

Dec 8 2011

Is America's Role as the World's Leading Power Now Coming to an End? Part II: America as World Leader

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Continuing the debate on the future of American global leadership, we present [Professor Alan Sked's](#) argument that America's position as world leader is secure. [Last week](#) we presented [Dr. Steven Casey's](#) view that America's role as the world's leading power is now coming to an end. These transcripts are drawn from a debate on the future of American global leadership hosted on November 23rd 2011 by the LSE's Department of International History and Chaired by its Head of Department [Professor Nigel Ashton](#). To join the debate, email your comments or submissions to ideas.transatlantic@lse.ac.uk



“America as World Leader” By Professor Alan Sked

Writing off American leadership has a long history and I don't have to mention the, in some ways quite distinguished, list of authors who have subscribed to this view. Perhaps the most famous was Paul Kennedy with his [‘Rise and Fall of the Great Powers’](#). Given that the publication of this work coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union it was soon followed by a number of articles on the theme of ‘The Rise and Fall of Paul Kennedy’.

For critics of America in the latter part of the twentieth century the usual prediction was that US imperial overstretch would allow Germany or Japan to assume world leadership; today the mantra is that China will take over. Economic determinists use GNP figures and project an apparently inevitable rise of China to some point around 2025 when she will enjoy a larger economy than the United States. Present US economic difficulties, on the other hand are assumed as permanent. Much of this, however, amounts to wishful thinking. Just as Henry Kissinger's much quoted vision of a ‘penti-polar world’ proved wrong, today's critics of USA will also be proved wrong. And it is not difficult to demonstrate why. Keep these basic points in mind:

1. The bottom line. World leadership depends on military and economic power. US military and even economic power is unrivalled. The USA spends more on defence than all other countries in the world combined. Her defence technology is overwhelming. She dominates the seas, the air, outer space and cyberspace. Her economy is still the world's largest and she exports more goods and services than any other country. Her economy is twice the size of China's. So there are no alternative candidates for world leadership. The USSR is long gone.

2. Leadership implies followers. Today the rest of the world still looks to America for leadership and nowhere else. No potential alternative leading power has any followers. Impoverished third world states and more recently an impoverished EU have looked to China for investment. But that is not leadership. Besides China turned the EU down. China does seem to have a few bizarre states which seek its protection—North Korea, Burma, Syria and Iran for example—but again even these embarrassing dictatorships embrace China opportunistically, not out of admiration or as a role model. They need protection from democratic opponents in the UN who would otherwise impose sanctions on them. But that is all. Burma may even have taken the first steps towards democratisation by herself. When this happens China will be of much less importance to her. So which states actually seek Chinese world leadership? I can't think of a single one. Moreover, I don't believe that China herself wants it.

3. What of other contenders? Russia, like China really, has turned into a kind of fascist state, with Putin as a kind of new Mussolini. She has few real friends in the world and far few followers, all of them former Soviet republics. She also has a huge demographic problem which means that her economy and military status are bound to decline. The whole trans-Ural part of the state is set to become almost depopulated but will still be surrounded by unstable and potentially hostile neighbours. Her only party trick is to blackmail neighbouring and perhaps western countries over gas supplies. But (a) this won't work any longer and (b) it does not indicate leadership.

Then there is the EU, today a sort of sick joke. After years in which lunatic EU fanatics published books with titles such as ‘How the EU will rule the World’, this emphatically anti-democratic body is approaching doom. While African states are replacing dictatorial old men with elected leaders, the EU is replacing elected leaders with dictatorial old men, accompanied by boasts from the parliamentary leader of Germany's CDU that the whole of Europe is speaking German and that Britain will soon join the Eurozone. Ich glaube's nicht. So much money is now leaving the Eurozone so fast that its very existence will soon be in doubt. Yet even if it survives and is joined by Kosovo this will hardly bring it world leadership.

The EU is in relative economic, technological and absolute demographic decline and in terms of world leadership is a joke. Robert Gates, before departing as US Defense Secretary visited NATO headquarters in Europe to read the [riot act](#) to his European partners telling them that they were no longer any use as allies, that states that spent less than 2% on their defence budgets and lacked air transport, advanced weapons and just about everything else could not expect to be taken seriously. This was proved true in the Libyan war, when the USA had to supply weapons and logistical aid to France and Britain who would otherwise have been helpless. Since its last Strategic Defence Review, of course, the UK, Europe's most impressive military power, has no planes to put on its new aircraft carriers, should they ever come into service. China, by the way, has just built her very first aircraft carrier, which is not supposed to be very advanced. America is building her fourteenth, huge, state of the art carrier, has military and naval bases all round the world, and has just successfully tested a long-range missile which can travel at five times the speed of sound and can reach Teheran from the USA in twenty minutes. She is also testing ones that can travel at twenty times the speed of sound and can reach LA from New York in twelve minutes.

4. Before concluding with a round-up of the huge advantages America possesses over other countries, let me look at what is happening in terms of geo-political realities. America and her allies are set to pull out altogether from Iraq and Afghanistan. Her future defence strategy in Afghanistan against the Taliban or whoever takes over there, will be based on intelligence and drones. It is impossible to say what will happen in the Middle East, but the US is not about to be replaced as the leading influence there. The Turks have agreed to man a NATO radar facility against Iran. And Israel will still seek US aid to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities and may even receive it. I doubt whether even Russian and Chinese protection in the UN will save Syria. Iraq will implode, but the US will not return. Instead, she will try to influence events from outside using economic and soft power.

5. In the Far East, China, meanwhile has been stirring up opposition among her neighbours around the South China Sea. This has recently led the US to establish a new military base at Darwin in Australia, give more military help to Japan, the Philippines and Thailand and to conclude military agreements with even the Vietnamese. The truth is that China has NO followers even in her back yard, far less elsewhere in the world. Not that we should assume that she seeks world or even regional leadership. She has too many domestic problems and her main priority is home affairs. Her domestic situation is much more fragile than commonly assumed; her ruling party faces daily demonstrations by hostile peasants, workers, ethnic and religious groups, and has much more severe problems to face with regard to public health, the environment and social inequality than America. The Communist party leadership is also aware that in 1989, it came within a hair's breadth of losing power for ever, and it has already seen almost all other communist parties across the globe lose power. It has also seen most East Asian dictatorships fall. Hence it is a rather insecure body more interested in domestic survival than world power. None the less, as I have said, its recent actions in the South China Sea have upset all its neighbours forcing them to look to America. In the words of the Philippines defence minister: "We will stand alone as much as possible. But when push comes to shove, it's reassuring that someone is behind us." And he meant America not China.

6. Let us think about that word "reassuring". Britain felt reassured by US support during two world wars. Western Europe felt reassured about US support during the Cold War. Israel has felt reassured about US support in the Middle East. South Korea and Japan have felt reassured by US support since World War Two. Recently Libyans and Egyptians have felt reassured by US support in North Africa. Today China's neighbours feel reassured by US support in the Far East. The only people that do not feel reassured are the Satanic Republics of Iran, Syria and North Korea, still an axis of evil in the world. But the rest of us should rejoice that the US still spends more on defence than all other powers put together, that she has the largest economy in the world, that she is likely to pull out of recession sooner than the EU, that she still has the best universities in the world where academic life can take place in freedom, that she still gains the most Nobel prizes and puts in the most patent claims, in short, that she is still the centre of wealth, innovation and freedom in the world. All these factors ensure her survival as world leader. If you don't believe me, there is a simple test. And here it is:

7. Where do most emigrants in the world want to go to? Where is their first choice? Do millions of people want to leave their homelands for Russia? For China? For the EU? Well, many do want to come to Europe. But overwhelmingly the first choice for almost everyone would be the USA. That is the true test of world leadership and that is why the USA will retain it for many years to come. When the world's poor, the world's refugees and the world's oppressed start wanting to emigrate to China, I shall agree that the USA is no longer world leader. But I don't expect that to happen any time soon.

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