The Decline of US Power

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The question of whether the United States is in decline has appeared repeatedly since the Vietnam War, the oil shocks of the 1970s, the rise of Japan, the end of the Cold War, the 2008 financial crisis, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the growth of China. The original essay argued that American power was weakening in three areas: military capability, economic leadership, and soft power. That framework remains useful, but decline must be defined carefully. The United States can lose its share of global influence while remaining the most powerful country in several dimensions. It can also experience temporary policy failure without suffering irreversible structural decline. The more accurate argument is that the United States is undergoing relative decline within a more competitive and fragmented international system. Its military reach, economic scale, technological capacity, alliances, universities, currency, and cultural influence remain exceptional, yet the gap between the United States and other powers has narrowed, domestic constraints have intensified, and credibility has been damaged by inconsistent policies (Beckley, 2018).

What Decline Means

Decline can be absolute or relative. Absolute decline occurs when a country's productive capacity, military effectiveness, institutions, or living standards deteriorate in real terms. Relative decline occurs when the country continues to grow but other states grow faster or gain influence. The distinction matters because the United States has not simply become weak. Its economy remains enormous, its military operates globally, the dollar remains central to international finance, and American firms lead in several advanced technologies. At the same time, China's economic and military rise, Europe's efforts at strategic autonomy, India's growth, and the increasing agency of middle powers have reduced the ability of Washington to dictate outcomes. Hegemony is therefore less complete even where American capabilities remain substantial.

The Post-1945 Position

After the Second World War, the United States possessed an extraordinary share of global industrial production, financial resources, and military capacity because competitors had been devastated. It helped build institutions such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and NATO (Ikenberry, 2011). The dollar became the principal reserve currency, while American universities, media, technology, and consumer culture gained global influence. This historical moment created a benchmark that may be impossible for any country to sustain. If decline is measured against the unusual dominance of 1945, then relative decline began as Europe and Japan recovered. Yet recovery by allies did not necessarily weaken the United States; it also created prosperous partners within an American-supported order.

Vietnam and the Limits of Military Power

The original essay identified the Vietnam War as evidence that American military power was less reliable than supporters assumed. Vietnam demonstrated that superior weapons and resources do not guarantee political success. The United States could inflict enormous damage but could not create a stable outcome acceptable to the American public at a sustainable cost. The lesson is not that the military was generally incapable. It is that military force cannot substitute for accurate political understanding, legitimate local institutions, achievable goals, and public support. Later interventions repeated parts of this problem. Afghanistan and Iraq showed that overthrowing a government is easier than constructing a durable political order. These outcomes weakened credibility and generated caution among allies and citizens.

Military Supremacy and Its Constraints

The United States still spends more on defense than any other country and maintains a network of bases, alliances, intelligence capabilities, nuclear forces, satellites, logistics, and advanced weapons. SIPRI reported that the United States remained the largest military spender in 2025 even as its spending fell while expenditure rose rapidly in Europe and Asia (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). Military power is therefore not disappearing, but its strategic environment is becoming harder. China can concentrate resources near its own coast, Russia retains nuclear and regional capabilities, and inexpensive drones, missiles, cyber operations, and precision weapons can impose costs on advanced forces. The United States must cover multiple regions and missions simultaneously. Fiscal pressure and the industrial capacity required to replace munitions also limit sustained operations.

Alliances as a Source of Power

The original discussion treated reduced allied spending or willingness to join operations as evidence of American decline. Burden-sharing disputes are real, but alliances are also one of the strongest advantages of the United States. NATO, bilateral alliances in Asia, intelligence partnerships, and defense relationships provide bases, interoperability, legitimacy, and shared capacity that competitors struggle to match. Allies do not simply follow Washington; they have domestic politics and interests. Disagreement may signal a more independent partnership rather than the end of American power. However, repeated threats to abandon commitments, unilateral decisions, or demands that allies accept costs without consultation can reduce trust. American influence depends on the belief that agreements will survive changes of administration.

The Economic Dimension

The 2008 financial crisis damaged the image of the United States as an unquestioned model of economic governance. The crisis originated in American financial markets and spread globally, revealing weaknesses in regulation, household debt, securitization, and risk management. It also accelerated debate about alternative centers of growth. Yet the United States recovered, and the dollar's role was reinforced rather than displaced during many periods of crisis because investors continued seeking dollar assets. The American economy remained the world's largest in nominal terms, with World Bank data placing 2025 GDP above $30 trillion (World Bank, 2026). Economic decline is therefore not a simple story of contraction. It is a story of slower relative growth, inequality, fiscal pressure, infrastructure needs, and competition from China.

Debt and Fiscal Capacity

The United States is a major debtor, as the original essay noted. Federal debt and persistent deficits create long-term risks, especially when interest costs rise and political polarization prevents budgeting reform. However, debt must be evaluated in relation to the government's taxing capacity, economic size, currency, financial markets, and investor confidence. The United States borrows primarily in its own currency and issues the world's most widely held safe assets. This gives it flexibility unavailable to many countries. The danger is not necessarily an immediate inability to pay. It is that rising interest costs crowd out public investment and that repeated political conflict over debt authorization damages confidence. Fiscal power depends on institutions as much as on the debt number itself.

The Dollar and Financial Influence

The dollar remains a major source of structural power because it is widely used for reserves, trade invoicing, borrowing, and financial settlement. American sanctions are powerful partly because banks and companies depend on dollar networks. Countries are exploring alternatives, and the renminbi has gained importance in some transactions, but replacing the dollar requires deep, liquid, open, and trusted financial markets. The United States benefits from rule of law, Treasury-market scale, and network effects. Misusing financial sanctions or undermining domestic institutional credibility could encourage diversification. Dollar dominance is therefore durable but not unconditional.

Technology and Innovation

American power is supported by research universities, venture capital, biotechnology, aerospace, software, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and leading firms. Immigration has historically strengthened innovation by attracting students, scientists, and entrepreneurs. Competitors have developed major capabilities, and manufacturing concentration abroad has exposed supply-chain vulnerabilities. China leads or competes strongly in areas such as electric vehicles, batteries, telecommunications equipment, solar manufacturing, and industrial scale. The future balance will depend not only on invention but on education, infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, and the ability to translate research into broad productivity. Policies that reduce scientific openness or discourage talent can weaken an advantage that cannot be replaced quickly.

Industrial Capacity and Supply Chains

The decline of parts of American manufacturing contributed to regional inequality and political dissatisfaction. Offshoring reduced costs and increased corporate efficiency, but it also created dependence in critical goods and weakened certain communities. Recent industrial policies seek to rebuild semiconductor, clean-energy, defense, and infrastructure capacity. Reindustrialization is difficult because it requires skilled labor, permitting, supplier networks, and sustained investment rather than one subsidy. A strong service and technology economy does not require producing everything domestically, but national power depends on the ability to manufacture essential goods during crisis. Economic security is now treated as part of geopolitical strategy.

Domestic Inequality and Social Cohesion

Power abroad is connected to legitimacy and capacity at home. High inequality, uneven access to healthcare and education, racial injustice, regional economic divergence, and declining trust in institutions can weaken national resilience. A country may possess advanced weapons and wealthy firms while struggling to agree on infrastructure, public health, or electoral legitimacy. Domestic polarization makes long-term strategy difficult because allies and competitors cannot predict whether commitments will continue. The original essay focused on unemployment and retirement pressures after the financial crisis. Current concerns also include housing affordability, automation, debt, demographic change, and political violence. Renewal requires investment in citizens, not only instruments of foreign policy.

Soft Power

Soft power is the ability to influence through attraction, legitimacy, culture, values, and institutions rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2015). American music, film, universities, technology, language, philanthropy, and civil society have broad appeal. The country’s constitutional ideals and history of immigration also remain influential. However, soft power is damaged when actions contradict stated principles. Torture, civilian casualties, racial injustice, support for authoritarian partners, restrictions on migration, and disregard for international law can weaken credibility. The original essay cited drone strikes in Pakistan as a source of anti-American opinion. That example illustrates a broader pattern: tactical operations may produce strategic resentment when affected populations view them as violations of sovereignty or sources of civilian harm.

Public Opinion and Credibility

Global opinion is not fixed. It changes with administrations, wars, economic assistance, cultural contact, and comparisons with alternatives. In 2026, reporting on multinational surveys indicated that views of China had surpassed views of the United States in many countries, reflecting dissatisfaction with American policy as well as China's economic outreach. Such surveys are not complete measures of power, but they reveal reputational costs. Credibility depends on consistency. If the United States invokes sovereignty in one crisis and ignores it in another, audiences notice. Soft power cannot be sustained through communication campaigns alone; it follows policy and behavior.

China as the Principal Competitor

China is the most significant long-term competitor because it combines economic scale, manufacturing, technology, trade, military modernization, and diplomatic reach. Its Belt and Road projects, market size, and infrastructure financing create influence across the Global South. Yet China also faces aging, property debt, slower growth, political control, environmental pressures, and distrust among neighbors. The rise of China does not automatically produce a complete transfer of hegemony. The international system may become bipolar in some areas, multipolar in others, and institutionally fragmented. American strategy will be stronger if it invests domestically and cooperates with partners rather than assuming that every Chinese gain is a direct American loss.

Russia and the Return of Hard-Power Competition

Russia's military actions and nuclear arsenal show that economic size alone does not determine geopolitical influence. The United States and its allies have used sanctions, military assistance, intelligence, and diplomacy to respond to Russian aggression, but the costs and risks are substantial. Russia's relationships with China, Iran, and other states complicate efforts to isolate it. These developments challenge the post-Cold War expectation that military conflict among major powers would recede. The United States remains central to European security, which demonstrates continuing power, while the need for allied rearmament shows that Washington cannot carry every burden indefinitely.

Middle Powers and a More Negotiated Order

Countries such as India, Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates increasingly pursue flexible relationships rather than align fully with one bloc. They may cooperate with the United States on security, China on trade, and Russia on energy. This behavior reduces the effectiveness of hegemonic pressure. It also means that international outcomes require negotiation with states that possess regional influence and alternatives. American leadership must adapt from commanding a hierarchy toward building coalitions around specific problems. The ability to listen and compromise becomes a form of power.

International Institutions

The United States helped create institutions that amplified its influence, but frustration with representation and unequal rule enforcement has encouraged demands for reform. Emerging economies seek greater voice in financial institutions, while alternative organizations and development banks have expanded. Withdrawing from institutions may save short-term costs but allows others to shape standards. Continued leadership requires supporting rules even when they constrain American choices. Hegemony based only on exemption is difficult to legitimate.

Climate, Health, and Nontraditional Power

Global influence increasingly depends on the ability to address climate change, pandemics, cyber threats, energy transition, migration, and artificial intelligence. Military force cannot solve these problems. Scientific capacity, financing, public-health institutions, diplomacy, and reliable cooperation are essential. The United States possesses major resources but has sometimes responded inconsistently to collective challenges. Leadership is demonstrated by providing public goods, not only deterring enemies. Failure in nontraditional domains can accelerate perceptions of decline even when conventional military power remains strong.

Is the United States in Decline?

The evidence supports a qualified answer. The United States has declined relative to the unusually dominant position it held after 1945 and briefly after the Soviet Union collapsed (Wohlforth, 1999). It faces stronger competitors, less obedient partners, domestic polarization, fiscal constraints, and damage to soft power. Military superiority has not guaranteed political success, and economic leadership is shared more widely. Yet the United States retains unmatched combinations of wealth, alliances, military reach, innovation, finance, resources, geography, and cultural influence. Decline is therefore neither imaginary nor complete. It is a warning that advantages can erode when institutions and partnerships are neglected.

Conditions for Renewal

American power can be renewed through domestic investment, credible institutions, sustainable fiscal policy, education, research, infrastructure, immigration, manufacturing capacity, and a fairer distribution of opportunity. Internationally, renewal requires dependable alliances, restraint in the use of force, respect for law, support for institutions, and policy consistent with democratic values. Attempts to restore an earlier era of uncontested dominance are likely to fail because the world has changed. Leadership in a plural system will depend on the ability to organize cooperation and provide benefits that others value.

Conclusion

The original essay was correct to examine American decline through military, economic, and soft-power dimensions. Vietnam, later wars, the 2008 crisis, debt, drone strikes, and weakening global attitudes revealed real limits. Since then, China's rise, renewed great-power competition, and the assertiveness of middle powers have further reduced unilateral American freedom. Nevertheless, the United States remains a leading global power rather than a former one. Its challenge is relative decline and internal erosion, not disappearance. Whether decline becomes irreversible will depend on domestic renewal, strategic discipline, alliance management, and the credibility of its values. The future is likely to involve less hegemony and more negotiated leadership.

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