



AMERIKA MAGA, CHINA, IMPERIAL DECLINE, DEMOCRACY

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Amerika*

MAGA, China, Imperial Decline, Democracy

There is an old Chinese saying that when the winds of change blow some people build walls while others build windmills. The old proverb has a new sting in its tail because our world is living through stormy times marked by a strange subdivision: the walled contraction and gradual decline of the global empire of the United States and the emergence of a powerful Chinese global empire of a kind unknown in previous world history.

The current rivalries between these two entangled but differently structured empires are everywhere triggering mental confusions, public anxieties and political misunderstandings and fears. Getting the measure of these world-shaping dynamics should be a priority for every thinking person, but the task is hampered by much bluff and bluster, propaganda and disinformation on both sides and—strangely—by widespread support in various quarters in the Atlantic region for the opposing view that President Trump's preachings on America's renewal and greatness are basically correct.

It's true that both the supporters and observers of Donald Trump's vision of America's embattled global role predict a rough ride for the world. But even when they are doubtful or outright hostile to the new president's mutterings, including his bizarre executive order against 'windmills', they tacitly or explicitly indulge his conviction that the United States, despite its recent decline, is still the dominant global power and will remain so indefinitely, thanks to the gutsy leadership of the new Trump administration. In this orthodox camp, there are admittedly nuanced differences of opinion. But as the following several examples illustrate, the MAGA camp is united by its presumption that despite numerous challenges America can be restored to greatness, or made even greater.

One version of this triumphalist line of thinking is represented by Professor Niall Ferguson, who predicts and recommends that the first priority of the United States is to cut China down to size by ratcheting up trade frictions designed to hurt the Chinese economy during the next several years. He quotes from Trump's book *The Art of the Deal*: 'There are times when you have to be aggressive, but there are also times when your best strategy is to lie back.' Today, says Ferguson, the United States finds itself in the sixth year of a nuclear-tipped confrontation with China, a second Cold War that has grown more dangerous under the Biden administration. Ferguson goes on to argue that just as Trump rightly launched a trade and tech war against China during his first term, his second term should prioritise 'piling on the pressure with a fresh show of American strength'. The goal? To reduce 'the nightmarish risk of World War III' by first humbling Washington's 'principal adversary' and then surprising the world (as Ronald Reagan did) by striking what Trump has described as 'the big deal...the most exciting, largest deal ever' with a chastened Beijing.

Other MAGA triumphalists word things differently. They say that the United States is nowadays suffering a bout of unnecessary diffidence. The real threat to the globally dominant United States is not the so-called 'rise of China' but America's lack of self-confidence, its unwillingness to recognise and build upon its unmatched potential. More bravado and bombast are needed. As China 'groans under the weight of its pathologies', President Trump's administration must recognise that the United States, despite its domestic shortcomings and global vulnerabilities, is still our planet's Number One Force for Good. It commands a strategic depth that China fundamentally lacks: 'a unique combination of economic vitality, global military superiority, remarkable human capital' plus a democratic political system which 'despite all its flaws is designed to promote the correction of errors'. The recommendation is that as China struggles, the United States should press hard its own advantages and resources of greatness. Vainglory will prove victorious.

* Preparatory notes originally prepared for the session 'US Foreign Policy and Its Implications for Asia-Pacific Cooperation', Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, March 2025

There's a third and more daring variant of the MAGA mentality: the belief that the United States under Trump is capable of building a new world order on the ruins of the old liberal 'rules-based order' it began to destroy during the first Trump presidency. The prediction is that most elements of the so-called liberal international order—free trade, large-scale migration, multilateralism, solidarity among democracies, respect for human rights—are about to be burned in a bonfire of outdated vanities by Trump's America. In its place, on its ashes, walls are going to be built. 'The US is still the world's most powerful country and the world's largest economy', it is said. But since China as a 'rising superpower' wants the world to accommodate its ambitions, what's needed, and likely to happen, are steel-tough visionary policies. There will be tariff barriers galore (as we now see in practice, tariff is among Trump's pet words), the threatened or actual withdrawal from the WTO and the abandonment of security guarantees for middle-power democracies in Europe and elsewhere. The plug will be pulled on military support for Ukraine. Russian leaders will be allowed there to 'do whatever the hell they want'. In support of a walled-in and walled-off America First nationalism, there'll be a token, 'do little' or 'do nothing' support for Taiwan, unconditional military partnership with Israel, land grabbing in Greenland and Panama, wire-fenced relations with Mexico, propping up of the US dollar, efforts to paralyse and dismantle the UN, and verbal shells fired northwards, in Canada's direction. Deals and/or a new grand Yalta-style bargain with Russia and China may happen. Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin, or both, may be welcomed to a Thanksgiving dinner at Mar-a-lago. But don't count on it, runs the reasoning. The United States may again find itself fighting to preserve its global dominance, using full-on military force, as it did after Pearl Harbor.

Take note how these different lines of commentary are agreed that the United States is the dominant global power and, given bold leadership by the new Trump administration, will remain hegemonic in the foreseeable future. But note as well that each of these lines of commentary is rather short on history. They have an amnesiac quality. Presented as breaking news interpretations for audiences hungry to make sense of a moment of great drama, Trump's victory is denuded of historical context, in effect presented as he would like it to be understood, as the triumph of the zeal to fix American decline, as the beginning (as he crowed at his 2025 inauguration) of a splendid new 'golden age' in which the United States, standing on the verge of the 'four greatest years in American history', ranks as the 'most powerful, most respected' country on our planet.

The New Chinese Empire

The old golden rule that those who are ignorant of the past invariably misunderstand the present seems of little or no interest to the MAGA pundits. Wedded to a spurious species of teleology, the mystical belief that history is on America's side and, with determination and luck, the guarantor of its future triumphs, they are blind to the ways the United States squandered its global supremacy and bankrolled the rise of its principal rival during the past four decades. American decline is not recent. Never mind the latter-day pandering to Putin's Russia. Think of the disastrous military interventions, the wars lost, the botched Blinken-style diplomacy and lies told, the cynical violations of the so-called 'rules-based order', and the widespread derision and laughter nowadays generated by a 'backsliding' US-style liberal democracy. Then think of the huge historical irony: the way the diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China and the subsequent material contributions of the United States to its sweeping reforms co-produced the return of China, after two centuries of subjugation, to a position of global prominence. The consequence? Thanks to the United States, technically speaking, China is no longer merely a 'country', a 'sovereign territorial state', or a 'big power'. It is an empire on the rise. The word 'empire' might today seem old-fashioned, or downright obsolete but if by empire we mean a super-sized polity whose economic, governmental, diplomatic, cultural and military power spills over and spread far beyond its borders, then the undeniable fact, as I explained at length in *China's Galaxy Empire* (2024), is that China is rapidly becoming an empire with a global reach. Not only is this fledgling empire a formidable challenge to American global hegemony and a far more robust and determined rival to the American empire than was the Soviet Union. The new Chinese empire is probably the most serious geopolitical threat the United States has faced since its foundation as a republic in the late 18th century.

The spinning shadows of Chinese windmills are everywhere on America's walls, but you wouldn't know it from the derogatory statements and bleak forecasts made by the believers in American supremacy. It's as if Orientalist ignorance about China's imperial growth is the underbelly of MAGA beliefs in US superiority, so let's consider some of the most important evidence.

Measured by total assets, the four biggest banks in the world are Chinese. Shanghai has overtaken Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Singapore to become the most important financial hub of the Asian region. China has outflanked bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to become the largest global creditor backed by its own currency swap measures, gold holdings, a cross-border payment system (CIPS), a state-backed digital currency and new financial services institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China is also spearheading the global rebellion against a world financial system defined by the US dollar and its rentier finance capitalist economy; in mid-2023, for the first time, the RMB topped the US dollar in China's cross-border transactions.

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With a nearly US\$1 trillion surplus in 2024—the United States hasn't enjoyed a trade surplus since 1975—China is the largest trading country and owner of half the world's patents. It produces a third of the world's manufactured goods, more than the United States, Japan, Germany, South Korea and Britain combined. China is the EU's and India's main trading partners in goods. It is the principal investor and trader in the world's most sizeable free trade zone in Africa, where a million Chinese employees are engaged in many thousands of infrastructure projects. In Latin America, for the first time in two centuries of independence from the Spanish empire and *de facto* economic and military dependence upon the United States, countries such as Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay and Colombia are actively drawing closer to China. China-backed trade agreements, tariff reductions, and import-export deals are the new fashion. Investments, extraction of mineral resources and trade in agricultural products jumped tenfold in the first two decades of this century. China is now the largest buyer of the region's iron, lithium, copper, oil, and soybeans.

Then there is the big and bold vision—the largest project in human history—for which Xi Jinping will undoubtedly be remembered, and his legacy judged: the so-named Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, BRI is a vast network of special economic zones and industrial parks and mega-projects comprising railways, roads, deep sea ports, bridges, power grids and other infrastructure works. Marked by fierce rivalries among provinces for shares of the huge sums of available state funding, more a visionary framework with 'omnibus' qualities than a rigidly defined juggernaut, BRI is set to cost more than a trillion dollars, seven times as much when adjusted for inflation as the US investment in Western Europe after the Second World War.

China is meanwhile home to the Alibaba Group, China Telecom and several other of the world's largest and most dynamic telecommunications and e-commerce companies. Despite US-led efforts to 'decouple' from China by applying tariff penalties, boycotting its products and services, and banning the sale and import of new communications equipment from Huawei, ZTE and other Chinese companies, China's economy—unlike the former Soviet Union—is an open political economy dominated by big business entangled with big government. It is a new species of state capitalism in which markets are neither competitive nor free because government and politics are always the deciding factor when it comes to investment, production, exchange and consumption; and China's state capitalism continues to attract substantial upstream investment from major foreign companies such as Airbus SE, Samsung, Toyota, German chemicals giant BASF and Singapore's OCBC bank and lithium-ion battery manufacturer Durapower Holdings.

Globally significant shifts are also happening in China in matters of everyday life. After experiencing low levels of life expectancy like those in the West a century ago, life expectancy in China (78.6 years in 2022 compared with 51 in 1962, according to World Bank data) has surged beyond levels in the United States, where healthy life expectancy at birth has been declining. Life expectancy is even higher among China's 400-million strong middle classes. Beneficiaries of the domestic push towards a 'moderately prosperous society' (*xiǎo kāng shè huì*), global expansion has for them become a way of life. Loyal to the system, guided by dreams of house, car and money (the three z's: *fángzi*, *chēzi*, and *piǎozi*), frequenters of shopping malls, practised at the art of keeping their heads down—follow the Party, but listen to your wife, runs a common joke—the social visibility of the new middle classes has been boosted by studying abroad and by massive state investments in higher education – a nearly 10-fold increase during the past two decades. China now produces more STEM graduates than India, the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, the UK and Canada combined.

Not to be overlooked is a fact of sobering importance: the People's Liberation Army and its strategy of what I have elsewhere called the *yīn-yáng* doctrine of 'militarised peace'. The PLA is now the globe's largest standing army, with two million troops backed by an expanding nuclear arsenal, more submarines than any other power, and sophisticated military hardware. The PLA is heavily involved in UN peacekeeping operations. In Libya, Yemen and the Sudan, it has practised the difficult arts of military evacuation of its citizens from conflict zones. Its hand has been strengthened by China's internal colonisation of Tibet and Xinjiang and its settlement of disputes with neighbouring states, including India. The PLA militarised peace strategy is backed by a military-industrial-aerospace complex featuring mega-companies sporting trade names such as China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) and the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC). It is reinforced by space power aspirations, a heavy reliance on smart diplomacy, and a commitment to a new and formidable model of warfare that presupposes, runs the Chinese saying, that melons forced from the vine don't taste sweet. Success in war, runs this way of thinking, demands self-control, forbearance, and the ability and willingness to wait (*wuwei*: non-action). Only fools rush into war. Wars are won, or avoided, by outfoxing opponents, wearing down or frightening enemies without firing a single shot.



Aerial view of Huawei Research Center In Shanghai.
Source: Lushengyi - shutterstock.com

A peaking power?

The evidence of strengthening Chinese global power is unmistakably clear. Not only has China become the world's largest investment and trading power, owner of half the world's patents, the EU's main trading partner, the principal investor and trader in Africa—three times larger than the United States—and a serious economic competitor of the United States in Latin America. China's fledgling empire also enjoys several unusual sources of resilience. At home, the governing system is not a crude and unstable form of 'autocracy' or 'authoritarianism' or 'totalitarianism', as MAGA enthusiasts claim. China is indeed a no-nonsense one-party political system, but the CCP rulers have long been nurturing clever, shock-absorbing methods of governance and what they call a 'democracy that works' – a 'phantom democracy' with Chinese characteristics comprising anti-corruption procedures, local popular courts, early warning detectors and online governmental accountability experiments. Abroad, backed by corporate telecommunications giants such as Tencent and Huawei, the new Chinese empire has post-territorial qualities. The first global empire to be born of the age of digital networked communications, China does not succumb to the hubris and repeat the mistake of early modern European empires, which brazenly grabbed land and sea routes, violently herded millions of people of different languages and cultures into bounded territorial states, and functionally depended upon capital cities at home, and in their colonies. China expands differently. Its state-owned corporations and governing institutions instead prefer unbounded flows, corridor opportunities, open borders and long-distance transactions. Beyond its borders, China's rulers foster the rapid and unrestricted movement of capital, goods, and services along with the defence of UN institutions and the building of new cross-border institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The point is China is neither an old-fashioned land empire nor a land-hungry maritime empire. It's an empire preoccupied with flows of capital, the spread of new information technologies, and global markets for its competitively priced goods and services. It connects cities and hinterlands with high-speed railways, airports, and shipping lanes. It is building global networks of logistics hubs designed to link together airports, rail and road routes, cargo ports using information and robotics technologies to boost the efficiency and effectiveness of parcel delivery systems and boosting cold chain capacity for delivering foods, medicines, and vaccines worldwide. Buoyed by its deep dependence on webbed networks of digital communications, fluid mobility—not territorial occupation—is the currency of the new Chinese empire.

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MAGA supporters and more than a few Western politicians, diplomats and journalists are ignorant of these manifold sources of resilience. Some of them instead think wishfully and talk in clichéd generalities about the crack-up of the new China. They make loud noises about the 'rise' and 'expansion' of China and its role as an 'existential threat' to the West. In the next breath, they come armed with predictions of the imminent crumbling of the new Chinese empire under the combined weight of forces such as steep tariffs, declining birth rates, rising life expectancy, real estate sector troubles, youth unemployment, exports dependency, ecological damage and political corruption. Some MAGA enthusiasts and academic observers combine the contradictory thoughts by describing China as a 'peaking power'. The idea is that China is a 'risen' power, and that's why it is so dangerous, both at home and abroad. Domestic repression of citizens is backed by resource grabbing, economic sanctions, military interventions, and other acts of foreign aggression. The remedy? Outside powers led by the United States must strengthen their military capabilities, rattle sabres, talk rough and tough, bargain hard, all the while glaring at their Chinese opponent, without blinking.

Post-imperial denial

It may indeed come to pass that the young Chinese empire unwittingly falls victim to surprise setbacks and unforeseen shocks. If that were to happen, its stillbirth would undoubtedly cast a curse upon the whole world, the United States included. Global production and supply chains, already pressured by Trump's trade war on the whole world, would snap. UN peacekeeping missions would falter. A catastrophic uncivil war in China's heartlands might result. In search of safety, tens of millions of refugees would pour across its borders into neighbouring territories, with regionally destabilising effects.

Nobody can yet say whether or to what extent such outcomes are likely, or what the collapse of a too-big-to-fail China would practically bring to the world. For the moment, what instead must be noted is the flipside of this scenario and a profound category mistake within the MAGA mindset: its blind refusal to admit that the American empire is itself entrapped in the dynamics of long-term decline at the hands of an unusually resilient Chinese global empire. Interpreting weakness as strength, failure as success, decline as triumph, MAGA manifestly fails to register and come to grips with the manifold symptoms of US imperial decline. It not only dwells in the realm of fiction. Psychoanalytically speaking, MAGA functions as a symptom of America's blindly neurotic mental and military fight against decline—its compulsive ignorance and denial and disavowal (Freud's *Verleugnung*) of the realities that are daily weakening its grip at home and abroad—and an attempt at all-or-nothing 'splitting', projecting its own insecurities onto the world by bullying everybody into a state of confused submission.

The task of making sense of these realities of decline is a formidable challenge. For the moment, it garners little political sympathy and wins few intellectual friends, especially in the United States, where what can be called empire decline denial stifles consideration of trends which ought to be obvious. Most often, for understandable reasons, the analysts of decline dwell on the economic challenges to US supremacy. China's rising leadership in matters such as global investment and trade and electric vehicles, AI and digital technologies is undeniable. An equally formidable threat to American economic power is China's drive to break the dollar system by globalising the RMB through its own state-owned banks, currency swap measures, gold holdings, a new cross-border payments systems (CIPS), and an e-currency.

MAGA enthusiasts and American officials should be worried by these economic trends, but there are equally formidable challenges confronting the American empire. Consider its declining legitimacy. Historians teach us that durable empires always try to camouflage their own immodesty by convincing both their heartlands and their clients and subjects abroad that their power is a force for good. Empires aim to get under the skin of the people whose lives they shape at a distance. The priority is to transform the empire into a whole way of life so that its power to shape the world at large—to tell stories that persuade others of its superiority and to nurture among the empire's subjects a sense of 'masochistic wallowing' ([Tsitsi Dangarembga](#))—comes to be seen and accepted as 'natural', and as the way things must forever remain.

China's CCP leaders know that in global affairs legitimacy really matters. Telling the China story well is for them of exceptional strategic importance. What's interesting is the way the young Chinese empire isn't framed by a single dominant ideology, a comprehensive story about its past, present, and future, a persuasive summary of its global achievements and wealthy benefits. The contrast with past empires, including the American, is striking. Empires of old typically ruled through a rigid set of legitimating symbols portrayed as intrinsically consistent and globally universal. Portuguese and Spanish emperors were proselytes for monarchy and the church. 'I believe in the British Empire', boasted Joseph Chamberlain, secretary of state for the colonies, 'and I believe in the British race. I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races that the world has ever seen.' The Ottoman Empire that confronted and outflanked Christian Europe in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the lands bordering the Volga River for over five centuries (between 1400 and 1922 CE) wielded power in the form of a *gaza*, a holy war conducted in the name of Islam against its non-Muslim doubters and enemies.

The symbols deployed by party officials, diplomats, journalists to justify the worldly spread of Chinese power are different, both in content and form. They have a kaleidoscopic ‘yin-yáng’ quality. There is plenty of pragmatic, business-like patter about stability and development, GDP, making money, growing rich, and ‘prosperity’. But CCP leaders also spout articles of faith such as ‘harmonious society’, ‘Confucian principles’, ‘rule of law’, the ‘democratisation of international relations’, ‘ecological civilization’ and ‘ancient Chinese civilization’. Other standard phrases including ‘territorial sovereignty’ and ‘national dignity’. ‘Peace’, ‘anti-imperialism’ and ‘protection from foreign enemies’ are also favourite words in their semantic arsenal. And there’s abundant talk of ‘socialism’ mixed with dollops of ‘Marxism’.

Whatever is thought of the consistency or veracity of this rainbow vocabulary, it underscores the way China's leaders and their media publicists are acutely aware of the reputational dangers of ideological rigidity. Knowing that those who sow thorns reap wounds, they want to be seen as strong but flexible, benevolently tough servants of ‘the people’, strong-willed champions of planetary peace, wealth creation, good governance, and environmental resilience. These conflicting images, euphemisms, intentional ambiguity and cloudy vagueness have functional advantages. They are difficult to summarise, or to denounce. Their rhetoric isn't easily falsified. Double standards are difficult to criticise when the standards are double, treble and quadruple. Leaders are much harder to pin down. Surprise moves can more easily be sprung. Leaders can sail with the political winds and bamboozle their foes and in turn their bamboozling—as the Chinese expression has it—enables them to shift a thousand pounds with four ounces. Reputational ambiguity grants them great political strength.

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By contrast, global questioning of the legitimacy of the American empire is rising. There was a time, especially in the years after 1945, when America’s reputation rode high. The empire had since the 19th century prided itself on its support for ‘democracy’, but after its World War II victories it had a free hand in playing the role of defender-in-chief of democracy and stoic guardian of the entire ‘free world’. In practice, it did some impressive things. In Europe, for instance, the Marshall Plan introduced the continent to American ways of life and helped build the foundations of a new middle class. America stood for economic growth and shared prosperity, high quality roads, education, health care and other public services, and belief in the principle that citizens are entitled to choose their own government. In popular culture, there was the allure of Hollywood, jazz, the all-shook-up Elvis Presley, Motown, Marilyn Monroe, Woody Allen, the rebel poetry of Bob Dylan, the melancholy magnetism of blue grass, gospel, soul and country music, the good-times fluff of the Beach Boys and the Monkeys. Even when things were not going well, America seemed reformable, capable of doing better.

But the times they are changing, and not for the better. We are going to see what the Trump administration does to America’s reputation in the coming years. The world is already awash with bad news about the United States, its double standards, big-money politics, gun violence, loud-mouthed leadership, second-rate infrastructure and general social decadence. There’s of course Superbowl rap king Kendrick Lamar and the private-jet, cash-grabbing, fan-based ‘my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism like some kind of Congressman’ pop star businesswoman Taylor Swift. And it’s true that in some countries, Poland, Israel, Japan and the Philippines included, a majority of citizens say they hold a ‘favourable opinion’ of the United States. Elsewhere, however, research shows that in China, Turkey, Tunisia, Greece, Malaysia, Australia and France, public opinions about the United States are split, or potentially hostile; the research also shows that in countries such as Iran, Egypt and Afghanistan and, more generally, in the wider Arab and Muslim regions, millions of people say they loathe American imperial power and its ways of life. They think of it as a freak show. Mere mention of the United States and its ‘democracy’ tempts people to curse and spit.

Viewed historically, these research findings are significant because they suggest that the light of democracy and freedom on America’s hill is fading. On the home front, whatever they say, its latest crop of political leaders and diplomats evidently care little or nothing for democracy. Some MAGA enthusiasts welcome its

abandonment. They speak openly of democracy's obsolescence. Their alternative mantra is fired straight from the hip: in the name of its fabled 'people', America will remake the world led by a government that snubs constitutional and civil society restraints on its power. Curtis Yarvin, a leading MAGA ideologue and 'dark enlightenment' champion, says it bluntly. 'The leader must use the mass movement to win the democracy game, then demand and take absolute power.' Hardcore MAGA supporters dream of weakening or outright abolishing power-sharing democracy. They say democracy is no longer the only game in town because brute power and winning are all that matter. Despotism is their thing. Constitutional niceties make no sense. Hero worship and demagoguery matter. Its rules are plain. Flood the zone. Strengthen executive power. Cross red lines. Defy existing laws and legal precedents. Bewilder citizens by issuing non-stop executive orders. Abolish guardrails and watchdogs. Arbitrarily dismiss inspectors general, judges and other guardians of public integrity. Reduce the power of legislatures to appropriate tax money and determine its spending. Trample on workers' rights. End birthright citizenship. Freeze research, educational, social support and foreign aid programmes. Silence dissenters. Expect unquestioning loyalty from civil servants. Denounce journalists and experts who expose misconduct, corruption, and malfeasance as 'far left' purveyors of fake news and partisans of the 'deep state'.

Imperium militare

Democracy promotion is also near the bottom of the fading empire's list of global priorities. Treating the so-called rules-based order as a sham is the new priority. Bully politics backed by a might-makes-right mentality is the gold standard. It's as if believers in American supremacy believe that power, like the mythical rabbit's foot, automatically generates its own charm. Reality is harsher. As each day, month and year passes, the magnetic allure of the United States is fading. Which is a key reason why America, foolishly, as previous fading empires did, resorts to military force as a prime solution to its mounting global ills.

In his first novel *Amerika* (1925), Franz Kafka daringly pictured the Statue of Liberty in a new light, her arm outstretched aloft, wielding a long, sharp sword. He couldn't have imagined the depth and breadth of the militarisation of the American empire to come. Currently backed by a network of 800 military bases in at least 75 countries, US military spending (according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI]) reached \$916 billion in 2023, a figure more than three times larger than China's (US\$296 billion) and higher than 20 other governments combined (Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, Germany, Ukraine, France, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Australia, Poland, Israel, Canada, Spain, Brazil, Algeria, Netherlands, Türkiye plus the province of Taiwan). The US is by far the biggest global arms dealer: between 2016 and 2020, 37% of global arms exports were from the United States (during the same period China accounted for 5.2% of the total).

The failing empire is now permanently at war. Since its founding as a republic, the United States has invaded other territories nearly 400 times; more than a quarter of these invasions have happened since the collapse of the Soviet Union. There have been untold numbers of engineered coups d'états, CIA-led assassinations and covert operations although, as might be expected of an empire losing its grip on the world, the rate of military interventions has recently been accelerating. The wise warning of old Montesquieu in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) that militarism corrupts republics and ruins empires goes unheeded.

America's rulers have long insisted that interventions are good and necessary because they promote peace, human rights, international law, alliances, counterterrorism and democratization. The bullshit alibis are contradicted by ugly realities. Since the Second World War, featuring the Vietnam fiasco, the Iraq debacle and the Ukraine quagmire, the United States has lost just about every war. Its inability to win small or medium wars in asymmetric conflicts has been matched by shocking losses of life and ecological destruction. The American military is the world's largest global polluter. The invasion and two-decades 'Operation Enduring Freedom' military occupation of Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of at least 250,000 civilians and a sudden withdrawal that left behind contaminated land and rivers, toxic burn pits and unexploded weapons containing known carcinogens, teratogens and genotoxins.

The spirit and substance of militarism are also infecting the empire's heartlands. Since 9/11, suicide rates among veterans and active-duty soldiers have reached an all-time high (which makes the Trump group's public attacks on the Department of Veteran Affairs, backed by proposals to cut 80,000 jobs, look bizarre, or utterly insane). The imperial presidency has robbed taxpaying and arms-bearing citizens of their say in matters of war. The design and execution of military goals and strategies are high-level imperial secrets. Troops are despatched to home borders to protect America from the scourge of unwanted immigrants. Undocumented civilians are rounded up in frightened communities, flung into military camps or deported to Guantánamo Bay. The US military sells off or transfers its used or surplus weaponry to domestic police agencies. Militarised policing is consequently the new fashion. Officers kitted out in combat gear and armed with stun guns, tear gas cannon, pepper spray, sniper assault rifles, armoured trucks, drones, and tanks are becoming the new normal. The data shows that in the United States around fifty thousand SWAT (special weapons and tactics) raids are carried out annually on household dwellings by teams dressed in military gear and wielding military weapons, including grenades thrown prior to the raids. Military-style police teams are also active during street demonstrations and in urban communities, where disproportionately they are deployed against African American, Muslim and other minority communities.

The future?

Where are these various ominous trends taking the United States? Outperformed on multiple fronts by a new and resilient Chinese empire, suffering mounting public suspicion and disrespect at various points on our planet, trapped in a deathly spiral of war mongering of its own making, those who run America, whether they know it or not, are now active contributors to the long history of the decline and collapse of empires.

When making sense of the present-day dynamics and looking to the future of the American empire, can anything be learned from the way previous empires have suffered decline and downfall? Indeed, much can be learned, beginning most obviously with the basic historical reminder that no empire lasts forever because the functional necessities of building and managing a durable empire are highly exacting. The famous English analyst Edward Gibbon in his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789) emphasised most of the key points. Empires last when they are 'prompt in action and rich in resources', enjoy 'swift and easy communication' with their hinterlands, build 'a regular administration' and a 'well-disciplined army to inspire fear, without provoking discontent and despair.'

These are demanding conditions, to say the least. They minimally require a strong dose of self-belief and a robust sense of what Gibbon called 'immoderate greatness'. Here the irony is that the requisite sense of self-confident superiority—displayed in MAGA triumphalism—turns out to be a terrible toxin. Empires are typically felled by their own arrogance. That's why their defiance of time by biding their time depends heavily on their ability to learn from their mistakes, to change course when circumstances grow threatening, to know when to back down, and, not to be underestimated, to hide their arrogance by staying close to the ground when strong winds of doubt and criticism blow their way. That's also why the rulers of empires are tempted instead to act as if they are monopolists of their own destiny; they doggedly suppose history is on their side. Gripped by dreams of a life of endless summers, autumnal decline and wintry death are far from their minds. But history always has other plans for them. While many empires postpone for a time the seasons of fortune, they are doomed to live within history. In recorded human history, historians tell us, no empire has ever lasted forever. All empires are subject to internal strains and external threats that sooner or later get the upper hand and drag them down into the dungeons of defeat.

Historians of empire also remind us that each case of imperial downfall is rhythmically different. Some eleventh-hour moments of empires are dramatic, as the film *Der Untergang* (The Downfall; 2004) directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel and featuring a masterful performance by Bruno Ganz, shows so brilliantly for the case of Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich. Most downfalls are by contrast protracted affairs. They are slow-paced tragedies in which perversity and perfidy savour their moments of slow-motion victory.

There's one other lesson historians teach us: imperial decline is typically a sordid and slimy affair. Honesty and magnanimity are in short supply. Even when entangled empires share many values in common, nasty rivalries between the victor and the vanquished are chronic, as the nasty tensions between the United States and Britain after World War I show clearly.

When viewed through the lens of these generalities, how does the case of the United States measure up? Is the 'exceptional' empire of the United States handling its own downfall in exceptional ways?

The interpretation I'm offering suggests that the backers of MAGA will do all they can to stave off American decline and defeat and that, for a time, they will succeed in their overall strategy of consolidating their power in certain zones (building a new mega-embassy/surveillance/command centre in Lebanon, for instance) and withdrawing from global institutions and costly conflicts where their grip is slipping. The sudden collapse of the United States imperium is not on the cards. Rather, like the Ottoman and British empires, the world will instead probably witness a string of slow-motion, spits-and-splutters episodes of retreat, regrouping and revenge. Perhaps imperial decline will happen the Hemingway way, slowly at first, then suddenly. There will be months when nothing much happens followed by days when months and years happen. One thing's certain: as we see already, the continued crack-up of the empire will be protracted, disorderly and painful.

There are already clear signs of the likely overall pattern: while the United States will do everything it can to trim its global empire on its own rationally calculated 'national interest' terms, there'll be many cartoonishly crazy and contradictory happenings. The MAGA mission may seem rock-solid robust, but its leaders are already displaying signs of disbelief and confusion about their own will to greatness. Slowly but surely, announcement by announcement, they are being forced to learn the arts of pulling back and accepting forced retreat. Symptomatic are those moments of honesty when an incoming Secretary of State acknowledges the birth of 'a multipolar world', warns that the rulers of China pose a 'grave threat' to American interests then goes on to recommend that 'no matter what happens' the United States is 'going to have to deal with them' because 'the history of the 21st century will largely be about what happened between the U.S. and China'.

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It isn't clear what 'dealing' with China implies. For the foreseeable future, to repeat, America's imperial decline will be constantly shadowed by the extraordinary irony that for a variety of reasons, ranging from geopolitical rivalry with the former Soviet empire to the lure of huge profits from investment in China, the United States played the role of lead midwife in the rebirth of a global China. America's entanglement with China will persist, for a while. The degree of quantum entanglement should not be exaggerated—remember that Chinese exports into the US are now only about 2% of its overall economic output—but the growth of the new Chinese empire and the shrinkage of the United States during the coming years will not straightforwardly be a zero-sum dynamic. Whether the new Chinese empire will eventually choose, or be forced, to play the role of the dominant empire in a chaotic and unruly global order, or whether it will want to operate as the leading global force in such matters as banking and finance, the brokering of peace deals, and the public management of environmental problems, nobody can yet say. But contrary to Ferguson and others, a new Cold War *sensu stricto* is not on the cards. Under Trump, who says many muddled and contradictory things about China, the world will witness moments of dialogue, cooperation, heavy bargaining, bouts of praise, followed by sarcasm and abuse, retaliatory threats and cat-and-mouse acts of revenge. But amidst the shenanigans, the spinning shadows will stay on America's walls: in fields as diverse as finance, trade and investment, technological innovation, media entertainment and military hardware, the People's Republic of China will continue to outpace and outflank the United States. China will build windmills. The United States will erect tariff barriers and military walls.

It may be that the United States, in foolish desperation, or by accident, in accordance with the proverb that two tigers cannot live together on the same mountain, launches a full-scale war on China. Vowing to end the 'continuing catalogue of catastrophic events abroad', [Trump's inaugural address](#) was unequivocal: 'Our armed forces will be freed to focus on their sole mission: defeating America's enemies.' China is evidently enemy number one, but for the United States, a Sino-American war would surely result in yet another military and moral stalemate or outright defeat by a much larger, more patient, savvy and well-equipped PLA opponent. Chinese citizens' support for their regime would be strengthened; American public opinion would be badly divided. Public opinion might not even count: the whole world would be forced to shudder at the environmental, infrastructural and loss of human life costs of a crazy conflict which renders obsolete the old distinction between 'conventional' and 'nuclear' war in an unprecedented global catastrophe from which our planet may not manage to recover.

Whether or not the United States exercises military self-restraint in 'dealing' with China, or whether our world is rescued by dumb luck, my prediction is that for the foreseeable future war will nevertheless remain on the global agenda of America's military-industrial-academic complex. There will be yet more complicity in obscene Gaza/West Bank genocidal tragedies and other 'shatter zones'. Some wars will be avoided; others will end in stalemate; still others lost outright. In military matters, America will be forced to eat more servings of humble pie. Trade wars, financial threats and investment reprisals will be commonplace. In those fields, failures and humiliations will also multiply, some of them not yet newsworthy, such as the weakening of domestic manufacturing industry by tariff wars, spikes in federal debt (already at \$36 trillion) stoked by tax cuts for the wealthy, and the silent but [steady decline of 'dollar dominance'](#), the gradual outflanking of the oversized global role of the greenback by the rising share of nontraditional reserve currencies, including the Chinese renminbi.



*U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division soldiers guarding the tarmac at Kabul Airport, 16 August 2021.
Source: US Marine Corps - Wikicommons*

For the first time in human history, imperial demise will get maximum media coverage. Compliments of the United States, the gradual reduction of America to a failing and fallen big power will be livestreamed to the world. Audiences will be treated with lots of rough talk, bizarre surprises, episodes of great tension, and a general display of American macho ugliness in world affairs. American bullying will be the flipside of its growing insecurity. Talk of a 'rules-based order' will stop; mere mention of the phrase will everywhere spark loud laughter. The United States will instead openly continue to sacrifice its long-standing allies and brazenly screw its opponents whenever and wherever it can. America's priority will be to stop tilting at windmills. It will cut its losses, shed unnecessary obligations, hold on to its most valuable power assets for as long as it can. America's traditional 'friends' won't be spared. Yet more Zelensky-style compradors and client states will be caught with their pants down. Most of them will be treated at best as mere business partners, or as raw material sites or convenient military bases. Ententes favouring American interests will multiply. The Kissinger rule shall apply: to be the enemy of the United States will be dangerous, but to be its friend will be fatal.

Democracy?

And what about democracy? What's the probable fate of the ideals and practices of democracy for which the United States proudly once claimed to stand? Again, we can't be sure, but what's already evident is that the accelerating decline of the United States is destroying more than a few illusions about democracy. The old dictum that 'a democracy is incapable of governing and managing an empire' (as the Athenian historian Thucydides famously wrote in his late 5th century BCE *History of the Peloponnesian War*) is already being turned on its head. In the coming years, the empire will manage without democracy. That's the rule in the history of empires. As they rise towards their zenith, long-lasting empires try to solve their power problems by granting some of their distant subjects a measure of self-government (as China does in its affirmations of non-intervention in the affairs of other states, as did the Ottomans in their *millet* system of courts of law run by different confessional communities, and as the British did by granting parliamentary rule to their loyal white colonies). When empires are in decline, by contrast, they are bad losers. They grow paranoid, mean-spirited, stingy, and bellicose.

At home, 'Hands Off' citizen fightbacks notwithstanding, the drift towards a new kind of despotic rule will accelerate. Fuelled by Trump-style talk of the 'tremendous fraud, tremendous waste' in government, rule by politically powerful and rich corporate 'poligarchs' is bound to flourish. Within the ruling circles, high-handed power moves will generate high praise and maximum centre-stage media coverage. The quintessence of politics will be that the few tell the rest what to do. Within the ruling institutions, friends will receive rich rewards. Enemies will be threatened with sharp-toothed chainsaws, abused, sacked and generally handed rough justice.

In the heartlands of the shrinking empire, there will be more guns, street shootings, immigrant arrests, misogyny, religious bigotry and media untruths.

Even though it used to be taught in America that democracy as a whole way of life requires a vibrant civil society, rough justice will flourish as well in the field of social life. In the heartlands of the shrinking empire, there will be more guns, street shootings, immigrant arrests, misogyny, religious bigotry and media untruths. Middle class anxiety and the angry underclass conviction that democracy is a mere façade for plutocracy will grow. Millions of citizens will feel the paralysing pinch of decades of past and future neglect. They already know that the wealthiest three Americans, each of them indulgers of the MAGA fantasy, currently own more wealth than 50 percent of the whole society. They are aware that there is no universal medical care and that their healthcare system totters on the edge of collapse. They know that a quarter of American citizens currently can't afford the drugs prescribed by their doctors; that there's a major housing shortage; and that officially at least 800,000 people are homeless. By 2023, only 10 percent of workers belonged to a trade union, half the number of four decades earlier. As the empire shrinks, unless a radically different government committed to the redistribution of wealth comes to power, social conditions will worsen. The number of Americans who have little faith in the future will multiply. A sizable majority of citizens (around six-in-ten) already say that life is worse today than it was 50 years ago. Looking to the future, they expect things to grow worse. They say that in 2050 their economy will be weaker, the United States will be less important in the world, political divisions will be wider and that there'll be an even bigger gap between the poor and the rich.

Ominously, everything will be made worse by the coming fires, floods, droughts and crop failures of the drill-baby-drill age. Disasters can of course bring out the best in citizens but, as Americans are already finding out, extreme environmental shocks desecrate democracy. People suffer injury and death. They fear for their lives.

Survivors are quarantined, told to keep their distance from others, dragged and pushed from their dwellings and habitats, supervised by police and army and government service agencies. Environmental disasters show just how quickly the tapestry and tissues and threads of trust and cooperation of civil society can be torn asunder by fear, greed and corruption. Ecological disasters also normalise arbitrary power. They get citizens used to emergency rule: it's what must for a time be endured, and what out of 'necessity' is in future to be expected. Slowly but surely, in the name of their 'safety' and 'security', people are encouraged to accept the permanent administration of their lives. Compulsory solidarity (Leszek Kołakowski), a type of solidarity degraded by its coercive imposition, becomes the new norm.

Abroad, in various cross-border settings, the United States will carry on openly abandoning the democratic principles of power sharing, public accountability, rule of law and justice for the weak. America will consistently vote against and give the moral finger to cross-border institutions and agencies (such as USAID) it dislikes or no longer controls. The executive order to withdraw from the WHO—signed on the first day of the second term of Trump's presidency—is probably an ominous harbinger of things to come. Until recently, the United States contributed around 15 percent of WHO annual funding. It played an important role in the multi-state organisation's monitoring, information sharing and responding to acute medical crises and longer-term global health care trends. Never mind that the American withdrawal will cause job losses and reduce the capacity of an organisation already in need of reform and struggling financially; or that America's walking away from the WHO will threaten the health of American citizens, damage overseas technical assistance programmes and supply chains and perhaps in the end help wreck global health diplomacy efforts. The fierce American logic of withdrawal and regrouping is what matters. It's brutal: with apologies to Thrasymachus, injustice is the will of those who were once strong. The rest of the world can go to hell. The cross-border ability to understand what's happening elsewhere, and to participate in decisions about matters of global importance, is old hat. The new watchwords are *saue qui peut*: each government and people affected by health care and other crises must hereon fend for themselves.

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But what about America's obligations to territorial democracies like Canada, South Africa, Chile, India, Australia, New Zealand, or Germany, France and other member states of the EU? They, too, will be forced to cope as best they can. That they call themselves democracies won't be of significance or concern to the flailing empire. To use a favourite backroom phrase of American diplomats, their governments can go fuck themselves. They will be forced to face up to the new reality: don't naively suppose that America is automatically on your side, pay your debts, honour your tariff commitments, buy our weapons, do what we tell you to do, or we'll make life difficult for you. Unless democracy's friend serendipity steps in, the consequence will be that the democratic world will experience something like a 21st-century repetition of the century before, when by 1941, after a half-century of social unrest, economic stagnation, dictatorship, global war, and totalitarianism, a year when President Roosevelt called for 'bravely shielding the great flame of democracy from the blackout of barbarism', only eleven parliamentary democracies had managed to preserve their independence. They did so by knuckling down and keeping their distance, as far as they could geographically and emotionally, from the general anti-democratic trends of the age.

For democrats, civil society defenders and democratically elected governments in cities, states and cross-border organisations, present-day trends and troubling futures are arguably just as challenging as they were during those dark times. Right-wing parties and governments are already emboldened by Trump's election, but not everything will go the way of the failing empire, it's to be hoped. Within the remaining democracies, and in the new democracies to come, citizens will build democracy hideaways, havens and hermitages. Democrats will use free and fair elections to elect mutinous governments. Elected leaders will speak out, perhaps even lead others honestly by the head and heart, not by tugging and pulling at their noses. The independent monitoring and public restraint of power will continue to reveal things that are not to America's liking. There'll be healthy scepticism, outcries and brave opposition to American bullying.

Confronted by Russian-style despotisms, a rising Chinese empire and an angry America bearishly in retreat and decline, democrats everywhere might realise that this is a moment of opportunity not to be wasted, a tipping point in which the future of democracy no longer depends on the approval and support of the United States. Post-imperial democracy will instead depend upon the solidarity of the shaken (Jan Patočka's famous phrase) and the courage, inventiveness and determination of those who are being sidelined, left behind, bullied and screwed. The mounting uncertainties, derogatory abuse, setbacks and misfortunes will hopefully galvanise the minds and hearts of democrats on every continent. So serious are the times that their commitment to democracy will toughen their resolve to stand firm while searching at all levels of government and social life for new remedies for the maladies of representative democracy, all the while saying again and again: since uncontrolled power is dangerous, and since America on the skids is trying to sow division and disunity to its advantage and can no longer politically be fully trusted or relied upon, democracy is once again, for very different reasons than our grandparents supposed, an indispensable global virtue, a non-negotiable and basic requirement everywhere of a decent and dignified life for creatures large and small on an endangered planet we call home.



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