherwise is constantly being debated in all circles of political scientists, economists, academicians, and sociologists, having differing points of view on the subject. This paper, therefore, relies on the theoretical assumptions as enunciated by renowned scholars and political scientists. It endeavours to testify to the argument that the US is in transit to a declining status as a superpower through various lenses of Imperial Outreach theory, Hegemonic Stability theory, and Predation theory.

Immanuel Wallerstein views that the US in a chaotic world is on the decline as a superpower.⁴ The US needs to revisit its policies, especially towards China, Russia, and Iran besides reducing its dependency on foreign oil. Jack F. Matlock Jr (2010) posits that the end of the Cold War, which resulted in the disintegration of the Soviet Union, effectively ebbed the US power status since the consequential perceptions emasculated US hegemonic status rather than enhancing the power status of the US.⁵ Charles Kupchan (2003) considers the emerging European economy a larger threat to the US than China.⁶ Paul Kennedy (1989) argues that military spending can never catalyse the progress of a state; it acts as a stimulant for the opponents. He advocates that declining powers spend more on military and territorial security rather than spending and capitalizing on economic opportunities.⁷

Super Power and Its Characteristics

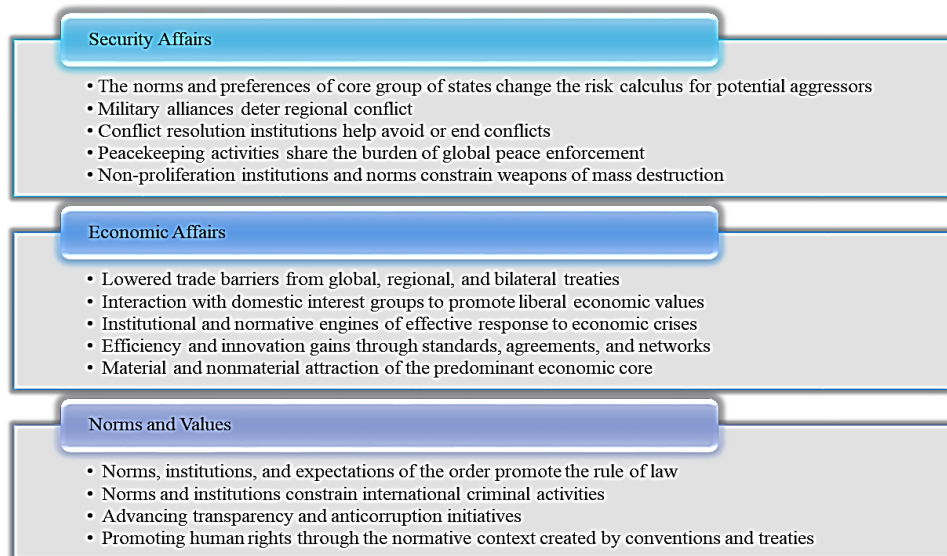
Oxford Dictionary defines the term superpower as “a country that has very great military or economic power and a lot of influence.”⁸ This definition is given with reference to the US as the most powerful nation in the world. However, it can also be defined as a state which within the arrangement of the international system has the ability to influence other actors within the system. Superpower is reckoning to hold a strong and stable economy, immense military might, strong political and cultural traditions along with technological advancements. With all ends aimed at achieving national agenda and interests, these attributes bestow upon the state’s ability to dominate world politics and international relations. This term was first used by William T. R. Fox (1944) while explaining it as a power structure within the international system which has the means to over-dominate the previous competing strong powers to achieve the highest status across the global spectrum. Fox recognized three states, the UK, the US, and the erstwhile USSR as the prevailing superpowers at that time.⁹

In modern times, a specific criterion for being a superpower is yet to evolve as a mix of soft and hard elements delineating the characteristics of a superpower;

hence, four axes of power, namely economy, military, politics, and culture, can be considered as fundamental traits for the superpower status. Military and economic powers are considered as hard elements, in which the military is the most significant, and the remaining two are recognized as soft power. The need for impeccable and unchallenged military supremacy necessitates par excellence power projection in qualitative and quantitative domains, both conventional and non-conventional. Economic superiority, a precursor for power projection,¹⁰ has always been a strong aspiration of a superpower to influence world politics through its economic muscles.¹¹ The manifestation of an absolute superiority by a superpower in terms of economy to reflect various gestures to other states includes incentives and coercion. Unless bestowed with a robust political system and equally vibrant culture, recognition of a state as a superpower in the international system would be challenging.¹²

The same can be vowed for the culture, an essential soft element of superpower status. A significantly open and inviting culture able to penetrate and crosscut the rest of the cultures while maintaining its fundamental values and remaining intact would attribute to the fundamentals of a superpower.¹³ Geography, size of the power, ability to dictate its will and control over natural resources also determine the superpower status.¹⁴ A study conducted by RAND Corporation (2018) explained these influences, which can be juxtaposed with vast regions of the world.

Figure 1.1: International Order: Categories of Value Assessed



(Source: RAND Corporation¹⁵)

Rise and Fall of Superpowers in the 20th Century

Historically, great powers that remained unchallenged for a period had to eclipse owing to several factors, primarily due to the systemic flaws in the system

accumulating for quite some time. However, history has not witnessed a peaceful transition of power. It is envisaged in the contemporary environment that power shifts will take place in the strategic domain than conventional wars.¹⁶ The decline of great power is initiated by several factors, mainly military and economy, and invariably, this fall is also associated with the relative rise of another great power. The rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, and the USSR corroborate this assertion. Great Britain, an empire with no sunset, started emasculating at the dawn of the 20th century to the extent of being taken over industrially by competing great powers, such as the US.¹⁷ This shift in the power structure was mainly in the geo-economics domain, and the growing clout in international relations led to the US influencing the global system. Similarly, the Soviet empire had been one of the greatest empires since the Czars era.¹⁸ Though having the status of a sixth-largest trading nation, it impelled to shun its traditional economy by adopting modernization and industrialization.¹⁹

Emergence of Bipolar World

Richard Overy argues that the concept of superpower status started getting its roots in the international system post-WWI.²⁰ France and the UK were sufficiently mauled while the US became an unparalleled economic power with military muscles. Germany and Italy adopted aggressive behaviour to reap the benefits of the evolving situation and fill that void. The non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union resulted in the German invasion of Poland, which led to WW II in 1939.²¹ It would not be unfair to state that post-WWII, the international system witnessed drastic changes, setting in new power equilibriums, declining colonial powers, and the emergence of the Soviet Union as a superpower being few of its corollaries. In the new power equation, two competing powers (the US and the USSR) emerged and led to a prolonged Cold War, spanning over 46 years. While these two superpowers adopted confronting policies, France, China, and the UK emerged as great powers. Therefore, the world dominated by two superpowers was divided into binary poles, and the resultant international system was called bipolarity.

Decline of the Soviet Union

With an emphasis on science and technology and backed by a war-tested army, the Soviet Union expanded its economy and increased its sphere of influence, especially in Eastern Europe. The economic bubble soon started to evaporate owing to a host of factors, including single-party rule, controversial socio-economic policies, and conservative agrarian society.²² Avoiding a direct confrontation, the US and the USSR endeavoured to achieve their national goals by using indirect means and through proxy wars. While engaged in the Cold War, both superpowers also remained busy in an arms race. The invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 then proved to be fatal for the Soviet Union. The withdrawal from Afghanistan catalysed the implosion of the Soviet Union and its hegemonic control over her satellite states; resultantly, the end of the Cold War in 1991 disintegrated the Soviet Union.²³

US as a Sole Superpower and World Order

The term 'new world order' was introduced, for the first time, in Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points.²⁴ It was conceptualized as a paradigm for peace through collective actions. Though the term was used in the aftermath of WW II, it could not gain currency. President Mikhail Gorbachev alluded to the new world order during his speech to the UNGA in December 1988.²⁵ However, the role of the US in anchoring the new world order was ambiguous and highly state-centric, primarily against the functionality of the UN.²⁶ The new world order seen multiple changes and customizations as the notion of institutionalization was rejuvenated to have social justice and international law. The concept of regionalism was revived to be an effective measure of cooperation and strengthened to have a functional approach towards collectivism.

By its geographic location and resultant security, the US has never been subject to any attack for the last 70 years. The US defence budget accounts for more than two-thirds of the world's total military outlay. With the fourth-largest army and having seven operational commands, holding the largest Air Force and a well-defined Blue Water Navy, US security forces operate in all continents. US economy and its influence over international financial institutions radiate far greater effects than those combined of countries like Japan, Germany, India, Russia, the UK, and Brazil. US population constitutes about 4 percent of the world's population, and its production capacity is approximately 26 percent of the world's goods and services. Oil production being a case in point, the US produces about 11,270,000 barrels per day vis-à-vis 11,590,000 barrels per day produced by Saudi Arabia.²⁷

However, paying less regard to international rules has become a dominant feature of US policy for the last couple of decades, wherein the US has been arbitrarily using hard power for attaining its objectives. This high-handedness, besides other factors, has led to erosion of the US image as a superpower and providing a fleeting opportunity for the emergence of new power centres. This phenomenon invites many to conclude that unipolarity may not last forever. While not contesting a dramatic transformation of power, the diffusion of US power is becoming a definite reality.

Rise of Multipolarity

Besides common characteristics of being a superpower, it is necessary to be recognized by other states or powers. Neorealists argue that the distribution of capabilities spread across the international system identifies the world order that we live in, i.e., unipolar in the case of a single superpower, bipolar in the case of two, and multipolar for many.²⁸ Polarity is a theoretical concept defined as a threshold value of the distribution of capabilities. Classical realists and neorealists define unipolarity as a structure in which polar-actor has a monopoly over all other tenants of the powerhouse and remains unchallenged without counterbalanced. When power is shared by two players in military, economic, and cultural domains, it becomes

bipolarity. However, when the dominance over political, military, economic, technological, and cultural power is shared equally with more than two powers, three at least, the structure of the international order can be termed as multipolar.

With the emergence of new power players having organizations and alliances as power centres and non-state actors as tools, the contemporary world is transiting from a unipolar world to multipolarity. The factors associated with the rise of multipolarity are globalization, regionalism, and nationalism. Diffusion is associated with globalization by declinists, e.g., the relative decline of the US has occurred owing to the shift of technology to the developing countries. Fareed Zakaria correlates the diffusion phenomenon with globalization.²⁹ Therefore, increasing economic power, information and communication technologies, and geographic reach are the key drivers of a multipolar world.

In a recent global crisis (Covid-19), China's unparalleled economic growth has demonstrated its potential of becoming a future superpower. With an approximate 1.408 billion population and a \$26 trillion economy, China outmatches the combined economies of Russia, India, and Brazil. Though not yet comparable to the US, China has increased its efforts to enhance its soft power.³⁰ With an average annual GDP growth rate of about 10 percent, the rise of the Chinese economy is unprecedented. Goldman Sachs, a US-based investment banking company, predicts that with the pace of growth for the last 30 years, China's economy is looking to surpass the US economy by 2027. Controlling energy and massive defence outlays, Russia is also on an upward trajectory once again. Russia's inflexible Crimea as Syria bears testimony to the Russian nurturing desire to dominate world affairs is again on the cards. Stiff resistance to NATO's ingress in the Russian sphere of influence and controlling gas prices in Europe are a few of the examples demonstrating Russia's intent of playing its role in world affairs.³¹

Besides states, multilateral organizations and non-state actors are also gaining ascendancy at the global level. Organizations like BRICS, SCO, and EU, etc., corroborate the assertion. Reckoned as power centres in regional and international politics, the formation of such organizations has an implied outcome for the benefit of the constituent states. On the other hand, multinational companies (MNCs) are equally participating in global economic growth. Various MNCs and NGOs, enjoying the wherewithal to transform international relations on a certain trajectory, are now pursuing their agendas for vested interests. These MNCs, NGOs, and highly empowered individuals might be nurturing their normative desires or a quest for profit and growth. In either case, these entities are readily available instruments for the developed countries to achieve their interests.

The US status as a hegemonic superpower in world affairs is rapidly eroding while other powers are emerging to fill the vacuum. The growing anti-American sentiments exhibited over various issues, such as disarray over cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan have created enough doubts about the ability of the US to maintain a stable and rightful international order. Russian obduracy and stiff resistance with

Chinese support against the policy of sanctions by the US in collaboration with European countries is an indicator of a great game in the near vicinity of South Asia. However, this shift is predominant in Asia.³²

There are two schools of thought that talk about the possibility of China replacing the US as a superpower. One school of thought postulates that China will replace the US as a superpower, whereas the other argues that the US status as a superpower is only in its infancy and that it will continue to dominate for a long time to come. From these arguments, it is fair to deduce that there could be a host of possibilities in the relative power equation between China and the US, primarily depending upon the future political changes in China. Though the US is likely to lose its relative power, China is not to surpass it soon. However, the multi-layered and culturally diversified world is adding new aspects to this reality. Though the US may not be at its zenith in many fields, including the economy, its military muscle still can dominate land, sea, air, and space. The dramatic recovery from the tumultuous effects of the Coronavirus has once again proved that China is an emerging economy and a political power. China is effectively employing its economic power through trade and BRI to take a large chunk of the world’s GDP; notwithstanding this, the US is still acting as a dominating player in the international system.

Theory of Imperial Overstretch

Kennedy advocates the concept of Imperial Overstretch as “the tendency great powers have to let their appetite for control over other countries exceed their digestive capacity.”³³ History bears testimony that overstretching of empires has always led to their decline due to various reasons, including draining economic resources required for maintaining the hold on the realm and emasculating political basis and cultural shocks. Keeping the Roman and Russian Empires in mind, this theory is equally applicable to the US as a superpower. These can be stated as under:³⁴

Figure 1.2: US Objectives and Power in the Affairs of the World

Categories	Security Affairs	Economic Affairs	Norms and Values
U.S. Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting the homeland • Avoidance of aggressive wars • Promoting stability in key regions • Preserving key norms such as freedom of the commons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National prosperity in part through stable and fair global economic system • Strong global growth rates • Free trade and global trade integration • Progress in less developed areas • Avoid and mitigate economic crises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote human rights • Promote and defend norms in key areas such as non-proliferation • Advance prevalence of democracy
Role of U.S. Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global military predominance helps to deter major aggression U.S. extended deterrence contribution to alliances helps deter war in key regions • Training, advisory, assistance, and other roles boost capacity of partner militaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractive and coercive role of desired access to the dominant U.S. market • U.S. leverage and coercion promoting liberal reforms • U.S. extended deterrence guarantees and military presence providing stability in key regions and setting the stage for growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. value promotion helps promote and defend norms • Direct assistance to democracies helps underwrite long-term trend • Example of system offers goal for reforming countries

(Source: RAND Corporation-2020)

Kupchan has postulated two trends pointing towards the strong possibility of US decline and the end of a unipolar world. The ultimate diffusing power of the states

since no state can have the wherewithal to maintain its dominance for an indefinite period. The second trend is the varying concept of internationalization which proclaims the ability of a superpower to extend influence over the world through a variety of strategies and actions. It is exhibited through a host of incentives and disincentives, political and economic incentives for compliance to superpower's decisions being economic concessions, trade agreements, and politico-military support. Disincentives include the ability of a superpower to impose its will and authority through coercive measures, including punitive military actions, international isolation, freezing of assets, economic sanctions, suspension of agreements, and discontinuation of diplomatic relations. These persuasive and dissuasive abilities of a superpower are inevitable for maintaining the world order and its hegemony,³⁵

Hegemonic Stability Theory and Flaws of US Decision-Making

The US decision-making process seems to be influenced by neoconservative politicians when analysed through the prism of hegemonic stability theory. These statesmen have always asserted and imposed unilateralism without resorting to distinct approaches followed by the world. Several powers like China have emerged remarkably with strong economies due to their fundamental principles. The US economic recession and unemployment have spiralled out of control occasionally, especially in the ongoing Covid-19 environment. It is estimated that by 2050, four out of the top five economies would emerge from the developing world, and the US economy would be about half the size of China's.³⁶

The weakening of the West has taken its toll on the US, thus, endangering the US hegemonic posture, its credibility, and relative strategic stability. In its course of faulty decision making, the US has also been making unrealistic compromises and retreats, examples being its retreat against the Russian onslaught in Syria, unchecked Russian meddling in Ukraine, Chinese inroads in the South China Sea, and Sino-Russian convergence in Afghanistan.

Predation Theory and Rising Power (China)

The relationship between a rising state and a declining power is explained well by Joshua Shiffrin in his theory of Predation, in which he has described various behaviour patterns of the rising and declining powers. According to Joshua, being contended with the emasculating influence of a declining power, the rising state can either adopt a predatory approach or a supportive approach against another polar state. In this context, the US is trying to lay a Thucydides trap for China neutralizing its economic, military, and political growth. The purpose behind the US all-out efforts is to make BRI project a failure. The Chinese response has been oscillating from supportive to that predation.

Paradigm Shifts

The new millennium has proved to be a harbinger of changes for the international order. The most perceivable change is the power shift in the world order of the post-Cold War era and the setting of the new paradigms for international politics. The events of 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, economic crisis, dynamics of states cooperation, and international relations have brought titanic changes to the existing international system. Besides serious concerns, these transformations have wide-ranging implications for the US itself and the other states.³⁷ The unchallenged US economic pre-eminence is now being challenged by China and other emerging states with impunity. Kupchan has projected the shift in economic power bases over the next 40 years, in which China would be the leading economic power in the world by 2050.³⁸

The US and its western allies are still using military power as the yardstick for maintaining the balance of power. Military advancements are generally dependent on the possession of several economic infrastructures, such as manufacturing base, technological supremacy, and energy. These gauges provide good indicators of a prospective military build-up. Thus far, the US has exhibited technological advancements over China, including automated weaponry, artificial intelligence, and hologram technology. China is endeavouring to catch up in space technology and the 5G spectrum; however, the gap to be filled is quite challenging. With the highest defence budget, the US military supremacy is likely to remain unchallenged for some time. During recent years, China's defence spending has remained unprecedented. It is evident from its investment in shipbuilding and steel production besides military build-up. These are the indicators of China's economic stability and growth.

The US and its allies have developed the wherewithal in every sphere of military dominance; however, the rising economic powers have started traversing the same trajectory that helped the US establishing its supremacy. With their burgeoning economies, these emerging powers are fulfilling the prerequisites of global military power. Though the ongoing pandemic has affected their economies, they continue to grow at an unprecedented pace in their quest to achieve global power status. Their shipyards are busy round the clock. International relations are advancing through the strategic investment capabilities of these economic powers.

The overall benevolent outlook, soft power, vibrant political culture, democratic values, human rights, freedom of speech, and economic largeness have been lending credence to the stature of the US as a dominant power. However, contested politico-military decisions, unilateral actions, unnecessary expansion of NATO, breaking of pact with Russia, unjustified stance on climate change, investing into regime changes, imposing pliant rulers against the wishes of the people, and supporting rulers who are not the aspirations of their people have added to the defiance against US hegemonic status.

The US needs to be cognizant that its zenith is over, and its power is eroding with the inevitability of realignment in international relations and shift in the global balance of power. Rather than denying and obstructing this shift, a balanced approach would be a policy of reconciliation than confrontation. The US should realize that resisting the entry of new rising power in the superpower club may lead to armed conflict. Therefore, peaceful co-existence would be a more suitable option. Non-accommodating behaviour towards emerging powers may result in a confrontation at the cost of weakening of international norms and standards.

Challenges for Pakistan

Post-US withdrawal, the ongoing fluid situation in Afghanistan has brought Pakistan once again under the spotlight and into relevance. The love-hate relationship between the US and Pakistan will remain in turbulence for a host of reasons. US-Chinese rivalry vis-à-vis Pak-China strategic relations, CPEC would remain a point in Pak-US bilateral relations. Indo-US nexus with a focus on China, on the other hand, will put Pakistan in a tighter position. Franchising security in Indo-Pacific to India vis-à-vis Indian hegemonic attitude in the region with full US abetment will certainly bring Pakistan closer to China and Russia, thus, causing major re-alignment in the region.

In the changing security environment, especially in Afghanistan, Pakistan needs well-articulated foreign policy, the edifice of which more alliances and realignments. Acting as a bridge between the two powers centres, the US and China, Pakistan should promote reconciliation than confrontation. The heart-warming of Russia towards Pakistan is an opportunity to realize geoeconomic advantages through the expansion of CPEC and regional connectivity. A neutral and balanced approach in the Middle East is the need of the hour while focusing on pursuing independent relations and catering for four-layered conflicts. Withstanding the bruises of Covid-19, the economy of Pakistan is on an upward trajectory but not out of trouble yet. Keeping the fragility of Pakistan's economy in view, the need for synergizing all elements of national powers to achieve the much-needed economic sovereignty cannot be over-ruled. The key to the economic revival is having diversified bilateral relations with regional states focusing on trade and investments.

Conclusions

The international system and politics are transiting in nature, ordained with continuity and change, hence, can neither remain static nor stable for a longer duration. As posited by Kennedy, the imperial overstretch of the US will eventually cause its decline as it did happen to previous superpowers. The unipolarity of the US power structure, gained in the post-Cold War era, may not last long as it was designed to suit its hegemonic and national interests, hence, contested by other emerging powers. This rapid decline is the result of an overstretch caused by her hegemonic obligations and preponderant military and economic power to invariably get involved

in the global issues with the desire to meld the events in its favour. Following the footsteps of her predecessors like the Roman Empire, British Empire, and the recently melted Soviet Empire, the trajectory of the downwards spiral is a reality, not a myth.

For longevity of its dominance in international relations, the US needs to revisit its military, economic and political relationship with the rising powers since the choices and options adopted by the contesting powers would remain beyond its purview. An approach based on cooperation and mutual co-existence through economic interdependency may be the sole option left with the superpower to reconcile with the political, economic, and military differences to survive with the acquired status.

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