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The Rise and Fall and Rise of Declinism

Posted on [May 29, 2008](#) by [Arthur Stein](#)

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The conversation about BRICSAM takes place against the backdrop of assessments about the international system. And the problem is that there is an ever-present cottage industry extrapolating from short terms dynamics to make sweeping generalizations about the course of the history, and it is typically wrong. Put differently, we are experiencing yet another wave of declinism.

In the late 1950s, the fear was that US was being overtaken by the Soviet Union. Sputnik signaled the inadequacy of American science and high Soviet growth rates (contrasted with anemic US growth and three Eisenhower recessions) would eventually mean that Soviet GNP would exceed that of the US.

Beginning in 1970 with Herman Kahn's *The emerging Japanese superstate*, Americans were subjected to two decades harangues about the rise of Japan and the danger this constituted, with the high water mark coming with the publication in 1991 of *The coming war with Japan*.

By the late 1980s, the decline of the United States seemed assured. Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000*, published in 1987, became a surprise bestseller in the election year of 1988 and even entered the election conversation. Sam Huntington characterized 1988 as "the zenith of [the US's] fifth wave of declinism since the 1950s."

Within a couple of years, the assessment of decline was already dated.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War led to a new short-lived assessment, that many of the problems of international politics were at an end. As Sam Huntington put it, 1989 was the year in which "declinism" was replaced by "endism."

As Japan settled into prolonged stagnation and disappeared as a source of "next-superpower angst,"

books had to be written to explain the failure of the challenge to materialize: *Japan, the system that soured: the rise and fall of the Japanese economic miracle* (1998); *The Japan that never was: explaining the rise and decline of a misunderstood country* (2004).

Those who did not imbibe the triumphalism of the early 1990s, that of the US as the last remaining superpower, predicted that a short-lived unipolarity which would soon be replaced by a coming age of multipolarity. When this did not materialize, international relations scholars swallowed all of their past theoretical insights and argued that US hegemony might be different than past hegemonies and might be stable and long-lasting after all.

By the end of the 1990s, this was even pitched as “The Benevolent Empire” (1998). When US hegemony was conjoined with a renewed assertiveness in the Bush administration, the talk of empire and its beneficial and important roles grew. An American imperium was to be encouraged. Niall Ferguson published *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* in 2003 arguing argument that on balance the British empire was a good thing. When the paperback version was published in 2004 it had a new subtitle and was called *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. If the lessons for the US were not obvious, Ferguson published *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (hard cover, 2004.). He argued that the US should embrace its imperial role: “This book argues not merely that the United States is an empire but that it always has been an empire. Unlike most of the previous authors who have remarked on this, I have no objection in principle to an American empire. Indeed, a part of my argument is that many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule.” But when the book was published in paperback a year later, it too had a new subtitle: *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*. These changing subtitles nicely illustrate the half life of the idea of empire in the US imagination.

The sense of US failure in Iraq and of a US overextension have led to a new round of arguments about decline. The US is now pictured as a less relevant power but the pundocracy disagrees about its challengers and challenges. You can now take your choice.

You can fear China, whose rise has been a subject of concerns since the late 1990s:

Greater China: the next superpower (1995)

China: the next superpower: dilemmas in change and continuity (1998)

China, Inc.: how the rise of the next superpower challenges America and the world (2005)

China's rise in Asia: promises and perils (2005)

China shakes the world: a titan's rise and troubled future and the challenge for America (2006)

China fever: fascination, fear, and the world's next superpower (2007)

And it isn't just its economic and military might which is to be feared, but even its soft power:

Charm offensive: how China's soft power is transforming the world (2007)

But there are others, Donald Rumsfeld's dismissal of old Europe notwithstanding, who see Europe as the next superpower and challenger:

The United States of Europe: the new superpower and the end of American supremacy (2004)

The European dream: how Europe's vision of the future is quietly eclipsing the American dream (2004)

The next superpower?: the rise of Europe and its challenge to the United States (2005)

Why Europe will run the 21st century (2005)

Of course, there are other contestants on the scene –

Think India: the rise of the world's next superpower and what it means for every American (2007)

Of course, these emergent superpowers may become rivals: *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade* (2008). And, of course, it may be that the competition between the US, China, and Europe will hinge on *The Second World* (2008). However it works out, we are told to recognize that we have arrived at *The Post-American World* (2008).

In all fairness, I should note that, the cycles of declinism being what they are and given the debate about America's role, one can always find works that seem off cycle or somewhat discordant. Thus, even as the chorus of empire was getting louder, 2002 was also the year which saw the publication of *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century*. And there have always been those who had their doubts about empire [e.g., *A Republic, Not an Empire* (1999), *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (2000)] or who reminded us that there was a choice: *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (2004).

This brief synopsis of the intellectual waves of the last two decades should leave one with a sense of humility. Prognostications about international politics seem to resemble the assessments we are given “explaining” the daily movements in the stock market. They are “intellectual bubbles,” overblowing and overextrapolating short term trends.

Which brings me to BRICSAM, a diversified portfolio of potential superpower growth stocks. Diversification is a good hedging strategy because there is bound to be a clunker or two in the set. Recall that at the turn of the last century, Argentina had the 5th or 6th largest GNP in the world and seemed to many a sure bet for future superpower status.

So with the humility generated by watching the prognosticariate over past decades and having observed long range patterns and a sense of what determines relative growth, I wonder which of BRICSAM are or soon will be plateauing, stagnating, or even declining, rather than rising.

— Arthur Stein, UCLA

2 THOUGHTS ON "THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF DECLINISM"



Bud Fox

on **May 30, 2008 at 14:43** said:

Nope – you are way off with that.. Wrong on too many levels to count..



asabrisam

on **May 30, 2008 at 15:16** said:

Well a reader doesn't agree with Art's blog post. It would be helpful to get a bit more comment on why (at least some of the reasons) the Reader doesn't agree.

Comments are closed.