

Debating American decline: is it for real this time?

The notion of American decline, often coupled with speculations on the inevitability of China's rise, became almost a piece of conventional wisdom in the early twenty-first century. There was, however, nothing new to this idea. Ever since the 1950s various commentators have predicted the collapse of American power as a consequence of a series of factors: the rise of competing states, the internal decay of the American economy and society or the overextension of the United States' military power beyond its capacities. The Soviet Union, Western Europe, Japan and now China have all been expected to claim the number one spot. Many authors, including most famously Paul Kennedy in his *Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (London, 1987), have predicted an American decline only to be proven wrong with the passage of time.

Instead, the reality was that for seven decades from the end of the Second World War, when the United States initially emerged as the world's unrivalled superpower, America continued to hold on to the top spot in many measurable and, perhaps more significantly, non-quantifiable areas. While US growth rates and overall population were far smaller than those of China and India, the American Gross Domestic Product (GDP), military spending, ability to project strength overseas, technological prowess, political strength, culture, university system etc. still made many observers doubt that a true global power shift was underway.

The prospect of American decline (and China's rise) has prompted a new heated debate in the United States. While scholars like Niall Ferguson and, yet again, Paul Kennedy, liken the United States' fate to that of Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, others, such as Josef Joffe and Joseph Nye have described the talk of American decline to be as premature in the 2010s as it was in the 1950s. Joffe's *The Myth of America's Decline* (New York, 2013) is a particularly thought-provoking book, questioning the motives behind much of what he calls 'declinism'.