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**THE NEW SECURITY ENVIRONMENT:
CAN THE U.S. RETAIN PRIMACY?**

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Those who assert that America is in decline argue that the United States as a society, economy, and political power is weakening and that its international primacy is ebbing as a result of the rise of others, especially China.¹ To be sure, the United States faces both serious domestic problems and a significantly changed global environment, yet in evaluating America's power position, it is essential to think broadly and long-term. In this regard it is sobering to consider how varied and volatile previous assessments have been. Observers at home and abroad have periodically offered gloomy and even dire assertions about America. Yet time after time, these have proved to be far too pessimistic, even embarrassingly so.

True, there has been a degree of erosion in America's economic and military power relative to other countries. However, the margin of strength vis-a-vis other international actors has been so wide that despite some attrition, the United States remains in a unique position as compared with other states. In contrast with the British experience of imperial decline a century ago, America continues to possess a substantial edge, whether measured in terms of its share of world GDP, depth and size of financial markets, or military power projection. Nor, in the percentage of GDP devoted to defense is it truly overstretched (a key concept in Paul Kennedy's

¹ For a conspicuous recent example, see Fareed Zakaria, "Are America's Best Days Behind It?" *Time*, March 3, 2011. And see the rejoinder by Joseph S. Nye, "Zakaria's World," *Foreign Policy.com*, March 8, 2011.

influential 1987 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*).² Even with the costs of war in Afghanistan and continuing military commitments in Iraq and elsewhere, current defense spending at 4.9% of GDP remains well below Cold War levels, which averaged 8.7% in the 1960s, 5.9% in the 1970s, and 5.8% in the 1980s.³

When focused on current problems and bitter political debates, we often tend to lose sight of America's strengths. Among these, it is the world's third largest country in population, enjoys a more favorable demographic profile than China and most other major countries except India, and is the one country in the world that is simultaneously big and rich. Despite recent funding problems, America's great research universities and its scientific and research facilities are unrivaled. U.S. competitiveness remains in the top rank, matched only by a few smaller countries such as Singapore and Finland, and America continues to be a magnet for talented immigrants from all over the world. Our political system, warts and all, remains flexible and accountable to the public will while maintaining constitutional liberties. Time and again, when faced with serious crises, the country has eventually found a way to respond. And contrary to Zakaria's claim that success has made it "sclerotic," a capacity for flexibility, adaptability and innovation is likely to continue to serve America well.

The Prediction Problem

Long term predictions are notoriously hard to get right, as evident in repeated warnings and prophecies about decline from the late 18th Century to the present. For example, Samuel Huntington identified no fewer than five waves of declinism in the space of little more than two

² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random, 1987). Also David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony* (New York, Basic Books, 1987).

³ Source: Table 6.1, Composition of Outlays: 1940-2016. "Historical Tables." *Fiscal Year 2012 Budget of the U.S. Government. United States. Office of Management and Budget*, www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals. Accessed 19 Feb. 2011.

decades: in 1957-58 after the Soviet launching of Sputnik, in 1969-71 when President Nixon proclaimed the end of the bipolar world and abandoned the gold standard, in 1973-74 in the aftermath of the oil shock, in the late 1970s after Vietnam, Watergate, and a period of Soviet assertiveness, and in 1987 with budget and trade deficits, the rise of Japan, and the October 1987 stock market crash.⁴ And yet, the decade ended not with America's demise, but with the opening of the Berlin Wall and end of the Cold War.

Since that time, assessments of the United States have continued to oscillate sharply, whether expressed in terms of America's extraordinary power and influence or, in warning of its vulnerability and weakness. With the beginning of the 1990s, in the aftermath of the U.S. led defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces and their ouster from Kuwait and the breakup of the Soviet Union, observers of America who only a few years earlier had offered gloomy forecasts now described the U.S. as the lone superpower, not just in military and geopolitical terms, but in the triumph of the American model of market capitalism and liberal democracy.⁵ In the following years, the "Washington consensus" was trumpeted as the only viable course for countries wishing to meet the needs of their people for economic and social development and prosperity.⁶ By the middle of the decade, the notion of overwhelming American primacy across the multiple dimensions by which world power is measured had become a given – not only on the part of those who embraced it, but also by critics who pointed with alarm at this predominance and its implications – and a French foreign minister complained of America's "hyperpower".

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S. – Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 1988/89): 76 and 94-95.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, Vol. 16. (Summer 1989): 3-18.

⁶ E.g., Thomas Friedman's reference to the "golden straitjacket," in his bestseller, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

Especially in the academic world, but not only there, the end of the Cold War and the appearance of a seemingly unipolar era gave rise to proclamations of a “new world order” in which traditional security concerns were increasingly outmoded. The phrase was most notably used by President George H.W. Bush in a March 1991 speech following the success of Operation Desert Storm, but the idea was amplified in post-Cold War discourse among academics, public intellectuals and foreign observers, who emphasized the “new” security issues such as civilian power, development, globalization, disease, the environment, national and cultural identity as the predominant concerns in world affairs. International institutions and global governance became the framework for this discourse. In the meantime, traditional security concerns were increasingly labeled as “old thinking.”

The sobering reality of the 1990s, however, was that power remained very much a matter of life and death. The ability of the UN Security Council to arrive at a common position on the use of force to remove Saddam from Kuwait provided not the harbinger of a new global order, but a rare exception. Instead, ethnic cleansing, civil wars, and the consequences of state failure became brutally apparent in places such as Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, the Congo, and Kosovo. The lesson here and often elsewhere was that the alternative to leadership or involvement by the United States in urgent and deadly crises was not that the UN, other multilateral institutions, or some other powerful state would take the lead in maintaining order, but was more likely to be inaction and often tragedy.

Flawed assumptions about global governance were not the only misconception. At the same time, insufficient attention was paid to a different kind of gathering threat. Evidence of radical jihadist terrorism was increasingly apparent, but was not accorded the priority it deserved. Ominous signs were there: in the 1993 bombing at the World Trade Center, the 1996

suicide truck bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Mozambique, the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, and in Osama bin Laden's 1996 declaration of *jihad* against the Americans and the "Judeo-Crusader alliance."⁷ Much more common as an expression of the decade's optimism about globalization was the sentiment voiced by President Bill Clinton, "In the new century, liberty will be spread by cell phone and cable modem."⁸

The shock of the September 11, 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon defined much of the following decade for the United States, but – yet again – in successively contradictory terms. The ouster of the Taliban regime within months of the attack, followed less than eighteen months later by the invasion of Iraq and the quick defeat and demise of Saddam Hussein gave rise to awed statements about America's unparalleled power. The widely quoted words of Paul Kennedy, "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing", typified these sentiments.⁹

Not everyone shared Kennedy's (then) adulation, and the Bush administration itself became a lightning rod for criticism, even before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Admiring – or disparaging – depictions of the United States as at the pinnacle of world power did not outlast the decade. Growing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, rising American and allied casualties, and failure to cope effectively with the Katrina hurricane in August 2005 triggered an abrupt shift in perceptions of America. Suddenly, the U.S. no longer seemed omnipotent. In 2007 real estate bubble burst, and in September 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, a full-blown financial crisis erupted. Instead of being seen as the "hyperpower," America was increasingly depicted in almost dire terms. Commentators and pundits shifted rapidly, no longer

⁷ Declaration of Jihad, August 23, 1996, in Bruce Lawrence (ed.) *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (NY: Verso, 2005), pp. 23-30.

⁸ Quoted by Fouad Ajami, "The New Faith," *Saisphere*, alumni magazine of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC 2000, and p. 13.

portraying America as uniquely dominant and powerful, but instead vulnerable and imperiled. As an example of this volatility, Eric Edelman has pointed to the sharp contrast between the 2004 report of the National Intelligence Council, *Mapping the Global Future 2020*, which saw unipolarity as likely to remain a persistent feature in world affairs, and the 2008 publication, *Global Trends 2025*, which forecast a quite different global multipolar system.¹⁰

The 2008 Obama election victory, which was widely embraced abroad, did not serve to stem the flood of pessimistic assessments. These intensified after large Democratic losses in the 2010 midterm election, the worst since 1938. A leading political journalist declared that, “In this election you can glimpse the brutish future of American politics,”¹¹ while a domestic critic expressed the mood on the left by proclaiming, “What this election suggests to me is that the United States may have finally lost its ability to adapt politically to the systemic crises that it has periodically faced.”¹²

These expressions of extraordinary primacy and radical decline juxtapose two forms of hyperbole – uncritical admiration and awe during the earlier part of the decade and in exaggerated depictions of weakness and incapacity in the latter part, and both embodied the pervasive tendency toward overreaction to immediate events.

What then can we say about the future of the American era at home and abroad that has any hope of being more reliable than so many of these short-lived predictions and assessments of recent decades? A requirement here is to differentiate between two broadly different types of foreign threat. The first of these concerns the rise of others and the resultant diffusion of

⁹ “The Eagle Has Landed,” *Financial Times* (London), February 1, 2002.

¹⁰ See Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America’s Contested Primacy* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary assessments, Washington, DC, 2010), pp. 2-3.

¹¹ Thomas B. Edsall, “Limited War: How the Age of Austerity Will Remake American Politics,” *The New Republic*, October 20, 2010.

¹² John B. Judis, “Here Comes Our Lost Generation: The Consequences of a Richly Deserved Defeat,” *The New Republic Daily*, November 3, 2010. www.tnr.com/artcile/politics/78890/a-lostgeneration.

American power in a world where more and more states matter. A second type of challenge is more direct. It concerns threats from hostile states or from nonstate actors such as al-Qaeda.

In terms of the first of these challenges, there have been subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the international distribution of power. One of these changes is a weakening in the standing of America's principal allies among the market democracies, as Europe and Japan have lagged in their economic performance, share of world output, and military capabilities. Meanwhile, other regional states have acquired increased power and prominence, as measured by their growing economic weight and geopolitical presence, and are less inclined to follow America's lead. The rise of China is central, but other developing countries are increasing in importance. For example, the contrary stance taken by Brazil and Turkey on the Iranian nuclear issue, not just in opposition to the American-led call for sanctions, but to the position of all five permanent members of the UN Security Council is likely to foreshadow the unwieldy and disparate character of 21st century international politics. As a recent illustration, all four of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) abstained on the UNSC resolution authorizing a no fly zone in Libya. The implication for the United States is that compared to the unipolar status it possessed in the years after the end of the Cold War, it now faces a more diverse and fragmented international environment.

As for more direct threats, terrorism, cyber attacks, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and radiological) are likely to pose a growing danger to the United States and to its interests and allies. Since the end of the Cold War, the importance of strategic nuclear weapons has been widely discounted or even treated as a relic of an earlier era. Yet depictions of "nuclear zero" as an ultimate and even achievable goal are manifestly unrealistic. This is not only a matter of Russia's evolving

modernization of its seriously diminished arsenal, but of China as well. In addition, North Korea, Iran and possibly others possess their own active nuclear programs, and concerns about control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal cannot be discounted.

In assessing foreign threats, the nature of American power needs to be taken into account, especially in order to avoid measuring current strength against an imaginary yardstick of past dominance. It is tempting to point to any number of areas (trade, economic policy, sanctions, and the environment) in order to argue that failure to prevail provides proof of decline, but despite its superpower status during the past seven decades, there was never anything inevitable about America's ability to determine outcomes. Power is not identical with influence, and even at the very height of its predominance, the ability of the U.S. to achieve desired results was never a foregone conclusion.

Consider a number of the serious reversals experienced by the U.S. since the end of World War II. These included the Chinese Communist victory over the American-backed Nationalists in 1949, the Korean War (1950-53) ending in a stalemate with 37,000 American dead, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and failure of the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, the October 1973 Arab oil embargo and its aftermath, the Vietnam War with 58,000 Americans killed and the Communist North Vietnamese defeat of South Vietnam in 1975, the Iran Revolution in 1979 and subsequent seizure of the U.S. Embassy and its hostages, the 1983 suicide bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, the "Blackhawk Down" incident in Somalia in October 1993, and on September 11, 2001, the most deadly attack on the U.S. in its history. In addition, even among America's closest allies there were continuing disputes over economic, trade and military matters. Yet each of these events occurred during the years in which American power was supposedly at its zenith. Keeping these experiences in mind can be useful in order to avoid

unrealistic expectations about international primacy and exaggerated pessimism in reaction to contemporary problems.

We should also be wary of condescending attitudes about the United States itself, its political system, politics, and people. The cut and thrust of partisan debate is nothing new and can be found even in bitter arguments among the founders. And while serious errors of policy and delays in coming to grips with domestic and foreign crises are nothing new, the long-term record of the United States is one of remarkable resilience, adaptation, and crisis response. Hence the sweeping diatribes delivered periodically by critics need to be met with considerable skepticism. As an example, no less a figure than George Kennan, the father of the containment doctrine (though for much of the postwar era a disgruntled critic of American policy at home and abroad), could write in 1984 that the United States was, “a politically unsuccessful and tragic country...always vulnerable to abuse and harassment at the hands of the dominant forces of the moment.”¹³ And current illustrations can be found in the condescending comment by Stephen Walt of Harvard that “We are a nation of swaggering sheep,”¹⁴ and in the sweeping assertion by Zbigniew Brzezinski that, “Most Americans are close to total ignorance about the world. They are ignorant.”¹⁵

The Rise of Others

Descriptions of the world as becoming multipolar are by no means new. President Richard Nixon, in his *Time* magazine “Man of the Year” interview of January 1972, proclaimed the emergence of a balance among five principal centers of power: the United States, Soviet

¹³ Quoted in Mark Atwood Lawrence, “The Heart of a Realist,” *New York Times Book Review*, July 25, 2010.

¹⁴ Stephen M. Walt, “A Nation of Swaggering Sheep,” *Foreignpolicy.com*, January 4, 2010.

¹⁵ “Ex-National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski: Spokespersons of US Right ‘In Most Cases Stunningly Ignorant’,” *Spiegel Online* (Berlin), December 6, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,733079,00.html>, accessed December 7, 2010.

Union, China, Western Europe, and Japan.¹⁶ This conception, widely cited at the time, proved to be premature. Only the U.S. and USSR were military superpowers, and among the five power centers cited, only the U.S. was both a military and economic superpower. Even so, the array of actors and agendas had already expanded from what it had been at the close of World War II and in the 1950s.

With the end of the Cold War, many authors and pundits, especially academic and political realists, predicted that the collapse of the Soviet Union and a period of unipolarity, with the United States as the sole superpower, would trigger balancing behavior.¹⁷ Yet despite these expectations, real balancing did not take place. NATO survived and expanded, and the EU failed to distance itself from the United States let alone emerge as a strategic competitor.¹⁸

To be sure, four decades after Nixon's pronouncement about multipolarity, and more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the cast of relevant regional and world powers has greatly expanded. This can be seen not only in data about trade and economic growth, but explicitly in the enlargement of the G-7 group of advanced economies to become G-8 and then the G-20, adding to its membership Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, the EU, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey. There is a certain mystique about these states, in particular, the "BRICS" (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and the expanding role they are playing in world affairs. Many liberal internationalist thinkers claim that this heralds a transition in which the U.S. role will be much diminished, to be replaced by a multiplicity of actors, most prominently China, operating through transformed international

¹⁶ *Time* magazine, January 3, 1972.

¹⁷ E.g., Kenneth Waltz argued that friends as well as foes would seek to balance against the international predominance of the United States, in "Globalization and Governance," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1999). In addition, numerous authors identified or predicted "soft-balancing", while others persuasively rebutted the concept.

institutions reshaped to give them much more influence and the institutions themselves much greater authority in a globalized world. For example, the Princeton political scientist, John Ikenberry, who had previously written that “the most powerful and rich countries in the world are now all democracies” (somehow managing to overlook the reality of authoritarianism in China and Russia),¹⁹ now sees the BRICS working with the United States and Europe to revise, adapt and strengthen the institutions of global governance.

Notwithstanding the belief that, “... [T]he continuing rise of economic and security interdependence is creating new incentives for the expansion of institutionalized cooperation,”²⁰ the actual performance of the BRICS suggests not a benign, cooperative orientation toward strengthening global governance, but a far more self-interested and less collaborative set of attitudes and policies across a wide range of economic, political and security issues. Most notably, China has had a deplorable record. It has supported the brutal regime in the Sudan, and it has obstructed or minimized international efforts to address proliferation and human rights issues in North Korea, Zimbabwe, Burma, Iran, and elsewhere. Citing its opposition to anything intruding on national sovereignty, China has had no qualms about reaching energy and trade deals with notorious regimes, even when they were the target of agreed upon international sanctions. Moreover, China has pursued hard-headed mercantilist policies in trade and investment, manipulating the value of its currency by holding the *yuan* at artificially low levels in order to promote exports. It has proved predatory in its pursuit of energy and raw materials, failed to enforce intellectual property agreements, withheld key raw material exports as a

¹⁸ For example, Charles Kupchan had proclaimed that NATO “is soon to be defunct.” See “The Waning Days of the Atlantic Alliance,” in Bertel Heurlin and Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, eds., *Challenges and Capabilities: NATO in the 21st Century* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2003), p. 25.

¹⁹ G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal International Theory in the Wake of 9/11 and American Unipolarity,” Paper prepared for seminar on “IR Theory, Unipolarity and September 11th – Five Years On,” NUPI, Oslo, Norway, 3-4 February 2006, http://www.princeton.edu/~gji3/Microsoft_Word_-_Ikenberry-Liberal-International-Theory-in-the-Wake-of-911-and-American-unipolarity-Oslo-word%20doc.pdf, accessed November 25, 2010.

political weapons (rare earths for Japan), and broken the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to advance its own interests.

The U.S. role thus remains unique. It has been the world's principal supporter of global governance and by the part it has played in promoting a liberal trading and monetary order, in upholding freedom of the seas, in creating and maintaining institutions, and in sustaining regional security. No country or organization is emerging to play a comparable role, and none is likely to do so in the foreseeable future. Hence the consequences of a lessened American presence or even outright disengagement would mean not that other countries would become more engaged, but that shared forms of world order would be more likely to weaken.

The Rise of China

Arguments about American decline inevitably rest in large part on assumptions about the rise of China. Observers marvel at its extraordinary economic dynamism, formidable export-led growth, and massive modernization and development projects. They are awed with China's sheer size, appetite for resources, ruthless competitive behavior, growing geopolitical influence, and potential to surpass the United States as the world's leading power. Illustratively, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson depicts the PRC's momentum and the trajectory for its implicitly inevitable rise as bringing the "end of 500 years of Western predominance."²¹

Yet any assessment of China needs to be made with care, and some of the foreboding bears an uncanny resemblance to worries about Japan a mere two decades ago. At the end of the 1980s, Akio Morita, a co-founder of Sony, and Shintaro Ishihara, a leading Japanese politician, authored a widely circulated book entitled, *The Japan That Can Say No*. In it, Morita asserted, "We are going to have a totally new configuration in the balance of power in the world," and

²⁰ Ikenberry, "A Crisis of Global Governance?" *Current History*, November 2010: 315-321, at 321.

²¹ Niall Ferguson, "In China's Orbit," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20-21, 2010.

Ishihara observed, “There is no hope for the U.S.”²² Indeed, as recently as 1993, Samuel Huntington expressed alarm, writing that “Japanese strategy is a strategy of economic warfare”²³ Granted, China today is far more formidable than was Japan, but it remains essential to assess China’s vulnerabilities as well as its impressive strengths. These vulnerabilities are both internal, in social, economic and political terms, and external, as China’s neighbors develop increased qualms about what was supposed to be its “peaceful rise”.²⁴

China has been the subject of much uncritical observation, while in reality Beijing faces a host of serious problems that it will need to overcome, and for which the solutions are difficult or uncertain. These include the likelihood that the economic model of export led growth cannot be sustained indefinitely, increasing raw material costs, demands for higher wages, pressures for revaluation of the *yuan*, and widening foreign resentments over the PRC’s predatory and mercantilist behavior. While China’s economic growth rate has been very impressive, its total GDP of \$5 trillion remains only slightly more than one-third of the figure for the United States of nearly \$15 trillion.

China’s extraordinary growth has taken place with enormous damage to its environment, as evident in severe pollution of the air, ground water, and food chain. Banks hold a large number of bad loans, and an enormous commercial and residential real estate bubble carries the potential for future financial disruption. China lacks an adequate social safety network, and during the coming 10 to 15 years, China also faces a major demographic problem. Thanks to its one child policy, China’s population is expected to peak near 1.4 billion and then enter what a

²² Quoted from Flora Lewis, “Foreign Affairs: Japan’s Looking Glass,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1989.

²³ The quote and the warnings about rising Japanese influence are from Samuel H. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993): 68-83 at 75-80.

²⁴ The idea was described by then Chinese premier Wen Jiabao in a speech at Harvard in December 2003. See, e.g., Zheng Bijian, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (Sep. - Oct., 2005), pp. 18-24.

leading demographer cites as an era of “prolonged, even indefinite, population decline and a period of accelerated ageing.”²⁵

Higher education is also a realm in which China’s emergence has been widely touted but overstated. Despite enormous expansion of higher education, China does not yet have institutions comparable to the best research universities in the United States, and the problem is exacerbated by widespread problems of quality. Columnists and pundits are fond of citing China’s achievement in annually graduating 600,000 engineering majors compared with a mere 70,000 in America. Yet half of China’s graduates have only associate degrees, and a widely cited 2005 report by the McKinsey Global Institute found that a mere 10 percent of these Chinese engineers were “employable” as contrasted with 81% of American graduates.²⁶ Moreover, as China has ramped up higher education, hundreds of thousands of recent college graduates are unable to find jobs that meet their expectations.²⁷

Another misleading comparison can be found in a widely publicized study of international test scores for 15-year old students in reading, math, and science. The report issued in December 2010 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranked students from Shanghai number one in all three fields. By contrast, the United States ranked 17th in reading, 31st in math, and 23rd in sciences. The results triggered an outpouring of soul-searching about America’s performance.²⁸ What was missing from most of these alarms was recognition that the US results were based on a random selection of schools from across the country, whereas Chinese data were for its richest, most modern, and most developed city, rather

²⁵ Wang Fen, “China’s Population Destiny: The Looming Crisis,” *Current History*, September 2010, p.251.

²⁶ Minxin Pei, “Think Again: Asia’s Rise,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2009, pp. 33-36.

²⁷ Andrew Jacobs, “China’s Army of Graduates Struggles for Jobs,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2010.

²⁸ See, e.g., “U.S. students in middle of global pack: Gauged against others, nation has little to show for school reform efforts,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2010, p. A4. Only in the 11th paragraph of the story, did the *Post* note that the Shanghai and Hong Kong results should not be interpreted as representative of China as a whole.

than for China as a whole, where the majority of the population remains rural and with a far lower standard of living and education.

Finally, can the political model of authoritarian rule by the Communist Party be sustained, especially as China's population becomes more educated and increases its access to independent sources of information? Widespread official corruption is a source of growing resentment. An economic crisis could trigger serious political unrest, and the legitimacy of Communist Party rule could be shaken. In the 1990s, the *Falun Gong* movement, based on a combination of graceful physical exercises and peaceful protest, gained some 70 million adherents around the country (a figure larger than the 65 million membership of the Communist Party). In reaction, the regime took draconian steps against the movement, with pervasive spying, forceful suppression of its protests, and arrests and killings of its leaders. Though *Falun Gong* has been largely suppressed, public resentment over government and police abuses, land seizures, and local corruption remains significant and reportedly has triggered tens of thousands of disturbances per year.²⁹ As Francis Fukuyama has recently noted, in contrasting China with the U.S., the Chinese political system has no way of holding its rulers to account, adding, "If I had to bet on these two systems, I'd bet on ours."³⁰

China also faces rising problems with nearby countries. Its growing economic might, coupled with rapidly expanding sea power, its aggressive maritime claims in the East China and South China Seas, and an increasingly confrontational diplomatic posture have intensified anxieties among its East- and South-Asian neighbors. As a result, they have both subtly and more openly leaned toward the United States for reassurance and deterrence.

²⁹ See especially Gordon G. Chang. "The Party's Over: China's Endgame," *World Affairs*, March/April 2011.

³⁰ Quoted in Nicholas Wade, "From 'End of History' Author, a Look at the Beginning and Middle," *New York Times*, March 8, 2011.

China's ambitious nuclear missile program has attracted relatively little external attention, even while its previously modest shorter range and strategic systems are rapidly expanding beyond any concept of minimal deterrence. The Second Artillery Division (responsible for strategic missile forces) has reportedly constructed 3000 miles of underground tunnels in Northern China for the concealment and transport of missiles and nuclear warheads. For a domestic audience Beijing describes these facilities as its "Underground Great Wall," and has shown them on its CCTV television network. In addition, with development of its DF-31A missiles, China is potentially capable of striking large areas of the United States.³¹

As a consequence of China's increasing assertiveness, the American response becomes critical. Throughout the past half century, the U.S. presence has underpinned stability in East Asia. Though there has been no equivalent of an Asian NATO, most of the regional security relationships with Washington have been on a bilateral basis. These have been both formal, as with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, as well as ad hoc with other East and Southeast Asian countries. China's neighbors are especially attentive to indications of whether Washington has not only the capacity, but the will to maintain its East Asian role. American support for Asian allies is seen not so much as confronting China as in deterring it. A case in point is freedom of the seas and insistence on freedom of navigation for American vessels through the East China and South China Seas. Conversely, a policy of disengagement and retrenchment would be more likely to lead to disarray, as countries scrambled to mollify Beijing, while Japan and South Korea, might instead opt to develop their own nuclear weapons.

³¹ For an authoritative analysis of China's nuclear capability, see Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2010," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (November-December 2010) 134-141. In addition to being shown on TV, the "Underground Great Wall" has been described in a number of specialized and regional publications, e.g., in the *Ta Kung Pao* daily of Hong Kong, citing the People's Liberation Army's official newsletter, as reported in the *Chosunilbo* (Seoul, South Korea), December 10, 2010, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/12/14/2009121400292.html. Accessed 12/10/10.

Tangible Threats and Shifts in the International Distribution of Power

With the passage of time, the increasing effects of globalization, and the rise of major regional states, it is no surprise that there have been shifts in the international distribution of power. Though in the recent past it seemed likely that Japan and an increasingly integrated European Union would be leading actors, both have encountered difficulties that limit their influence. Indeed, the considerably increased share of world GDP now represented by China and other East Asian countries, has come largely at the expense of the Europeans and Japanese. Meanwhile, the United States has experienced a much smaller erosion in its own relative share of world GDP and production, in both cases still maintaining close to the proportion – about one-fifth, depending on how measured -- that it had accounted for since the 1970s.

The hopes of the post-Cold War era for a benign new world order do not fit the realities of the 21st century. The international environment in which the United States finds itself is one in which there are both stubborn and lethal threats. Proliferation, terrorism, radical Islamism, weapons of mass destruction, uncooperative or hostile regional powers, and cyberwar, are the most serious, though by no means the exclusive dangers to the United States, its national security, and its vital interests. Cooperation and burden sharing with allies remains important, but the capabilities of America's long-standing alliance partners have lessened. In turn, emerging democracies and regional powers such as Brazil, India, Turkey, Indonesia, and South Africa cannot be relied upon to cooperate with the U.S. in the way that Western Europe and Japan did for half a century.

The implications of these dangers and of the limits of allied and multilateral cooperation are two-fold. First, the international environment is one in which threats to the United States cannot be managed by deferring to others. Second, while burden sharing and collaboration with

other countries and institutions can be helpful and even essential, there is no substitute for American engagement and leadership. These realities create a compelling need to maintain international commitments, and while they do not guarantee that policymakers and the public will continue to support such a role, they provide a powerful motivation to do so, even in the face of constrained resources.

America's predominance continues to be vital in terms of its own interests and security, and for the maintenance of international order and stability. The U.S. has rightly been described as the world's principal provider of collective goods.³² The capacity of the United States to sustain its position remains a subject of debate. But America's core problems, especially those of deficit and debt, are manageable provided there is the political will to tackle them. Indeed, in contrast to declinist assessments, the ultimate obstacles are more likely to be ideational than material. Matters of policy, public choice and political will are critical, but there is nothing inherent in society or in the international arena that precludes the United States from playing a leading world role.

³² See especially, Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005). Though in his latest book, Mandelbaum argues that problems of deficit and debt will force retrenchment in foreign and security policy. See *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010).