

Changes in the World Power: The United States within the New Balance of Power

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the behaviour of the United States as a world power. The working hypothesis is that the only superpower has become, nowadays, impotent, affected by a relative decline. However, this should be understood as something natural, since it has never happened that any society would permanently remain ahead of the others. We assume here that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis is, certainly, the basic methodology used for this investigation. We will try to conclude that notwithstanding their relative decline, the USA will tend to remain, in the short and medium term, the only world superpower. It is recommended that further investigation must assign a special attention to China's emergence and its consequences on the balance of world power, in particular with regard to the durability of American hegemony.

1 Introduction

The word decline scares. How to conceive that the United States, the winner of World War II, with the strongest currency in the world, is now in decline? This upsets the spirits, leads to debates, and causes strong reactions. The media also contribute to give the impression of a stronger America that it actually is.

It is a ridiculous word, the decline. How is the country, which fills with fast food all the stomachs from Beijing to Brazil, from Sydney to Tokyo and marvels the eyes of the whole world with magnificent Hollywood films, in decline? How will this country, which has already reached the Moon, manage to explore the surface of Mars if in reality it is losing its hegemony? Is the land of Coca-Cola, General Motors, Motorola, Ford, IBM or Microsoft going through a valley of tears? The country that has the largest armed forces in the world, which patrols the oceans, which controls the air or dominates on the ground, is it at the end of its glory days? This are complicated questions, whose answers are divided between the supporters of the uninterrupted supremacy and those who, instead, announce its end.

Between one and another critical approach, we believe that the right measure lies rather in the middle. That is, we will not defend here the radical theory of an absolute decline but we will opt for the demonstration of a relative decline, which is something natural in the history of the great powers. As Brzezinski also says "for all power, the decline is inevitable; [...] hegemony is a transitory historical phase [...]; in time, even if it is far away, the American global hegemony will erode" (2004: 283). Nevertheless, as Nye (1990) warns, decline is a tricky word as it bundles together two different concepts: a decrease in external power and internal deterioration or decay, however, a country may experience decline in one sense, but not in the other.

Convinced that the behaviour of the states, the power or influence are not likely to translate into tangible realities, mathematical formulas, or mere statistics, we assume, from this point, that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is, certainly, the methodology supporting the present investigation. In this sense, it is imperative to penetrate the sphere of subjectivity, i.e. the understanding of causality inherent in the action of the various actors, that reaches us through the analysis of a whole panoply of scientific articles, monographs, theses, among other available sources regarding the subject of this study, in order to try to understand what drives the USA to act in this or that way.

It is important to consider, within the framework of the analysis that follows that, as Nye explains, "the word 'decline' mixes up two different dimensions: absolute decline, in the sense of decay, and relative decline, in which the power resources of other states grow or are used more effectively" (2010: para. 8). Starting from this fundamental distinction, we shall repeat once more that this article does not conceive the decline of the United States as absolute, but rather as relative regarding, in particular, the emergence of other actors in the international system, or better, several poles, which contribute to the fragmentation of power, as we will see, towards an uncertain and unstable system. It's not unreasonable to state that China is, eventually, one of these poles susceptible to reverse the balance of power against the American hegemon, given the extraordinary Chinese economic growth over the past few decades, along, at the same time, with a modernisation of the Chinese armed forces and of a gradual assertion of the soft power and pragmatism of Chinese foreign policy on the world stage. However, as we will conclude, the USA, although crossing a relative decline, will tend to remain the only superpower in the short and medium term.

2 Upheavals in Power: Towards a New Order

Today the power has changed. If once it was imposed by the simple force of the arms, demanding and eventually getting the respect of the enemy, today this one has become, more than ever, a protester against the power. In the past, the power was a balance element in the sense that it "was functional on the international

scene, it regulated alliances, organised the protections [...]" (Badie, 2004: 277). Today, with the end of bipolarity, new actors are claiming a place in the world political arena. They now seek to impose their own points of view, rather than to accept the *status quo*.

In an increasingly globalised world, actors feel a sense of indignation and dissatisfaction regarding the United States hegemony. And then arose chaos and disorder which the power of the past was no longer able to control or suppress. This explains, according to Joseph Nye, that the United States will have more difficulty in achieving its goals in the 21st century (1990: 175). But this does not happen only with the United States because, in reality, any power which has great resources (economic, cultural and military) will find obstacles to its hegemony. Similarly, the author believes that power is disseminated primarily because of five factors. Namely, "economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism functioning in weak states, transfers of technology and the new political problems" (Nye, 1992: 166). In addition, the fact that actors are individual and multiple at the same time, almost anonymous and invisible, makes it even more difficult to contain their movements and requires negotiation and consensus often very difficult and slow.

Richard Haass also shares this point of view, speaking of the dangers caused by the existence of a "nonpolar" world. Similarly, Haass believes that nonpolarity will be the cause of a series of threats which have been caused by terrorists, the rogue states, among others. If the author claims that the emergence of this non-polarity is inevitable, he defends, however, the idea that actors may try to counter the negative effects so that the global order is the least unstable possible (Haass, 2008).

The former power is thus threatened. It is diluted while the political arena becomes fragmented. Moreover, we do not know very well how the new post-bipolar order will be structured. In fact, "we know what we lose; we guess wrong what we win" (Badie, 2004: 280). The problem of the instability of the power in the political sphere is also dear to James Rosenau. According to this author, hegemony is declining, borders are fading and the authority or the power (considered in general terms) is increasingly challenged. In short, the world is changing (as it has always been, in fact), but this change is marked by a trait of unpredictability in what concerns power. While global governance vacillates, social systems deteriorate, conflicts between groups increase and the traditional order is questioned. To conclude this part, let's say that the order and governance are interrelated insofar as this last one conditions and models the nature of the order of the political system. One exists only because the other is present and vice versa. Similarly, it is also possible to have governance without government (Rosenau, 1992: 1-29). But then some may think in this regard that the absence of a central authority - capable of imposing force if necessary - will maybe lead to anarchy. In this perspective, we would probably not be very far from chaos if the United States (which owns the largest army of the planet) renounced their "role of policemen of the world". The question, then, is what can happen if the Power wants to stay on the sidelines of the world (as, indeed, it was in the past) or if it is not powerful enough to manage everything and everyone and at the same time. The Americans have reason to be interested in possible threats to their hegemony in this new century. In other words, while the decline of America continues, other actors seem to emerge. In addition to the United States, the famous Palmerstonian pentarchy includes: "Russia, China, India and Japan". In this form of power for the 21st century, "Europe has disappeared [...]" while Asia focuses attention (Schmiegelow Partners, 2008: 21). Indeed, if one takes a look at the "recent growth rates of the two most populous nations of the world, China and India" as well as their enormous potential "labour, territory and capital", we see how important Asia is (Schmiegelow, 2006: 10). As Henrik Schmiegelow points out, the Asian integration and development model seems to practice "more consistently than America a philosophy which is (in fact) American: the philosophy of pragmatism" (2006: 18).

Declinist theses have been recurrent in American intellectual circles over the past few years. In fact, since the end of World War II, the theme of the decline has been present on the national discourse about the role of the United States worldwide. But would Paul Kennedy's work *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, in 1987, be an important catalyst for the debate on whether the United States would, or not, be in the midst of decline or renewal? The supporters of the decline evoked three major arguments: "the economic performance of the United States was in relative decline compared to other powers; 2) economics is the central element of national strength; and 3) the relative decline of the United States was largely caused by excessive military spending that resulted from wide-reaching US political commitments around the globe" (Edelman, 2010: 24). Now, this resulted in a speculation on whether the United States would be, after all, in the same declinist trajectory as other great imperial powers that preceded them, like Spain, France, or England. In this regard, Joseph Nye (1990) argues that the situation for the United States at the end of the twentieth century is quite different from that of Britain at the century's beginning, which explain that loose historical analogies and falsely deterministic political theories are worse than merely academic, in the sense that, according to Nye, they may divert Americans from addressing the true nature of their situation.

The debate of U.S. decline is a debate about the relevance of history, i.e., "declinists contend that history tends to repeat itself and that the history of world politics can be characterized as a 'succession of hegemonies' [...], as an 'observable pattern of great power emergence', or as a series of 'long cycles'" (Beckley, 2012: 22). Authors such as Robert Gilpin share the realistic perspective of the American decline, defending, on the other hand, that

the tendency toward breakdown or fragmentation of the system greatly increases with the relative decline of the hegemon. Gilpin (1987) tried to draw a general scenario of the relative economic decline of the United States, which has also its impact on the overall hegemony it wields in the political and military domains. Experts such as Michael Cox argue that “the question is not whether decline is going to happen – it already is – but how successfully the United States will adjust to the process” (2007: 653). However, Cox recognizes that “the U.S. still retains a great deal of hard power”, and that “it will for some time to come, remain the most significant international actor to which others will tend to turn when in trouble” (2007: 653). Fareed Zakaria takes a similar position. In *The Post-American World*, Zakaria (2008) prefers not to put the emphasis on the decline of America, but rather on ‘the rise of everyone else’. Zakaria (2008) sustains that the U.S. relative power, in fact, is not declining significantly, believing that the American power can retain most of its international political dominance, since, after all, according to the author, its decline is economic – and not geopolitical – and relative, rather than absolute.

Declinists such as Arthur Stein argue that the United States is suffering from a classic case of the “hegemon’s dilemma” (1984: 384). According to Ian Bremmer, “the greatest concern underlying the declinist mood at large [in the USA] today is not really whether the United States can afford to continue playing its role in the world, it is whether the Americans are capable of solving any of their most pressing economic and social problems” (2012: 9). The real question, in Bremmer’s opinion is “can Americans do what needs to be done to compete effectively in the twenty-first-century world?” (2012: 9). It will be difficult, as predicted by Parag Khanna, another supporter of the declinist theses vis-à-vis American hegemony. Khanna (2008), who paints a stark picture of an America in decline, believes that the United States are nowadays faced with fierce competition for world hegemony, which they will hardly maintain. This is essentially due, according to the author, to imperial overstretch, domestic political malfunction, economic weakness, and diminishing soft power. To the question *how long can American unipolarity last?*, the supporters of the decline highlight the transformation of the policy and the international system (towards multipolarity), driven either by globalisation, or by geopolitical competition between the United States and emerging powers such as China. Power diffusion may pose a bigger danger than power transition in this new century. Nye (2010) sustains that the distribution of power today resembles a ‘complex three-dimensional chess game’. What Nye is telling us is that it can be misleading and inaccurate describing power transition in this new century as a traditional case of hegemonic decline. In fact, Nye argues that “the United States is not in absolute decline, and in relative terms, there is a reasonable probability that it will remain more powerful than any single states in the coming decades” (2010: para. 42). Bringing a further contribution to the debate about the decline, the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2025* (published in 2008) warns that in addition to relative decline, the United States will confront other constraints on its international role; U.S. military supremacy will no longer be as dominant as it has been since the Cold War’s end; The United States’ soft power may diminish as its liberal model of political and economic development is challenged by authoritarian/statist alternatives. At home, economic and political constraints may undermine U.S. hegemony. *Global Trends* predicts that over the next two decades, the dollar’s role as the international economy’s preeminent reserve currency will erode. But while the National Intelligence Council, Zakaria and Khanna conceive China as the rising power with more potential to challenge the American hegemony, others, non-supporters of the declinist theses, such as Brooks and Wohlforth, devalue China’s growth and rise, as well as its ability to supplant the United States hegemony (Layne, 2009).

In general, anti-declinists are divided into different branches. The *economic revivalists*, such as Aaron Friedberg, Edward Luttwak and Robert Lieber, sustain that the US economic decline is overstated and that declinists undervalue the economic resilience of America’s open, free-market economy. Besides, there are those who highlight American *soft power*, such as Joseph Nye, or another school – the so-called *structural positionists*, like Joffe, Singh, Friedberg and Luttwak – which puts the emphasis on “the advantages of America’s geopolitical location and the resulting demand by others for the United States to provide leadership in solving international problems” (Edelman, 2010: 28). Finally, Kristol and Kagan are perhaps the most important representatives of the *benign hegemonists’* school who profess “the attractiveness of American ideology, its global leadership role and the willingness of others to follow the US lead” (Edelman, 2010: 28). We share, in this article, Charles Krauthammer’s thesis, when the author argues that “the question of whether America is in decline cannot be answered yes or no” (2009: para. 5). However, we do not fully agree with Krauthammer’s unconditional belief in the capacity of a country (in this case the U.S.) to choose or not its own decline, given that there is no infallible certainty as to whether the mutation of power and transformation of international politics, can themselves prevail (or not) over the will of the Americans to avoid, delay or prevent the (relative) decline of their country.

3 The (Relative) Decline of the United States

According to Senator J. William Fulbright, “[...] America is now at that historical point at which a great nation is in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it. Other great nations, reaching this critical juncture, have aspired to too much, and by overextension of effort have declined and then fallen” (1966: 3). It is interesting that the above sentence was referred to by an American

about forty years ago and that it remains always contemporary. It is also curious the fact that this same American (who was not a common man, but a Senator) had established, even only implicitly, an analogy between the possible fate of the United States and that of other major nations. And finally, very timeless on the behaviour of America towards the rest of the world, was his book whose title is enough compromising: *The Arrogance of Power*. We notice that large nations such as the United States tend to understand their power as a "sign of God's favour" (Fulbright, 1966: 3). Thus, they believe to be different from other countries, with a 'worldwide' mission, with responsibility towards other nations (Hassner, 2003: 57). This means that their life patterns are considered the most correct and should therefore be extended to other peoples. It's almost a duty to bring these nations out of the 'darkness' and in addition it must be done because it is believed that God wishes so. It is, therefore, established a kind of dichotomy between good and evil, which governs the external policies of the great powers. For example, President McKinley believed that God had entrusted to the Americans the duty to civilise and Christianise the inhabitants of the Philippines.

Moreover, President Bush "introduces himself as an instrument of the Lord", convinced that "providence has given the United States the task to correct the political, moral, spiritual and economic mistakes of the less fortunate nations of the planet" (Lapham, 2002, 41). But what is the arrogance of power and how can it carry the germ of a possible decline of the United States? The arrogance of power means "a psychological need nations seem to have to prove that they are bigger, better or stronger than other nations" (Fulbright, 1966: 5). According to this point of view, the basis of power and the best proof of a country's superiority lay in the force. Owning the largest army means, thus, having the most developed institutions, the best principles and the best civilisation. In addition, the signs of arrogance may be observed through the way Americans behave when they are abroad. Indeed, the awareness that they belong to the richest country in the world is, in itself, a factor which does not help to reduce national pride (Fulbright, 1966: 3-22).

3.1 The Economic Decline of the Superpower

According to declinists, one of the main causes of the (relative) decline of America is the economy. We touch here the strong point. The ratio of forces is reversed. The United States is no longer the economic giant that causes fear. On the contrary, declinists argue that it is the Americans today who are worried about the globalisation of the economy and the emergence of new actors. In addition, the debate on the economic decline of the United States is dense, controversial and steeped of ideology, of passion, of subjectivity... This is, maybe, because it is not about any country but about a great power. However, the phenomena in question have an objective nature; they are based on the figures and not on desires. We verify that the United States consumes more than it produces, it lives at the expense of the world (Umberto, 2003). The question "How to manage a superpower economically dependent but politically useless?" raised by Emmanuel Todd expresses the dilemma that now worries Washington leaders (2003: 26). The U.S. trade balance became unstable and the deficit is alarming. There is no balance between what the United States consumes and what it exports. Supporters of the declinist thesis argue that it is doubtful that the United States is still a hegemon. They recall, for instance, that "at the April 2009 Group of 20 meeting in London, President Barack Obama acknowledged that the United States no longer is able to play this role, and the world increasingly is looking to China (and India and other emerging market states) to be the locomotives of global recovery" (Layne, 2009: 170). This is curious if we take especially into account the fact that the United States had previously been the dominant economic power in the post-World War II. Let us recall the 'miracle' that the Marshall plan represented for a Europe that was in shortage and which was hungry. This is not the place to discuss the double intentions of such a plan regarding a red peril. What matters is rather to note the irony of history, because it is constantly changing. Today, Europe is no longer hungry. On the contrary, declinists sustain that it is the old continent (between other global economic actors) who must feed, with the most varied products, a gourmand America.

Besides, the U.S. trade deficit figures do not deceive. Let us mention those for the year 2001: "83 billion dollars deficit with China, 68 with Japan, 60 with the European Union, [...], 30 billion with Mexico, 13 with Korea, 4.5 billion with Israel; 3.5 with Russia and 0.5 with the Ukraine" (Todd, 2003: 80). Todd notes, as strange as it may seem, that "the majority of the U.S. deficit does not concern the first needs, on the contrary, they are instead other materials, among which mainly manufactured products, which constitute the largest deficit slice – 366 billion dollars in 2001" (2003: 80). Agriculture has also become a field affected by this relative decline. The 'world flooded with food' is something that Paul Kennedy had already mentioned in his book *Naissance et déclin des grandes puissances*. How does this represent a threat to the U.S. economy? Kennedy explains that this affects US farmers as, in a world where food is abundant, there is now a rapid decline of "agricultural prices and of U.S. food exports" (1989: 583). Declinists find it curious to note that it is mainly due to the indirect help of western countries that the world has agricultural surpluses. In fact, these powers have paid money, by funding research to find out how to increase agricultural production in other countries. The consequence is that these countries have themselves eventually become major exporters of food products, and therefore potential competitors of America. This, in turn, generated a huge protest in the agricultural sector in the United States, culminating finally with protectionist measures. Nevertheless, one must be careful on the assessment, because the anti-declinist view argues that "the US food industry is the largest in the world, representing almost 13 per

cent of GDP”, adding that “America’s farmers and producers have never been more efficient or productive than they are today” (Edelman, 2010: 69).

Coming back to the arguments shared by declinists, not only agriculture was affected. For example, Kennedy also mentions in his book the existence of a Japanese competition with regard to the ‘Silicon chips’. The author explains that they entered the United States market at a lower cost than the cost price. Again discontent manifested itself, snapping once again protectionist feelings. Of course, all this had as a result the questioning of American supremacy in different areas of production. Furthermore, it must be said that this protectionism follows an era where American and English had devoted the primacy to a market where the state did not intervene (Kennedy, 1989: 583).

Compared to the industry, we can say that the Americans master the leading sectors, which does not, however, prevent them to remain deficient in low technology products, as Kennedy notes. The chemical, the textiles or the steel industry can be used as examples in this regard (Kennedy, 1989). However, according to Todd, the reality is surprising because the United States has attended, in recent years, even in the field of high technology, a situation which is more and more unfavourable to it. Todd shows here for example, the fact that in 2003, Airbus (European) and Boeing (American) had produced almost the same amount of aircraft. According to the author, “the surplus of the U.S. trade balance for advanced technology goods changed from 35 billion dollars in 1990 to 5 billion in 2001, and it was in deficit in January 2002” (Todd, 2003: 80-81).

So, all these sectors together threaten American finance, by converting the United States, “the world’s largest creditor” so far, says Paul Kennedy, into ‘the largest debtor’ (1989: 584). Obviously, there are positive aspects in the American economy, despite declinist arguments. This explains, for example, that the American El Dorado continues, even today, to be coveted by millions of people who want to seek a better life in the United States. Furthermore, we should notice that the United States takes precedence in relation to the field of research on all other countries of the world. Needless to say, quoting Beckley, that “the United States increased its lead in terms of Research and Development spending over the last twenty years and still accounts for 50 percent of the world’s most highly cited scientific articles” (2012: 73).

However, according to the partisans of declinism, reality is now more hostile to the goals of a power that wants to continue to maintain its supremacy in the world. Otherwise, let us think about it. How can the country, the greatest world debtor, which must now face a very violent competition at the international level, and that has also a trade balance, whose exchanges are uneven, continue to ensure its superpower status? The answer, according to declinists, is: it is very difficult. Beckley adds here that “because the United States allows the dollar to function as a global reserve and exchange unit, it must run persistent balance-of-payments deficits to supply the world with liquidity” (2012: 26). However, Beckley explains that “doing so undermines not only the competitiveness of U.S. exports but also the confidence of markets and central banks in the dollar, thereby increasing the risk of a dollar collapse” (2012: 26). More important, the author argues that “foreign governments that hold dollar reserves depend on U.S. prosperity for their continued economic growth and are thus ‘entrapped’, unable to disentangle their interests from those of the United States” (Beckley, 2012: 30). Others, like Fareed Zakaria, while admitting the existence of an economic decline (not geopolitical) of the United States, argue that “the problems besetting the U.S. economy – overconsumption, low savings, current account and budget deficits, and reliance on foreign creditors – could be fixed except that a dysfunctional U.S. political system is incapable of undertaking needed reforms” (in Layne, 2009: 155).

In turn, supporters of the anti-declinist theses, as Daniel Drezner, note that despite “prior to 2008, numerous foreign policy analysts had predicted a looming crisis in global economic governance”, on the whole “the system has worked” (2012: 2). Among the various reasons which explain that the system has worked, Drezner points out that “the relative power of the United States was underestimated; the pre-existing institutional commitment to an open economic order made it easier to reinforce the status quo; the relative efficiency of prior eras of global economic governance has been overestimated, exaggerating the contrast between the past and the present” (2012: 4). Bremmer also believes that “the debt-ceiling debacle did not prove that U.S. politics is fractured for the long term” (2012: 2). In fact, Bremmer explains that it showed the opposite. Therefore, such facts lead us to mitigate the emphasis often placed by the supporters of the economic decline of the American superpower, since, as already mentioned, the system, with all its weaknesses and predictions of failure, has worked, after all.

Returning to the arguments raised by declinists, they argue that is not enough to have an armed power stronger than any country considered individually. It is necessary that other states recognise the American hegemony. A curious issue regarding the United States was raised by Paul Kennedy: “If ever a war breaks out in the world, how could the United States handle it as, once in the conflict, they would not have not a sufficiently effective industry able to meet all its needs?” (1989: 587). Kennedy argues that one can well see that “having the largest army in the world is certainly an important but insufficient factor, because this army could not feed the population” (1989: 587).

Once we are here discussing the economic aspects, what is the ratio between the expenses that the Americans spend on defence and their effects on the economy? It is a hot spot especially if one adopts a comparative

perspective between the United States and the world's major economic powers. Declinists argue that as the world's only superpower wants to maintain a hegemonic force, it is likely that other sectors of the economy will be negatively affected.

While countries such as Germany or Japan channel much of their investment in the improvement and development of the commercial sector and research, Americans are rather concerned with defence, as declinists note. This results in the channelling of the attention of experts mainly in military research because they want to have the best technology in order to cope with any situation. Paul Kennedy confirms that we [USA] distract the attention of those technicians in favour of the military progress, with, as a result, a weakening of the attention given to the civilian sectors (1989: 589-590). Robert Kagan stresses that "American land and air forces are equipped with the most advanced weaponry, and are the most experienced in actual combat, [able to] defeat any competitor in a head-to-head battle; [...] American naval power remains predominant in every region of the world" (2012: para. 12). Beckley adds here that "militar superiority allows the United States to employ force without war, pressuring other countries into concessions by shifting military units around or putting them on alert" (2012: 29).

In this (declinist) angle of analysis it is therefore not surprising to see a U.S. industry that weakens, and which must necessarily resort to imports to compensate for shortcomings. Besides, it is not surprising to see the American economy becoming strongly in deficit and dependent towards abroad. At the same time, other countries, which have fewer security concerns, take the advantage commercially. The choice between defence and the civil sector is increasingly becoming the crucial issue. Are Washington leaders willing to pay any price to ensure the supremacy of security? Are they able to reconcile the challenges of a highly competitive global economy with the maintenance of the largest war machine in the world? Whatever the answers, declinists warn that one has to take into account the fact that the reality and pace that manage the world do not stop to wait for the Americans. On the contrary, it is the Americans who must run against time to try to reverse the economic balance. In this regard, declinists see a causal relationship between the economic decline of the superpower and the desperate effort of its leaders to stop it. Indeed, Washington believed that a series of belligerent companies in the Middle East and Asia could be the solution to stop the weakening of the economy. But such a project, so ambitious, failed, and the Americans have not managed to control these vital regions from a strategic point of view, which if successful, would have enabled them to possess approximately 70% of the oil resources of the world. This could also, therefore, have led to a global financial supremacy, as it was the case in the good times when the dollar was the strongest currency.

The problem is that U.S. leaders had aimed too high and that today they lose more and more influence in Eurasia. In addition, and concluding on this point, why is Eurasia therefore so important to the United States? Because it is in Eurasia, where "75% of the world's population" lives, that the global "bulk of the political and military destiny" is played (Brzezinski, 1997: 18). In this context, declinists stress the obsession of the United States in keeping its supremacy in this region so vital in energy and human resources, among others. The fact that Eurasia occupies a central position in the world, also explains the obstinacy of Brzezinski by saying that "whoever controls this continent, controls the planet", linking the sustainability of American hegemony to its policy in the region (1997: 24). In brief, any disruptions or conflict in this space is perceived as a threat to American interests, a threat which would legitimise in the eyes of Washington, the use of force.

3.2 The Decline of the Dollar

According to declinists, it is a long time since the United States has been emitting a currency whose future value is not certain. On the other hand, it receives goods and services provided by other powers. The U.S. economy is no longer what it was in the 50s, 60s or 70s (Ribeiro, 2007). Until the end of the World War II, American hegemony has as major symbols the dollar and the Pentagon. These two pillars experienced a peak between 1945 and 1971, the year when Washington decided to liquidate the conversion of the dollar into gold, because the reserves of dollars of other countries were threatening it. John Foster said in this regard that "the large export of dollars abroad, associated [...] to the growth of the Empire, had created a huge Eurodollar market" (2005: 39). This has weighed heavily in Nixon's decision to finish with the conversion of the dollar into gold. The year 1971 is, then, a key year because from this moment the dollar is no longer the currency of a strong power that continues its economic rise. Obviously the decline is a complex and historical process, having not started in 1971, but sometime during the post-World War II, and which manifested itself more or less clearly especially from the 1970s (Ribeiro, 2007). From now on, competitiveness and U.S. oil production plunge into decline. On the other hand, domestic consumption, and therefore imports, grew still more. In addition, Americans seem to be very good clients for Europeans and Asians.

According to declinists, there is not only a cause, but rather a set of causes, which are at the origin of the economic crisis that Americans are undergoing today. On one side, we have, for example, the increase in private and public spending which can be joined to military expansion and the typical consumption of a capitalist society. On the other hand, we should mention the existence of a certain delay at the level of productive innovation, as well as the weakening of industrial competitiveness. Furthermore, all these factors are in closely

related to a context of growing discontent and apathy of the society towards politicians, the increase of crime, institutional and cultural deterioration (Beinstein, 2007).

Subsequently, declinists argue that the economic decadence results in the decrease in the balance between foreign investment in the United States and American investment abroad. It should be recalled that this balance, which partly offset trade deficits in the past, has however become negative for the first time in 2006. At a time when US production was falling, the other countries had opened the door of credit to the United States. Americans, far from saving, increasingly contributed, through unbridled consumption, to the growth of the external debt. If Bush's (son) Government appeared, in a first moment, to succeed in stemming the continuous economic decline and giving the impression of a return to prosperity, it was nevertheless only causing an increase of consumption, without having a sufficient internal productivity back. Therefore, the relative feeling of economic wellbeing that George W. Bush had induced in American society was, in fact, only an illusion. In fact, the economic weakening has never been stopped and the fact that the President had given the opposite impression served perfectly the Government's expansionist and military interests (Ribeiro, 2007). Moreover, pursuing the path of militarisation, with all the expenses that this led, George W. Bush caused a worsening of the American economic situation. For example, the imperialist invasion of the Iraq not only has not helped the improvement in the economy, but has also helped, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, "the diminution of the [U.S.] hegemon's power" (2006: 44).

Almost two years ago, Jaime Caruana feared that "a decline of the dollar strengthens itself and becomes disordered, increasing volatility on global financial markets and putting to the test the elasticity of the global financial system" (Mondialisation.ca, 2006: 4). As Director of the IMF's international capital markets Department, Caruana was well aware of "a potentially very expensive risk [...] threatening the global financial system" (Mondialisation.ca, 2006: 4). If we consider, moreover, the opinion of the historian and economist Oswaldo Coggiola, one realises that it is less 'modest' than the previous, as for Coggiola "it is the biggest global financial crisis since the 'thirties'" (in Filho, 2007: 2). For this author, the fact that the central banks have helped the affected areas by decreasing the interest rate is rather a panacea and not 'the solution' because such a decrease will only delay the emergence of economically even more difficult times.

According to declinists, the financial crisis has not really surprised because all knew well how the real estate market took a strange allure: people became more and more indebted and saw their properties mortgaged. As an example, Mike Whitney informs us that in Santa Barbara (California) parking lots were turned into dormitories so that families who had lost their homes in the mortgage scandals could sleep in their cars. The same thing happened in Los Angeles where people have lost their jobs and do not have anything to cover their expenses (Whitney, 2008).

It is the speculative system based on the sale of loans, to a sector of the population with low resources, which has been ruined. Furthermore, what was a real estate crisis at the beginning became a simultaneous crisis of the financial sector, banks and a foreign exchange market crisis. Similarly, according to Coggiola, we weren't expecting that the crisis assumed such a dimension, a situation which can still cause "a currency war, a tendency to the brutal devaluation of the dollar and a fall of world trade" (in Filho, 2007: 8).

Other problems are related to this situation, namely: the increase in unemployment (a consequence of the reduction of economic activity), the increase in the price of imported goods and, by extension, the cost of living. It will be mainly the working masses and the "peripheral countries" that will pay, according to Coggiola, the global financial crisis, this through "the reduction of the level of employment and real wages, by assigning at the very least the central nations" (in Filho, 2007: 9). Although this is a typical crisis of capitalism, the author believes that it is however different from the crises of the past given its impact, greater than ever, and the extreme interdependence of all financial systems. Furthermore, according to Garcia, "central banks lose their faith in the dollar and begin to put it back into the market in quantities that can be fabulous, thereby threatening to plunge the 'greenback' even more" (2006: 76).

Despite the arguments mentioned above by the supporters of the decline of the dollar, and in a broad sense, of the US economy, it is important to present the opposite vision, reflected, for example, in Barry Eichengreen's famous book *Exorbitant Privilege* (2012). In fact, this author tries to demystify and devalue certain declinist theses, unfounded according to him, intending for the purpose, to analyse the role of the dollar before, during and after the crisis of 2008, in order to indicate the possible consequences both for the American and world economy, in case of a weakening of the *greenbacks*. Barry Eichengreen (2012) concludes that, in spite of the periods of instability the dollar has been through, it still kept its *exorbitant privilege*. The author conceives the *exorbitant privilege* as the ability of the United States to generate successive deficits in current account, simply covering them with currency issuance, since the existence of debt denominated in its own currency is paid with 'paper and ink'. However, such privilege would only end if other currencies, like the euro or the yuan, for example, would replace the dollar as the reserve currency, a scenario that the author discards for now. This vision contributes, once more, to mitigate the pessimistic impact of the declinist theses in what concerns, in this case, the American economy.

4 Conclusion

At this stage, we insist that, speaking of decline, we do precede this word with the adjective *relative* in parentheses. We did it on purpose because we don't want at any time that the reader thinks that the United States finds itself in a situation of absolute decline. We prefer, anyway, the conscious repetitions to the idea of unintended omission.

Then, why can't we talk of absolute decline for the United States? Just like the great empires of history, the United States, may also fall. When? Nobody knows. The author of *Naissance et déclin des grandes puissances* is clear on the question of whether the United States can maintain its current situation "[...] not because it was never given to any society to maintain on top permanently, because it would mean that it freezes differences in growth rate, in technological and military developments that have existed for a very long time" (Kennedy, 1989: 591). Various factors prevent us from stating that this decline will be absolute. Indeed, we need only to remember the geographic size, the number of inhabitants or the resources possessed by the United States. This set is quite significant and powerful to enable the United States to occupy a position of weight no matter the power upheavals in the political scene.

Similarly, the fact that the U.S. Army, culture and ideology are highly prevalent and implanted everywhere explains that we can't condemn the United States to the darkness (although this was the fate of some empires in the past). In fact, we do agree with Eric Edelman, when the author mentions that "the United States is the first leading state in modern international history with decisive preponderance in all the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological and geopolitical" (2010: 64). It is also worth mentioning Zakaria (2008), who argues that the United States can remain at the center of the international system for a long time to come because there is still a strong market for American power, for both geopolitical and economic reasons. However, according to Zakaria (2008), the way to preserve its pivotal status in international politics is by using its soft power, not its hard power. We also share Nye's view that the U.S. has the soft ideological and institutional resources to retain its leading place in the new domains of transnational interdependence, given that the country remains the largest and richest power with the greatest capacity to shape the future. But, as Nye (1990) warns, the critical question is whether the USA will have the political leadership and strategic vision to convert its power resources into real influence in a transitional period of world politics.

However, the decline, as a natural process, must be interpreted with realism and knowledge of the History since nationalistic passions and emotions are only complicating the way that Americans are currently following. The passion is inconsistent with the reason because it blurs the intelligence. On the other hand, realism tries to find the best way to delay the decline, which as we have seen, is inevitable in the life of a great nation. While the system is becoming multipolar, this does not mean that the United States will dilute in a complex game of actors, losing its singularities. Nevertheless, it will be less strong than today but more powerful than any other country considered individually. In this context, the question of whether the United States is in decline must now give way to the real question: who will replace it in this new century? Only future will tell but, for the moment, there are already a few 'candidates' to this place: China, Japan, India or Russia. Of course that the European Union must certainly not be overlooked, despite the fact that some, such as the American Palmerstonians, have not included it in the pentarchy of the 21st century. It is certainly economically powerful (and, we must add, militarily weak), such as Japan, but it is China which seems to concentrate all the attention. When this huge country wakes up, it can then shake not only the Americans, heavily dependent on it, but the world.

As Zaki Laidi says, "considering China's potential, Russia and India's ambitions we will see [...] that it is not impossible that the world order of the 21st century is marked by the return of the logic of power". If this is true, it is not surprising that the Americans see their hegemony threatened in a multipolar world. They will then try to do everything to "prevent challengers" to their power (Laidi, 2003: 22). It is thus legitimate to think that if China becomes more powerful (as indeed current indicators suggest), it will want to have a word to say on regional and even global affairs. This explains that the relationship between the two giants, the United States and China, can range from cooperation to conflict. Taiwan is also a focal point in the relationship between the two powers, but this does not mean that, despite the challenge, the two countries would be actually willing to use nuclear weapons. In such a way that China is well aware of the importance of maintaining such a special 'client' which allows it to develop its economy. Impregnated with a mixture of reciprocal passion and mutual distrust, Sino-American relations oscillate between cooperation and rivalry. In fact, although China proves to be an indispensable partner for the issues of nuclear proliferation and terrorism, it is still regarded, however, in certain American political circles as a 'strategic competitor'. Beijing, in turn, refutes the siege policy that Washington leads about it, in order to circumscribe the Chinese power. Ambiguous, the American attitude towards China is based on a mixture of tactical prudence and strategic indetermination. Certain authors have created, in addition, the term of 'endigement', which explains a strategy designed to 'isolate Beijing politically', trying, however, to maintain at the same time an 'active partnership in what concerns economic and trade issues'. Acting in the 'same fields' (namely in Africa and Asia), both powers want to ensure their access to raw materials, as well as to control the 'other's gestures'. The future of their relationship, including the risk of a potential conflict, will be

determined mainly by the way how Washington and Beijing will deal with their economic competition, with Taiwan's issue, with human rights and world governance. But, at this moment, the two countries are neither 'supreme enemies' nor 'long-lasting partners'.

Despite all these apprehensions, rivalries and distrust, 'the Chinese threat' towards American hegemony is, for now, reduced, due to the internal problems (social instability, high corruption and abyssal imbalances between the rich coastal areas and a poor inland, environmental negligence, a barrier that the nature of the Communist party paradoxical and interestingly puts to the growth and progress of the country). This does not mean, however, that the Chinese will not fight to rediscover the way of the 'imperial temptation', to become again the 'great nation' they were in the past. This amalgam of 'manifest destiny', of 'historical mission', nationalism, prestige and nostalgia for a glorious past may, one day, make China a superpower. As H. Christophe underlines, "apart from some major incident, unexpected event or a serious strategy error on the part of the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing seems to have every advantage in hand to achieve it" (2006:8). In fact, "today's weaknesses will be, perhaps, the strengths of tomorrow, being hardly conceivable that such a large state, territorial and demographically, will not play a more important role in the future" (Christophe, 2006: 8). At that time, still distant and uncertain, it cannot be excluded that China will become, one day, a 'threatening' actor. But this possibility should not be perceived as a strange phenomenon. On the contrary, it fits into the natural dynamics of the 'birth and decline of great powers', where either one or several states will dominate, or will decline.

However, for now, despite the relative decline of the United States, these will tend to remain the only superpower, i.e. the hegemon, in the short and medium term. In fact, it does not exist, in military and/ or economic terms, any power or group of powers that can still stand up to the American power, which spends more on defence than all the other countries together (according to Beckley, "the U.S. defense budget exceeds half a trillion dollars, i.e. eight times greater than China's and rising, even when supplemental funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is excluded") (2012: 83). Furthermore, as Barry Eichengreen concludes, in 'Exorbitant Privilege', there is still no currency that can replace the dollar as a means of global exchange. It should be noted that, after all, the American economy remains the largest in the world and, despite having produced a systemic crisis in 2008, it shows clear signs of regaining and recovery of production. The USA still have, for all purposes, the most profitable portion of production global chains (innovation, design, high technology), which, even under a Marxist or Dependency perspective, still means that they systematically control global production. There is not even any evidence or proof that the existence of systematic deficits necessarily generates the decline of a superpower. Unlike any other country, the U.S. may produce deficits because they are responsible for the system trading currency and they are also responsible for global liquidity (a fact highlighted by emerging powers when they complained about a 'currency war' and a 'monetary tsunami' in the years following the crisis of 2008).

On the whole, we do agree with Edelman's arguments, which sustain that America's enduring primacy and the length of the unipolar moment are clearly going to be a matter of intensified debate in the next few years. A "proper evaluation", as Edelman adds, will depend "on how we attempt to measure the power of those countries that might become additional poles in a multipolar world, and how we evaluate America's enduring strength and capacity for revival" (2010: 30). That said, it would be interesting if other researchers and studies devoted more attention to the Chinese phenomenon, that is, to the contours and consequences that China's emergence in the world arena can bring for the balance of power, in particular for the survival of the American hegemon as the only world superpower in the years to come.

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