

Colossus is still the indispensable force

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In the mid-1980s a genre of international relations literature emerged which was described broadly as "declinist" since it looked forward, not necessarily with great enthusiasm, to the decline of the United States from its position of global pre-eminence. Notable among the contributors was the Yale historian, Paul Kennedy, with his book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. It was an impressive piece of scholarship, a compelling global narrative covering 500 years of great power history that ended with some sombre warnings on the dangers of American "imperial overstretch" and a forecast that it could lead inexorably to decline.

Within five years of the book's publication, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the Cold War had ended and the US emerged as the world's sole superpower. In the short term, Kennedy's prognostications appeared spectacularly errant.

Nearly two decades on, a plausible case could be made that perhaps Kennedy was right after all. The great republic appears besieged on all sides. Where anti-Americanism was once the preserve of Cold War adversaries, the left in France and miscellaneous malcontents largely from the Third World, in 2005 it seems more widespread. A deepening ideological chasm between the US and parts of the Muslim world is evident but, equally alarming, the anti-American contagion appears to have spread more widely, severely affecting relations between Washington and some of its allies and close friends in Europe.

Nor has the American economy done well in recent years: sluggish domestic growth (now picking up), high current account and budget deficits, a declining dollar, slow job creation and significant losses in the manufacturing sector are all cause for concern. Then there is Iraq, where Washington is struggling to support a challenging experiment in democracy and to guarantee Iraqis long-term peace, prosperity and security.

As bleak as this picture may be, however, it would be exceedingly unwise to see within it the seeds of American decline. Eventually, like all great powers, America's period of pre-eminence will come to an end, but this is a long way off. Most of the discontents troubling the American body politic reflect short-term policy challenges. They require attention, certainly, and they could lead to more serious problems, but the foundations of America's global position remain firmly in place.

Underpinning US primacy is its massive structural power relative to its competitors. This strength starts with the extraordinary size and energy of the American economy which, with a GDP of \$US10,500 billion (\$13,860 billion) is nearly twice that of the next ranked country — Japan. With a quarter of global GDP, the American economy underwrites much of the world's trading, finance and investment activity, maintains a remarkable entrepreneurialism and is adapting to and benefiting from the challenges of globalisation. The dollar is stable as the world's main reserve currency and continues to underwrite global liquidity, while American business continues to lead innovation.

In military capability, America's strength is even more impressive. With annual defence expenditure greater than that of the next eight countries combined, an arsenal of both conventional and nuclear weapons, armed forces deployed around the world and an active

commitment to the continued exploration of space, its security capability has a truly global reach and a size many times that of its nearest rival. Massive investment in military research and development will underwrite its strength well into the future.

A large, growing and well-educated population and a stable political system reinforce these structural strengths.

American primacy is also founded on its "soft power". As Joseph Nye has argued, this is the ability to get others to "want what you want" — it co-opts rather than coerces, and rests on people in other countries admiring and respecting American values and being willing to embrace them. Despite the apparently widespread anti-Americanism, to many people around the world the US remains an inspiration and a beacon of hope for a better life. The reality may be different to the image, but US values and culture, its science and technology and its educational opportunity, have a seductive appeal.

The Economist magazine was undoubtedly right when it declared in 1999 that the "United States bestrides the globe like a colossus", but the more important point is that no other state is close to having either the will or the capability to challenge its primacy. None of the obvious contenders — China, Russia, Japan, India or the European Union — seem interested. Perhaps the power differentials are too great and the task too demanding.

Alternatively, as a recent study by the US National Intelligence Council suggested, perhaps it is because US policies are not seen as sufficiently threatening to warrant such a step.

American primacy means that Washington's power and influence is both global and highly diffused. Former president Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright once famously remarked that America was the "indispensable power". It was not said with hubris, or with the implication that the US could or should act unilaterally, but rather with the recognition that "America needs to be there". Little of significance can be achieved in international affairs without Washington's participation: sometimes with the use of its coercive power, sometimes with its ability to persuade and cajole.

Among many other things: much-needed UN reform will not take place without the active participation and support of the US; success in the Doha round of multilateral trade negotiations will require Washington's energetic commitment to change; a serious international effort to address global warming will not be effective until the US signs on; and in a dozen trouble spots around the world — in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Washington's intervention has the capacity to shape and determine outcomes, for good or ill. Only imperial powers have wielded this kind of power and influence, and generally they yield their dominance only reluctantly and when confronted by a successor. For the moment there is no obvious successor.

None of this is to suggest that great powers, the US included, can preserve their pre-eminence without the studious guardianship of strengths and judicious exercise of power. As the eminent historian, John Lewis Gaddis, provocatively said recently, "it is always a bad idea to confuse power with wisdom: muscles are not brains". Whether the first-term foreign policy of the Bush administration is guilty of such confusion is debatable. As critics and supporters alike have noted, many of its foreign policy actions have been sound and principled, but implementation has too often proved a weakness. The more significant point is that this administration's shortcomings threaten to undermine America's great-power legitimacy and thus its ability to secure important policy objectives, such as the expansion of democracy.

But this is not a terminal condition as the declinists are wont to believe. When the US emerged pre-eminent from World War II, the Truman administration (and its successors) faced the challenge of protecting American power and advancing core national security interests in a world of danger and immense change. They met this challenge by working with friends and allies to confront threats and shape a liberal international order that allowed America's interests to be advanced, its ideals to be admired and its strength to be respected. In short, Washington used all of its available means and instruments of power to secure policy objectives. There were some policy failures, as the outcome of the Vietnam War demonstrated, but for the most part American grand strategy secured legitimacy and delivered prosperity and security — not just for Americans, but for millions of others.

In a globalised world, where the networks of interdependence that are its foundation go, in Thomas Friedman's words, "farther, faster, cheaper and deeper", and we face a new security threat, the challenges are different to those of 1945. The response will need to be different, but as the Bush administration is showing in its new term, Washington can remain committed, while also retaining a capacity for adjustment and change. As it has been able to do in the past, the US must place its power, purpose and primacy on a new 21st-century foundation that will underwrite its international legitimacy. This is not just a cause for Americans. For members of the international community (including Australia) that revere America's liberal political values, gain prosperity from its economic enterprise and find security in its military might, this is a cause which is in their interests, too.

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