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NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Ketan Patel  
✉ ketan.patel@forcegood.org

RECEIVED 15 October 2024  
ACCEPTED 24 July 2025  
PUBLISHED 02 September 2025

CITATION  
Patel K, Hansmeyer C, Desai N and Ajit A  
(2025) American hegemony at a critical  
juncture, lessons from history's great powers.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1511913.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1511913

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# American hegemony at a critical juncture, lessons from history's great powers

Ketan Patel<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Christian Hansmeyer<sup>1,3</sup>, Nandan Desai<sup>4,5</sup> and  
Aditya Ajit<sup>4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent Researcher, London, United Kingdom, <sup>2</sup>Force for Good, Greater Pacific Capital, World Academy of Art and Science, London, United Kingdom, <sup>3</sup>Force for Good, Greater Pacific Capital, London, United Kingdom, <sup>4</sup>Independent Researcher, Mumbai, India, <sup>5</sup>Force for Good, Greater Pacific Capital, Mumbai, India

**Introduction:** At the 2024 election, Americans faced a pivotal choice about their nation's global trajectory, amid intensifying debate over the future of U.S. hegemony. This study investigates whether the United States is experiencing a phase of hegemonic decline, signaling the end of its era as the world's leading great power, or whether its power can persist or even be revitalized.

**Methods:** To evaluate this, we employ a mixed-methods approach. We use quantitative modeling to analyze historical power lifecycles of previous hegemonies, identifying inflection points and estimating the potential end dates of U.S. dominance. In parallel, and qualitative analysis of recurring historical markers of decline – such as strategic overreach, domestic polarization, and eroding global legitimacy – to assess their presence in current U.S. conditions.

**Results:** Our quantitative model projects potential turning points in American global primacy between 2032 and 2067. The qualitative analysis reveals that the United States currently exhibits several key recurring features of great-power decline, including internal division, weakened alliances, reduced moral authority, and challenges from rising powers with competing rule-setting ambitions.

**Discussion:** While the United States maintains significant multidimensional strengths, these findings suggest that it may be transitioning into a phase of relative or systemic decline. This framework offers a foundation for further study into the drivers, agents, and timing of hegemonic transition, as well as how U.S. administrations may shape the durability or erosion of American leadership in the evolving international order.

## KEYWORDS

U.S. hegemony, great power decline, American foreign policy, power lifecycles, international liberal order, world order, geopolitics, systemic change

## Introduction

The 2024 American presidential election occurs at a significant juncture in the evolving trajectory of American power. While elections are a routine mechanism through which the electorate recalibrates national priorities, the outcome of this election comes at a time when Americans are divided on the direction that America should take and increasingly plagued by highly effective sources of misinformation (West, 2024). While the election itself does not determine the fate of American power, it represents a key variable within a larger context of historical, geopolitical, and systemic changes.

A hegemon has three essential attributes, exceptional material and political capacity, which gives them the ability to invent the rules of the game; the will to lead the order and enforce the rules; and, finally, indisputable primacy of social capital in the international system leading to consented followership (Mendes, 2023). America clearly possesses each of these three attributes currently. Its material and political capacity is underpinned by the world's largest economy and capital markets, the most powerful military and the

greatest research and innovation capacity (as measured by R&D spending and the size of its high-tech industry). It leveraged this capacity to create the post-war liberal international order, organized around multilateral institutions, open markets, and liberal political values (Ikenberry, 2011), and further served as the anchor of this order, underpinned by its pre-eminent position in its global institutional architecture (Mearsheimer, 2018; Bacevich, 2021). However, having been the dominant force in geopolitics since the end of the Cold War, American power has been subject to varied and powerful challenges that potentially threaten its continued hegemonic position, and its recent election appears to have led to a dramatic shift in its domestic and international aims and methods.

Power is an essential concept in international relations, referring to the ability of a state or independent actor to influence others and achieve desired outcomes, and is typically understood to be multi-dimensional (Brzezinski, 1997). The common breakdown of power into hard power, the use of coercion (Weber, 1978), and soft power, shaping actions through appeal and attraction (Nye, 2004), can be further broken down into a more comprehensive typology of four types. These include compulsory power, the direct control over others; institutional power, indirect control through institutions; structural power, the positioning of actors within structures, and productive power, the discursive formation of meaning and norms (Barnett and Duvall, 2005).

America's role as global hegemon has been underpinned by strong positions across all four types of power, with compulsory power residing in its military capacity, and its institutional power enshrined in its outsized role across key multilateral institutions such as NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the group of G7 countries. American structural power derives from numerous sources, including among others the US Dollar's role as a global reserve currency (Strange, 1988), control of the international SWIFT payment system (Tooze, 2018), bilateral and multi-lateral security guarantees (Walt, 2017), and more indirectly through US based tech giants in setting technology norms and standards and controlling key layers of global digital infrastructure (DeNardis, 2014). Among the means of productive power, America benefits from the dominant position of Hollywood in global media culture (Nye, 2004), from the role of English as the global lingua franca, in business, science, and diplomacy (Crystal, 2003), and from the pre-eminence of US higher education and academic publishing (Altbach, 2004), among others.

While America may currently be a hegemonic power, it is certainly not the first in history, which is replete with polities and states that dominated large parts of the world known to them at the time. Prior to the emergence of modern nation states driven by the administrative and cultural demands of industrial society beginning in the eighteenth century, all such powers were politically organized as empires (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990). The alternative political units at the time like small city-states or loosely connected feudal kingdoms generally lacked the necessary military strength, economic control, and political stability to project power and influence beyond their borders in a systemic and prolonged way.

It is self-evident that no state can maintain a pre-eminent position indefinitely, and while the circumstances of each state's decline are unique, their trajectories are found to depend on a

series of factors that remain constant across time and geography. International systems dominated by hegemonies are hierarchical in nature and systemic instability tends to increase when a rising challenger approaches parity with an established power, placing strain on the existing international order (Organski, 1958). When subordinate states no longer accept or align with the dominant norms and institutions promoted by the hegemon, its ability to shape international behavior diminishes (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990). Cyclical shifts in material capabilities and the escalating costs of maintaining global leadership contribute to the weakening of hegemonic dominance (Gilpin, 1981), while changes in the capacity to maintain ideological legitimacy and institutional authority across the system are further factors impacting hegemonic decline (Cox, 1987).

Although history does not repeat itself, it rhymes (as Mark Twain is alleged to have said), and such common factors in the decline of past great powers offer potentially important insight into the pressures now facing the United States. Critical current questions for American power therefore include the significance of the rise of other powers particularly China, how internal divisions matter for external power projection, its power in Europe in the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine, the role of periphery states such as Israel in drawing it into economic and military over-reach, the role of its system of enterprise, and the importance of technology superiority in renewing or extending power.

The aim of this research is to provide a historically informed assessment of the future of American power, without forecasting a deterministic outcome. The study's objectives are to (1) estimate prospective inflection points in the trajectory of U.S. hegemonic power through quantitative modeling of historical great powers; (2) identify and interpret structural and behavioral markers of hegemonic weakening, derived from qualitative analysis of relevant historical cases; and (3) evaluate the extent to which present-day U.S. conditions correspond to patterns associated with a decline in power, putting its position as global hegemon at risk, based on a set of common markers of decline that have presaged the fall of leading powers throughout history. Collectively, these objectives integrate empirical modeling, historical interpretation, and theoretical frameworks to assess the durability and direction of American global leadership. The main research questions examined are: what trajectory will American power follow based on historical patterns of the rise and fall of leading powers throughout history; which factors have historically contributed to the decline of great powers; and, how these apply to America today, what their impact on the sustainability of American global power is. The study takes a "top down" approach, identifying the common markers of decline from history and testing these against America's current position, rather than identifying specific challenges facing America today, such as the rise of China as a geopolitical competitor, which in itself is a major topic of analysis and debate, and then seeking to contextualize these challenges with lessons from history. This top-down approach necessitates using a sufficiently large data set to determine comparative power trajectories and identify markers of decline that are common throughout history, rather than a few potentially idiosyncratic specific cases.

The study proceeds in three parts. First, it uses quantitative analysis to model the rise, peak, and decline trajectories of 29 historical great powers, focusing on variables such as territorial

size, duration, and timing of inflection points. This enables the identification of a projected window within which U.S. hegemonic decline is most likely to enter an irreversible phase. Second, it conducts qualitative analysis of a subset of historically comparable cases to extract recurring markers of hegemonic weakening, including internal polarization, military overreach, economic inequality, loss of alliance cohesion, and diminished capacity to set international norms. Third, the study applies these markers to the current U.S. context to evaluate whether its present trajectory reflects a cyclical recalibration or signals a structural transition toward post-hegemonic status.

This study therefore adopts a mixed-methods design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative tools to explore great power dynamics in depth. It draws on [Barnett and Duvall's \(2005\)](#) four-part typology of power—compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive—which provides the conceptual framework for identifying markers of hegemonic decline and situating them within the broader processes of international change. The study is guided by the hypotheses that hegemonic powers follow a broadly cyclical pattern of rise, peak, and decline, and that both internal and external pressures—such as military overreach, economic imbalance, institutional decay, and the emergence of rival powers—shape their longevity. It further hypothesizes that the United States, though distinctive in its form of power projection, is likely to follow a similar trajectory under comparable conditions. The integration of theoretical frameworks, historical patterns, and contemporary developments underpins the study's approach. Theory of hegemonic power, transition, and systemic change informs the approach to the identification of power dynamics and markers of decline; historical data provides the empirical grounding for the recurrence of these patterns; and their application to the United States enables critical evaluation of its current trajectory and future role in the international system. The study thereby advances both an interpretive framework for analyzing hegemonic decline and a predictive model for estimating the potential timing and character of inflection points in American global leadership.

This research contributes to the understanding of power transitions, systemic change, and the decline of hegemons by offering a historically grounded and empirically tested model that accounts for both structure and agency. By analyzing the interplay between historical patterns and present-day variables, the study aims to provide a nuanced perspective on the sustainability of U.S. power and the broader implications for global order in a period of systemic transition.

## Methods

### Quantitative analysis of great powers

#### Research design

##### Type of study

This study employs a quantitative research design, focusing on the historical analysis of leading powers from 600 BC to the present. This is supplemented with qualitative factors to identify potential markers of decline.

#### Rationale for chosen design

Quantitative analysis systematically examines historical trends in empire size, duration, and peak periods, enabling models that project global power trajectories, with empirical data from historical states supporting mathematical models predicting the trajectory of American power. This quantitative approach is predicated on the development of a sufficiently sized dataset of historical states, as opposed to a purely qualitative approach focusing on a more limited number of comparable states from which to draw specific, albeit anecdotal, implications for American power. The quantitative outputs of the study in this case are complemented by qualitative insights that interpret contemporary factors like technology and geopolitics.

#### Research questions and hypotheses

This research examines the potential trajectory that American power might follow based on the patterns of the rise and fall of historical empires; which historical drivers of decline apply today; what global shifts may erode or renew its power;. Its base hypothesis is that American power will likely follow a path similar to the one chartered by historical powers, shaped by internal and external forces.

### Sampling and participants

#### Population and sampling frame

The population for this study comprises 29 large historical states, each controlling more than 1.2 million square miles, accounting for 2% of the world's landmass during their respective peak periods. As previously stated, each of these 29 states was organized politically as an empire, raising questions about their suitability for comparison with America today, given that its status as an empire remains disputed, with strong arguments for ([Ferguson, 2004](#)) and against ([Kagan, 2006](#)). For the purposes of this research however, the question remains irrelevant, given that core behaviors of hegemony—projecting power, creating international systems and managing global order—are not regime-dependent, and hegemonic roles arise from systemic dynamics, not domestic governance ([Gilpin, 1981](#)). Moreover, the fact that American power mirrors or exceeds that of past great powers, makes comparison logical and necessary for theory-building ([Kennedy, 1987](#)).

#### Sampling method

Purposive sampling was employed to select empires based on predefined criteria, including territorial size and global influence, ensuring that only empires significant in terms of territorial extent and geopolitical influence were included, making for an original dataset for analysis.

#### Sample size and criteria for inclusion/exclusion

States that did not meet the minimum size or global influence criteria were excluded to maintain a focus on larger historical powers with comparable global significance. The size threshold of controlling more than 1.2 million square miles was used as a filter to identify historical empires that had a significant and scaled impact on regional and global political structures, without the need to further classify the nature of their hegemonic dominance.

into full, partial, regional, or contested hegemonies. This approach relies on land mass as a proxy for historical power (Aron, 1966; Kennedy, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001; Strange, 1988), while the US has by contrast has most recently exerted its power through a global system characterized by complex interdependencies, market penetration, technological dominance, and institutional rule-setting. This distinction is central to understanding both the nature of its hegemony and the uniqueness of its prospective decline, and is considered at length in the qualitative analysis of this paper.

## Data collection methods

### Research materials

The study draws on historical records and academic research from historians. Data on empire size, duration, and peak influence were sourced from their works, providing the empirical foundation for analysis.

### Procedure for data collection

Data were systematically extracted from published historical records to construct timelines of each great power's rise, peak, and decline. The historical records of the sample of 29 great powers were examined, and specific inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied to create the unique dataset for this study. For each power, the following variables were recorded:

- **Start Year.** The year when the underlying state was founded or began to exercise meaningful control over its territory. This could coincide with a military conquest, political unification, a leader rising to power or a formal declaration of statehood.
- **Peak Year.** The year during which the great power reached its greatest territorial expanse, serving as a critical marker of its power.
- **End Year.** The year when the power ceased to function as a dominant political or territorial entity. This could result from collapse due to internal or external factors, such as invasions, revolutions, regions gaining independence or economic decline.
- **Land Area.** The total size of the controlled land by the great power at its territorial zenith, expressed in millions of square miles. Data for each of these variables were sourced from a combination of historical records, academic databases, and reputable cartographic sources. Where necessary, secondary sources such as books and peer-reviewed articles were used to verify specific dates and territorial sizes. For certain great powers, such as those with fluctuating borders or periods of reconquest, the peak year was determined based on the most stable and well-documented period of control. In cases where the end of the great power was ambiguous due to gradual decline, the year when the great power no longer held meaningful power was selected from the sources available.

The sources of these are available in [Appendix I](#).

### Ethical considerations

No pertinent ethical considerations were identified in this analysis.

## Data analysis, validity and reliability

**(i) Polynomial Modeling of Great Power Lifecycles.** A third-degree polynomial regression model was employed, to analyze the rise, peak, and fall of the powers. This provided a flexible curve capable of capturing the complexities of great power lifecycles, including rapid growth, periods of stability, and eventual decline, balancing flexibility and generalization, and avoiding overfitting while still accurately representing the overall trend of each great power's lifecycle.

The X-axis of the model represents the historical timeline, spanning from 600 BC [capturing the start of the Achaemenid Empire (Briant, 2002)] to 2000 AD, covering over two millennia of history. Each great power's start, peak, and end years were plotted along this axis, allowing capture of the duration of each great power's existence and its relative position in time.

The Y-axis represents the territorial size of the great power, measured in millions of square miles. This metric was chosen as a direct representation of the great power's territorial control and is used as a proxy for political, military, and economic power, with the assumption that territorial expansion generally corresponds to an increase in influence, while contraction signifies a decline in power.

**(ii) Calculation of Great Power Trajectories.** The analysis of great power lifecycles involved dividing each great power's history into two main phases: the rise phase, and the fall phase. These phases represent the period of expansion and the period of contraction, respectively.

**Rise Phase:** The rise phase begins at the great power's founding and extends to its peak territorial control. During this phase, the great power typically expands its territory through military conquest, colonization, diplomacy, or consolidation of existing holdings. In the polynomial model, the rise phase is characterized by a positive slope, with the first derivative indicating the rate of territorial growth. The peak year, determined as the point where the first derivative equals zero, marks the transition from the rise to the fall phase.

**Fall Phase:** The fall phase begins after the peak year and represents the great power's decline. This decline may be gradual or rapid, depending on internal or external factors such as wars, economic stagnation, rebellion, or administrative collapse. The second derivative of the polynomial curve was used to analyze the rate of contraction during this phase. In cases where the great power experienced multiple stages of contraction, such as a temporary loss followed by reconquest, the polynomial model was adjusted to capture these fluctuations.

To enable comparison between great powers with vastly different lifespans, the time axis for each great power was normalized. This was achieved by calculating the total duration of each great power (the difference between its start and end years) and then scaling this duration to a common range. This normalization process allows for direct comparison of the trajectories of great powers that existed for vastly different lengths of time, such as the relatively short-lived Macedonian Empire vs. the long-lived Roman Empire.

**(iii) Grouping and Comparative Analysis of Great Powers.** To facilitate a more structured comparative analysis, the 29 great powers were grouped into two main categories based on their size and historical context. Firstly, in the Largest Empires group, great powers with the largest territorial holdings, such as the



British, Mongol, and Russian Empires were included. Secondly, the Modern Industrial-Age Empires group includes great powers that emerged during the Industrial Revolution or later, such as the British, Russian, Japanese, and Portuguese Empires.

The comparison between these two groups was aimed at highlighting differences in the strategies and challenges associated with empire-building in different historical eras. Average rise and fall trajectories were calculated for each group by averaging the polynomial coefficients for each great power within the group.

**(iv) Sensitivity Analysis.** To ensure the robustness of the polynomial model, a sensitivity analysis was conducted by introducing variations of 10% in the peak year for each great power, which means the rise to peak year took 10% longer than current estimates, it impacted the fall for the US power to up to 24 years earlier than currently projected. This suggests the need for multiple sensitivities to be run in future work.

This analysis provided additional confidence that the model could generalize across a wide range of historical great powers, even when faced with uncertainties or slight variations in the underlying data. The sensitivity analysis also offered insights into how shifts in key variables—such as a delayed peak year or a slower rate of contraction—could influence the overall trajectory of an great power.

### Steps taken to ensure data validity and reliability

The study relied on peer-reviewed academic sources and well-documented historical records to ensure data validity. Cross-referencing multiple sources of data further enhanced the reliability of the historical trends analyzed. However, the resulting dataset is subject to the criteria set in this study as described above.

## Qualitative analysis of great powers

### Type of study

This part of the study employed a qualitative analysis to identify potential markers of decline. It utilizes a thematic approach to synthesize historical narratives and identify patterns across diverse geopolitical and temporal contexts.

### Rationale for chosen design

Qualitative analysis allows for the identification of specific factors for an great power recognizing its time and context and also allows for the synthesis of these to identify common factors which allow for a qualitative consideration of quantitative results. By integrating qualitative insights with quantitative findings, the study aims to provide a more nuanced examination of the topic.

### Research questions and hypotheses

The main research question for the qualitative analysis is, what are the key factors contributing to the decline of Great Powers? Are these factors consistent across different historical periods and regions? The aim is to identify the key markers of decline (e.g., overextension, economic stagnation, or technological inferiority) and their commonality to discuss their importance to the potential decline in America's power position.

## Sampling and participants

### Population and sampling frame

The same population is used as for the quantitative analysis, comprising 29 large historical great powers, each controlling more than 1.2 million square miles, and each accounting for 2% or more of the world's landmass during their respective peak periods. This ensures consistency and comparability between the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

## Data collection methods

### Research materials

The study draws on historical records and academic research from historians for each of the 29 great powers used in the quantitative analysis utilizing the whole dataset, and also the six largest great powers from the 29, and the six modern industrial age great powers for further qualitative examination.

### Procedure for data collection

Information was systematically extracted from research materials to identify their view of reasons for decline, using a key word search of “decline”, “collapse”, “fall”. The outputs from each were then tabulated for each of the selected great powers. These were then synthesized to produce a list of key markers of decline. Each key marker was then used to search each reference document to determine if they were identified as a factor in the decline of a great power. This provided additional data points for each great power. A final list of markers was compiled for each great power, which allowed for analysis of occurrence of the markers. Qualitative data was collected for each marker for each great power from the reference documents.

### Ethical considerations

No pertinent ethical considerations were identified in this analysis.

## Data analysis, validity and reliability

### Analytical techniques

The analysis employed tabulation, frequency count and a qualitative assessment to group similar themes. Patterns of decline were identified through thematic coding, and these themes were cross-referenced across great powers to identify commonalities and divergences. Reliability was addressed by using consistent coding protocols across all data sets.

## Key assumptions and limitations of the study methods

While actual plots were utilized for great powers where available, these were smoothed for comparison. One limitation is the smoothing of historical data with polynomial trendlines, which may obscure important variations in great power trajectories. This smoothing may underrepresent significant short-term events, such as sudden territorial losses or gains, which could offer critical insights into a great power's dynamics during pivotal periods. The qualitative analysis, focused on thematic patterns allows for the inclusion of sudden events, though these events may still

be underrepresented if not emphasized in the historical sources analyzed. Hence, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the model cannot fully account for sudden external shocks, such as invasions, natural disasters, or political crises, which may cause abrupt changes in a great power's trajectory. For qualitative analysis, these shocks may be inconsistently documented across great powers or disproportionately weighted in the available narratives, which could lead to an uneven emphasis on specific factors. These outlier events are often crucial for understanding the unique circumstances surrounding a great power's rise or fall but are not easily integrated into a generalized model.

Second, using territorial size as a proxy for power may not adequately reflect the influence of modern great powers, which often exert power through economic, diplomatic, or cultural means rather than territorial control. This limitation is particularly relevant for post-industrial powers, where economic dominance or technological innovation often plays a more significant role than physical landmass. A complementary metric—such as economic output, technological advancement, or diplomatic influence—could address this gap in future studies. A broader range of qualitative factors could enhance the depth and scope of the analysis, ensuring that non-territorial influences are better represented. Therefore, the qualitative analysis seeks to address this limitation by recognizing factors beyond territorial size, such as ideological shifts, technological stagnation, or the erosion of social cohesion.

Finally, the model's ability to project future power dynamics is limited by the assumption that historical patterns of rise and fall will continue to apply in a modern, highly interconnected world, with more complex geopolitical dynamics, such as the technological and energy revolutions, which could alter the trajectory of American power in unforeseen ways. The qualitative approach similarly relies on historical narratives that may not fully account for the unique challenges of the twenty-first century. For instance, the qualitative analysis may overemphasize traditional markers of power (e.g., military dominance) at the expense of emergent dynamics such as cyber capabilities, global financial systems, or climate-induced migrations. These modern factors could render historical analogies less applicable or require significant reinterpretation of thematic patterns.

## The context for American power: a world in transition

### American primacy within a changing world context

The modern capitalist world-system is experiencing a structural crisis, marked by systemic shifts and growing instability, which signals not just a decline and collapse but its eventual transformation into an entirely new global order (Wallerstein, 2011). Leadership in the old world order is not a guarantee of leadership in the next. America's current hegemony is multifactorial, and includes an unmatched military capability, with its expenditure constituting nearly 40% of the world's total

defense spending in 2023 [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2024; World Nuclear Association, 2024], which is more than the next nine countries combined. Its economy leads with over a quarter of the world's GDP [International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2024], and its capital markets represent over 50% of global market capitalization (World Federation of Exchanges, 2023). With 10% of the world's arable land, it is a significant player in global food production [Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2022], and it accounts for 8% of world trade exports [World Trade Organization (WTO), 2023]. Additionally, it leads in intellectual property development, producing almost 30% of the world's published scientific papers [National Science Foundation (NSF), 2024]. The United States continues to lead in technological innovation, with companies like Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta and Microsoft (collectively known as "Big Tech") at the forefront of global advancements. Moreover, America's cultural influence through Hollywood film and music, sports, and education while under assault, still holds considerable sway internationally (Schere, 2021).

However, American pre-eminence is being challenged by a series of major disruptions and crises, many of which have historically contributed to great power transitions (Kim, 1992). In addition to conflicts rising by 40% since 2020, populations across the world have had and are facing energy pricing shocks, delocalization, environmental degradation, economic shocks, political fragmentation, rising income inequality, and technology-driven dislocations, which some call a polycrisis (Güney and Kurnaz, 2023). The effects of these crises are widespread among the world's poor and middle-income groups. While poor countries have witnessed lower growth in the last several years and borne the brunt of the pandemic and economic hardships, with structural poverty increases, and border and territorial conflicts remaining unaddressed (Chrimes et al., 2024), the issues of middle income and rich countries have risen too, with rising inequalities within these countries, and large populations stuck in middle income traps, World Bank (2024) leading to increasing civil dissatisfaction and discontent. Populists have capitalized on these issues, creating and exploiting divisions while not yet offering practical solutions [Institute for Global Change (IGC), 2024]. The failure to address these and other longstanding problems through national and international agencies has led to national unrest and violent international conflicts, such as the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza conflict, which risk escalating further [Devji, 2024; Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2023]. The lack of progress on addressing major global issues is evident in the significant achievement gaps for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Achs et al., 2024), despite the apparent availability of sufficient financial resources and potential solutions (Force for Good, 2024).

On the one hand, none of these crises are characterized by the level of conflict witnessed during the world wars, and arguably are magnified by media or propaganda (Hameleers, 2024), and on the other hand are also seen as bearing some of the hallmarks of events that led up to the world wars (UNRIC, 2024). Further, historical transitions between great powers were also marked by radicalization, instability and violence (Schäfer and Stadelmann, 2015), and this suggests that, like those, if the current transition

is to an illiberal world order, it also has the potential to increase violent conflict between illiberal and liberal forces within and across borders amid a global struggle for power (Chivvis, 2011). This threatens making the achievement of global efforts such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and global Net Zero by 2050 impossible.

America's own rise as a global power (and Great Britain's fall) occurred during a similar period of greater disruptions and crises, amid two World Wars, where American intervention in the latter of these two conflicts saw it emerge as a savior alongside allied forces from the Nazi conquest of Europe and Japanese advance in Asia (McKercher, 1999). The current complex crises potentially provide another juncture with the opportunity for leadership to be provided by America, as well as others.

Today, America remains the dominant global power, while the argument as to the extent of its power and whether that is rising or falling remains a point of debate (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023), its dynamism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw it defeat its primary post-war rival, the Soviet Union, and establish what some see as a unipolar world order (Krauthammer, 1990). America's global leadership in the second half of the century, embodied in the Liberal World Order (Barnett, 2021), saw the establishment of the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), all headquartered in America, with significant funding from America, and influenced by American post-war liberal ideals, further solidifying its global leadership. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, auguring what some saw as the emergence of a unipolar world, American power has been tempered by transnational institutions, other states, and its own coalition forming approach, and so is best understood as taking place within a complex interplay of global power structures (Layne, 1993), tempered by domestic pressures (Krauthammer, 2002).

Despite these constraints America's military and economic strength, and soft power, remain significant. However, reflecting the complexity of the current crises affecting the world, and a perceived lack of American leadership to navigate it, this period of hegemony is being challenged, with rising calls for a multipolar world order (Jervis, 2018; Fehl and Thimm, 2019).

## American power in historical context, background to this study's analysis of power

America today undoubtedly stands alongside the Roman, British, Mongol and Persian Empires, among others, as one of history's great powers. Like America today, each of these powers was subject to challenges and disruptions that represented potential and actual threats to their geopolitical positions. How well each state contended with these challenges ultimately determined their success and failure, mapping a trajectory of power that ultimately ends in the loss of great power status, if not the demise of the state itself.

The specifics of the challenges each of these great powers faced are of course unique, as are the circumstances of each power's responses. With two millennia of time elapsed between the rise of the Roman Empire and the demise of the British Empire, it

could hardly be otherwise. But a closer inspection reveals a series of underlying commonalities, rooted in physical geography, historical contingency, and perhaps human nature itself, that make both a quantitative and qualitative comparison between great powers and their trajectories a worthwhile endeavor that provides potential insights into America's current challenges and how it might respond to maintain its position as the world's dominant power.

The qualitative analysis undertaken identifies markers of decline that have accompanied the fall of hegemonic great powers. The extent to which these markers are relevant to America's trajectory today however is a function of the similarities between it and the great powers of the past, i.e., does America share a set of common characteristics with historical great powers, and do the markers identified act upon these characteristics?

While there is no agreed-upon definition of great power, it is characterized by economic strength, military capabilities, and geopolitical influence, all of which enable a state to act independently and shape the geopolitical order of its time (Layne, 1993). The characteristics are argued to be shared by the United States and all historical great powers, with specific instances examined in previous research citing Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, the Ming and Qing Chinese Empires, the Mongol Empire, Rome, Persia, all of which leveraged economic power to sustain military dominance and territorial expansion (Gilpin, 1981; Layne, 1993; Kennedy, 1987).

The extent to which historical great powers can be considered the hegemon of their time varies from case to case. While for example the Roman (Doyle, 1986), British (Kennedy, 1987), and Persian Achaemenid (Briant, 2002) empires are widely recognized to have met the criteria of being hegemon, other great powers such as the Ottoman or the Persian Sassanid empires operated in multipolar or bipolar systems of power distribution with negotiated rule setting, which preclude hegemonic status (Doyle, 1986).

However, each of these states exercised considerable power across all four types of power described by Barnett and Duvall (2005) in their typology of power in international relations. All pre-industrial great powers exercised considerable compulsory power, focused on the coercive extraction of resource and political domination in imperial governance (Doyle, 1986). Such states also used bureaucratic and religious institutions to exercise institutional power structuring relations between the imperial center and the periphery (Kang, 2010; Barkey, 2008), as well exercising structural power through systemic legal, cultural, regional, hierarchies that conditioned what actors could be or do (Wallerstein, 1974). Finally, such states also defined norms of civilization, legitimacy, divinity, and world order, thereby exercising productive power shaping how subjects and outsiders saw themselves (Price, 2020).

While the manifestations of some of these power types looked very different from how they appear in modern, industrial context of American power, their consistent presence across history provides a reasonable basis for comparison between America and other great powers, 29 of which are screened for inclusion in this paper. In addition to the commonalities between America and historical great powers it is also important to recognize the differences between them, such as their distinct geopolitical structures, economic systems, military organization, ideological frameworks, and cultural influence, as these factors can shape their power (McMichael, 1990).

As stated above, virtually all the pre-industrial great powers in history were what are now considered empires (Doyle, 1986). Similarly, there is no agreed upon definition of empire, a term that seems to include very different forms of political organization across time and space, including European colonial empires characterized by emigration, conquest empires of antiquity, and many hybrid forms in between, such as British India under the East India Company (Stern, 2011). The question of what is or is not an empire is further complicated by terminology, with some states that by consensus are clearly considered to be empires shunning the term (such as the Ottoman Empire, which referred to itself as “The Sublime Ottoman State”) (Shaw and Shaw, 1976), with other states embracing the terms largely as a semantic construction rather than an accurate description (such as the Second German Empire, which was essentially a nation-state (Mommensen, 1990).

## The nature of American power compared to history’s great powers

Building on the challenges of defining “empire,” our central question is whether the 29 historical great powers shared defining characteristics among themselves, but not with the United States, and whether those traits meaningfully shaped their trajectories when confronting major challenges. The key feature common to empires, but not necessarily present in great powers, is the exercise of control across a large range of territorial space, often over different cultures and ethnicities from which value is extracted (Doyle, 1986; Burbank and Cooper, 2010).

Given how central territorial control was for those empires, it’s worth asking whether American hegemony ever adopted similar land-acquisition practices. The presence of these land acquisition features in American hegemony is questionable. The United States had flirted with the idea of territorial empire at the turn of the twentieth Century under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt, with the US acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines following the Spanish American War of 1899, but ultimately did not follow up on these gains with other military conquests or acquisitions. American hegemony has instead placed a greater emphasis instead on trade, multinational corporations, investments, while still projecting military power (and using military coercion when needed) (Harman, 2001). At the beginning of World War II, the United States held extensive political and military assets around the world, with ~58 diplomatic missions in various countries [Congressional Research Service (CRS), 2019] along with multiple strategic ports and numerous factories that supported the global supply chain and infrastructure essential for the war effort. Today, this global system is significantly larger, with over 271 diplomatic posts across the world, including embassies, consulates, and missions to international organizations (Lowy Institute, 2024). The United States also operates ~750 military base sites in 80 foreign countries and territories (Cato Institute, 2021), along with partnerships with hundreds of multinational corporations and access to strategic ports, forming a robust infrastructure that supports its economic and defense capabilities. This system

provides an effective source of international political, military and to lesser degree economic power projection without relying on the direct control or formal sovereignty exercised by former empires. While America today may appear to fail to meet the definition of an empire on some accounts (Kagan, 2006), it is functionally similar to one in terms of its power and influence (Bacevich, 2021), and the impairment or weakening of the system of hegemony described above can be expected to have an analogous impact on its power position as a loss of territory would on past imperial powers.

In addition to analyzing the data of all 29 great powers, two subsets that highlight the differences in strategies and challenges associated with empire-building in different historical eras were examined in detail. The first subset of Largest Empires focuses on the great powers with the largest territorial holdings, whose experiences reflect the challenges of managing vast, often multi-ethnic territories and maintaining control of territories over great distances. A second group the Modern Industrial-Age Empires group includes great powers that emerged during the Industrial Revolution or later, such as the British, Russian, Japanese, and Portuguese Empires. These empires share features like bureaucratic centralization, and their use of modern technologies, such as railroads, telegraphs, and advanced military equipment, to facilitate expansion. They also reflect the shift from traditional empire-building strategies to models focused on economic and industrial dominance.

With the exception of the Mongol Empire, which is one of the largest in history, these subsets effectively exclude great powers that precede the Early Modern Age (from c.1450), specifically the empires of antiquity. While many of these great powers were highly successful hegemonies, often for centuries, they were characterized by fundamental governance, economic, military and technological differences to more recent powers that negatively impact the comparability of their trajectory to that of America’s. Ancient empires like Rome were territorially expansive but lacked centralized bureaucratic control, relying on tributary systems and indirect rule, rather than administrative centralization and direct governance (Burbank and Cooper, 2010). Great power expansion was primarily military and tributary and lacked economic integration and industrial control (Pitts and Versluys, 2014). The absence of these and other key structural features shared with America today preclude the usefulness of analyzing a subset focused on or including medieval or ancient great powers (beyond their inclusion in the broad analysis undertaken of the 29 largest powers in history).

Stepping back, if the trajectory of past hegemonic great powers holds for America, what does it imply about the shape of its power projection going forward, noting the important considerations raised above that modify its trajectory?

This study charts great power expansion across time and territory to establish a set of models of the growth and decline of great power status. These models are used to project the potential arc of American power, recognizing the limitations of such projections. Qualitative factors are identified that may influence the quantitative trajectories as a series of key markers of decline provided as part of a qualitative review methods and results below.



## Results

### Quantitative results: charting America power trajectory from the rise and fall of great powers in history

#### Results in overview

The rise and fall of great powers [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2020a,b] follow a consistent pattern (Motyl, 2001) offering critical insights for American power’s future trajectory. Although it is essentially a parabola showing great powers rise, peak, and inevitably decline, with this pattern evolving through pre-industrial, industrial, and information ages (Figure 1), analysis

reveals three distinct forms. The detailed results are provided in Appendix II.

Segmenting the data into three of potentially many, groups, six Industrial Age Empires (Figure 2), six of the largest empires in history (Figure 3), and the 29 largest great powers in history (Figure 4).

The form of the pattern for modern industrial empires—probably most relevant to America’s historic position—is one of great powers that were larger, faced more rivals, fell rapidly, and were shorter-lived than others, and their size was correlated with economic scale. The patterns provide a framework to project the trajectories to determine the shape of America’s future power [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2020a,b].

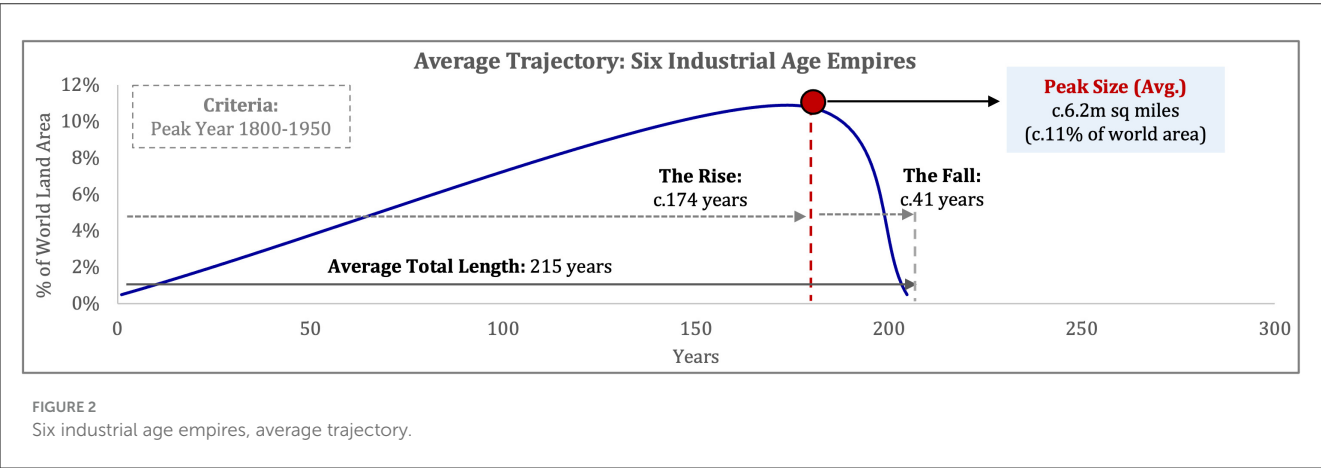
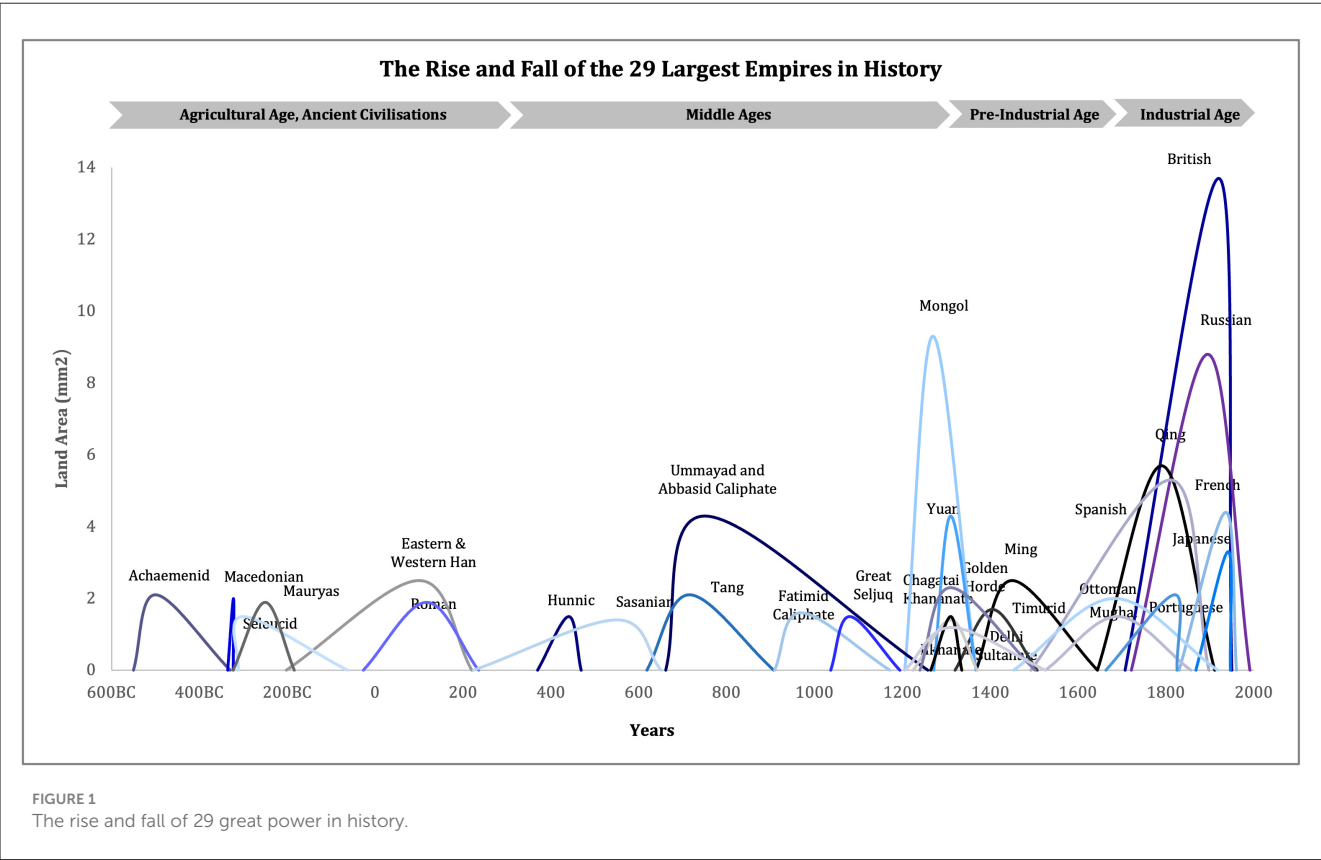




FIGURE 3  
Six largest empires in history, average trajectory.

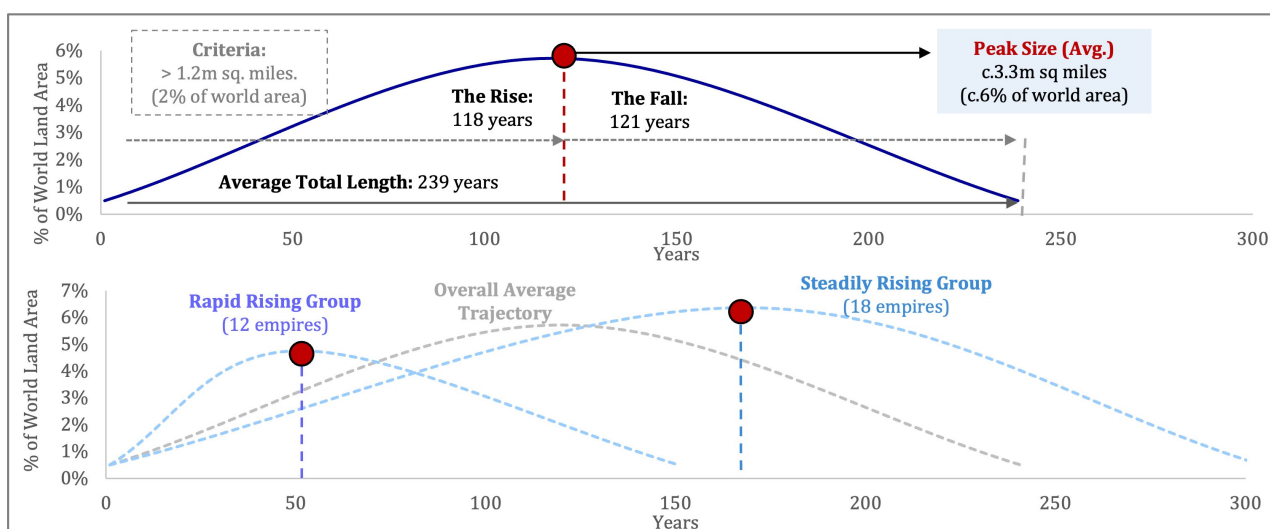


FIGURE 4  
Twenty nine largest empires in history, average trajectory.

Applying the mathematics of these patterns to the US, taking the pivotal starting point as 1898 with the Spanish-American War (Foner, 1972), and the turning point as 2001 (Body-Gendrot, 2012), marked by America's relative economic decline in terms of global economic share, China's entry into the World Trade Organization, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks leading it to prosecuting costly wars and diverting attention from its domestic issues and core rivals. These events underscore the twentieth century as the "American Century" and the twenty-first as the century of change.

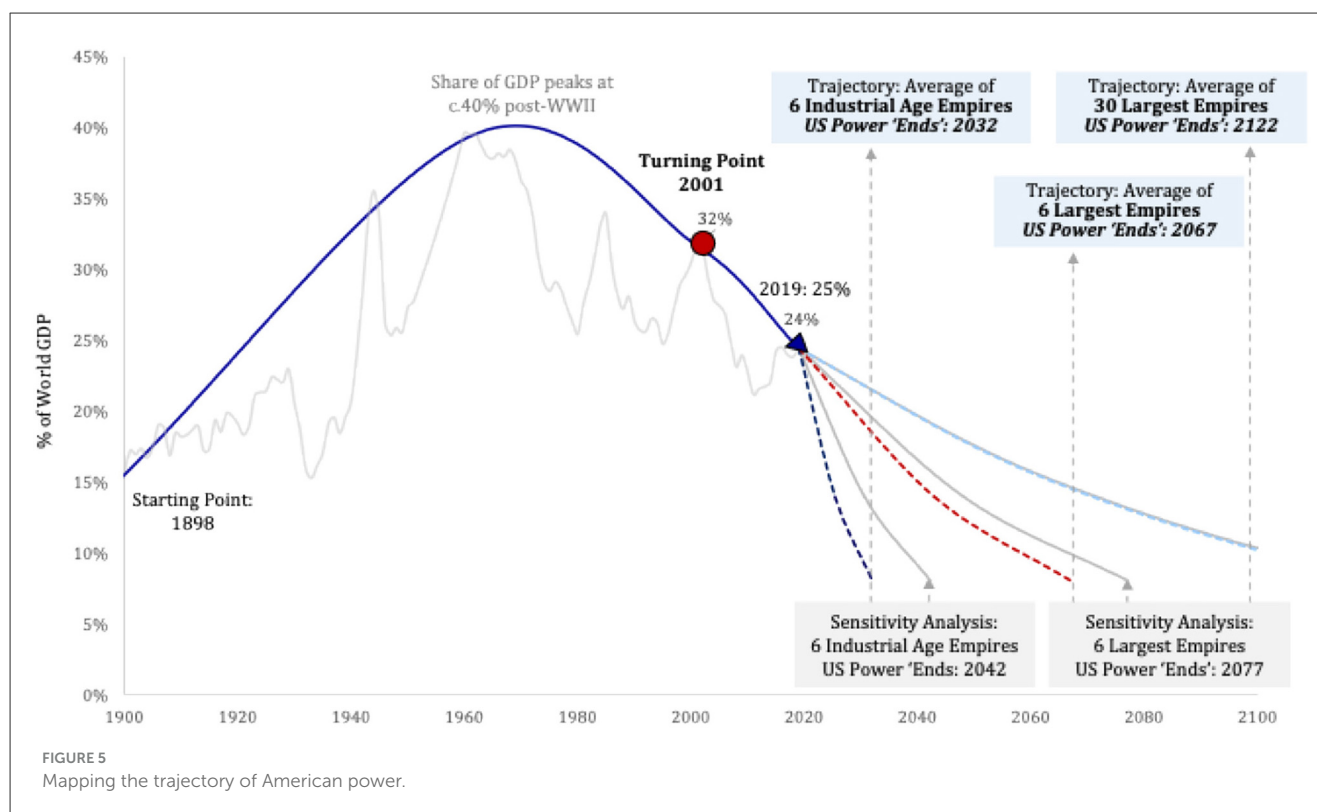
Applying the average trajectories of past great powers to American power yields three potential end dates, marking when America's relative geopolitical influence, measured by its economic might, reverts to its starting level in 1898 (Figure 5):

1. **2032**, based on the patterns of Industrial Age empires, which is most relevant (using a model based on Figure 2).
2. **2067**, according to the trends of the six largest empires, which is also relevant (using a model based on Figure 3).

3. **2122**, following the average curve of the 29 largest empires in history, which is less relevant (using a model based on Figure 4).

These scenarios suggest three trajectories for US power in the twenty-first century, of which the first two, based on recent or large empires, seem the most relevant and signal American dominance extending to a mid-point around 2050. Variations of the dates makes a difference, and if the end of the Spanish Empire is taken to be not the point at which its substantial imperial power had dissolved, c.1836 (Anna, 1983), but taking it to the Spanish-American War of 1898, the average of both the industrial age empires and the largest empires moves out by almost a decade to 2042 and 2077, respectively.

While this is mathematical modeling, history shows that power declines to a pattern. And while the exact shape of America's decline and the end of its status as a great power could vary, the quantitative analysis suggests a decline, with the most likely critical point being around the middle of this century.



However, the qualitative results will provide markers for this decline that can be used to calibrate the analysis.

## Qualitative results: the potential markers influencing the decline of America power based on the fall of great powers in history

### Key historic markers of great power decline

Based on the results of the quantitative analysis of 29 great powers, the qualitative review focused primarily on the six largest powers and the six modern Industrial Age powers from the dataset, the British, Mongol, Soviet, Qing Dynasty, Spanish, Second French Colonial, the Empire of Japanese and the Second Portuguese Empire.<sup>1</sup> The qualitative analysis (Figure 6) reveals that there is a wide range of markers that indicate the decline of Great Power. The review of materials reveals that to some extent, many of these markers are common to every great power. However, guided by historians' views of which markers had a material effect on the

decline and final collapse of these great powers, a specific set of 13 markers was identified.

These 13 markers are as follows:

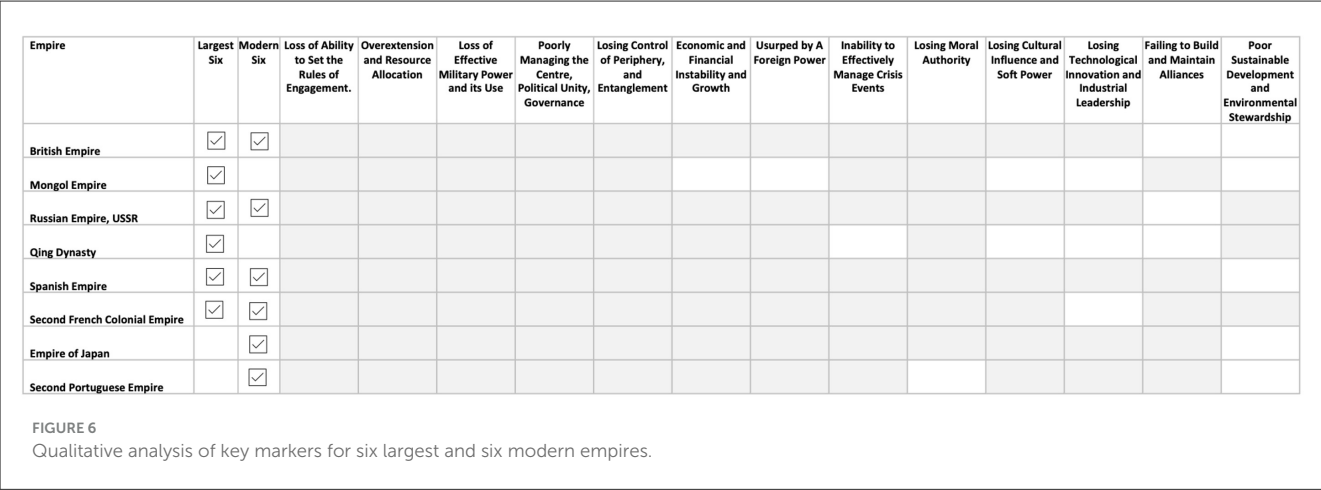
#### (1) *Loss of Ability to Set the Rules of Engagement.*

Great power tends to vanish well before the end of the curve and happens when the power can no longer set the “rules of engagement” for others and this seems to hang on macro forces, local decisions with international consequences and public opinion, among other factors. For the British Empire macro events worked against the maintenance of an empire given the costs of war, international opposition to colonialism, pressure at the UN for the emancipation of the colonies and a shift in the world economy away from the UK's historic strengths (Louis, 1999). In contrast, a misjudgement at home can have a domino effect in unleashing pent-up rage, which precipitated the end of the 276 Qing dynasty following a decision to nationalize the railways with foreign banks, triggering a wave of uprisings, riots, declarations of independence and a revolution (Orlandi et al., 2023). Public indifference to the value of international assets and their management was a drag on the effective exercise of power during the end of the Second French Colonial Empire (Thomas, 2005).

#### (2) *Overextension Straining Resources.*

A recurring theme across all the Great Powers examined was decline due to the overextension of resources and military capabilities, and a declining focus on the home front, which Gibbon (1776–1789) famously highlighted for the Roman Empire. The overextension of the British Empire in South-East Asia during the twentieth century was evident in its struggle to maintain control amidst growing nationalist movements, economic decline, and military setbacks, ultimately weakening its imperial

<sup>1</sup> The Second Portuguese Empire, estimated to start around 1640–1825, focused on the South Atlantic, comprising Brazil and parts of Africa, particularly after the restoration of independence from Spain. The First Portuguese Empire (c. 1415–1822), centred on the Estado da Índia, stretching from East Africa to Japan. Source: Clarence-Smith (1985). The Third Portuguese Empire, 1825–1975: A Study in Economic Imperialism. Manchester University Press.



power (Stockwell, 1988). Similarly, the Mongol Empire faced overextension challenges in the face of an attack while trying to advance on multiple fronts, in Eastern Europe, Syria, and Afghanistan, straining resources and marking a point of decline (Jackson, 1978). The Japanese Empire also experienced overextension during its war with China, where despite initial victories, the commitment of men and resources ultimately overtaxed its military capabilities, hindering broader regional control (Jansen, 2000).

(3) Loss of Effective Military Power and its Use.

Military power is traditionally the critical factor in power acquisition and in countering growing threats that an empire in decline inevitably encounters (Aldrich, 1996). Declining military effectiveness can be a critical factor in curtailing strategic decisions, paralyzing resources, and being outmaneuvered, all markers in the decline of empires. British consideration of potential U.S. military aims became a part of its strategic decision making, such as renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1921-233, which lost it the ability to influence Japan’s entry into World War II (Louis, 1999). Over-confidence led the Soviet Union into a costly and futile war in Afghanistan, which, coupled with domestic divisions, rendered potential military interventions in Eastern Europe impractical by 1989 (Marples, 2004). Crucially, the Japanese Empire struggled to maintain supply lines to distant outposts and prevent the Allies from isolating Japanese forces, shifting the course of the war decisively against Japan (Jansen, 2000).

(4) Poorly Managing the Center, Political Unity, and Governance.

History’s great instances of extreme inequality have led to revolutions, in modern times in France (1789–1799). Russia (1917–1923), and China (1927–1949), accompanied by unparalleled bloodshed and counter-prevailing extremes in terms of political, economic and social systems; 94 million people are estimated to have been killed by Communist regimes since 1917 (Courtois et al., 1999). Economic inequality poses a threat to social cohesion and acts as a force to undermine the credibility of any state, including liberal democracies, making people within and outside question whether it is indeed a system that works for most people, or only a few (Chancel et al., 2022). Policies that promote inclusive growth, improve access to education and healthcare, and address systemic

inequities are therefore believed to be essential ingredients of stability; ensuring that the benefits of economic progress are widely shared reduces social discontent and strengthens the foundations of democracy and a market economy (Pew Research Center, 2024a). Great Powers faltered when they failed to effectively manage the center from where power is administered and resolve divisions with the home state thereby preventing being undermined by civil conflicts (Donnan and Wilson, 1999). Transition of power provides a frequent example of civil conflict, a case in point being The Mongol Empire entering a five-year war between Qublai Khan and his brother that spread across Mongolia and Asia (Jackson, 1978). The federal vs. city or state level authority provides another arena for conflict which was instrumental in The Russian Empire under Gorbachev, who faced increasing political instability and internal divisions, facing off local leaders such as Yeltsin, as well as strikes by Donbas miners that undermined the central administration (Marples, 2004). The Qing Dynasty illustrates the power of counter-elites feeling the system works against them and becoming the leaders of numerous rebellions, including the Taiping Rebellion, which alongside widespread geopolitical setbacks was a critical part in undoing the Qing rule (Orlandi et al., 2023).

(5) Losing Control of the Periphery and Entanglement.

A lack of clarity about the necessity of controlling the periphery while not allowing it to entangle the center is a recurring marker of declining powers. The loss of a critical sphere of influence due to miscalculations in the balance of power between central and peripheral agents was a feature of the Mongol Empire losing its influence over Iran and other southern and western territories, ultimately leading to their secession from the empire (Jackson, 1978). The fall of the U.S.S.R. provides a powerful example of underestimating the turning point when liberalization and power-sharing turned into demands for independence from multiple republics, contributing to its political and economic fragmentation (Marples, 2004). During the Second Portuguese Empire, the British role in protecting Portugal from Napoleon’s invasion, formalized through the 1810 treaties, gave Britain a commanding influence over Portuguese affairs. These treaties regulated trade in favor of British interests by removing restrictions on British commodities and imposing favorable duties (Pedreira,



2000), effectively turning a partner into an exploiter. Transborder relationships and small powers play a critical role in sustaining or undermining Great Powers and can draw them into great wars (Sweijts, 2010). China's initial cooperation with the Mongols ultimately led to its subjugation under the Yuan Dynasty (Atik, 2023).

#### **(6) Economic and Financial Instability and Decline.**

Economic and financial instability have played a significant role in the collapse of multiple empires, with history's Great Powers building systems of enterprise that stretched across the world, with Rome's roads carrying its trade and Britain's roads to sea-routes following suit, both backed by military security, rules and taxes (Ahuja, 2008; MacGeorge, 2007). However, numerous factors undermined these systems and indicated decline. Over-indebtedness faced The British Empire with near bankruptcy after World War II, making them dependent on a US\$3.5 billion American loan in 1946, which critics saw as reducing Britain to an economic satellite of the United States (Louis, 1999). The enormous strain of war debt and the rising costs of managing nationalist unrest led to the abandonment of imperial ambitions in key territories like India, Ireland, and much of the Middle East, forcing a severe reduction in defense and imperial expenditures leading to internal and external pressures for dissolution (Louis, 1999; Owen, 1999; Darwin, 1999). Similar challenges faced The Qing Dynasty in the form of severe economic decline due to trade imbalances that depleted available silver, causing deflation and undermined fiscal stability, resulting in growing discontent among merchants and a weakened international position (Orlandi et al., 2023). Toward the end of the Spanish Empire, Spain was drawn into destructive tariff wars with the United States that forced it to reduce customs duties for Cuban imports, combined with the loss of American revenues and smuggling left Spain's treasury in chronic deficit, depriving it of its long-standing economic advantage (Balfour, 1997; Paquette, 2009).

The American system of enterprise—encompassing consumerism, producerism, capitalism, technologism and strong laws, regulatory frameworks and institutions—has outperformed all others in history, evidenced by the scale of its global market capitalization at US\$115 trillion (as at March 2024). Nearly half of the world's top 20 companies by market capitalization are American, with 96 of the top 200 global leaders, including 14 of the top 20 in technology and 11 in financial services, surpassing China (19 companies) and India (6 companies). U.S. corporations contribute 72% of GDP across OECD countries and generate nearly 40% of S&P 500 revenues internationally, reflecting their global integration. Despite representing only 25% of global GDP, U.S. firms account for almost 50% of global corporate leadership, aided by equity market premiums of up to 160% over China and a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship and innovation [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2024]. Historically, American corporations have adapted to shifts in global value, leading in energy and consumer staples in the 1980s (Exxon, P&G), industrials in the 1990s (GE, Boeing), and technology since 2010 (Microsoft, Apple). This adaptability and leadership, particularly in IT, established American firms as central to global economic and geopolitical power.

#### **(7) Usurpation by Another Power.**

Nearly all powers in the qualitative dataset lost in competition to another power, often weakened by civil, governance and economic issues. In its rise, the United States had emerged as the usurper of the European Great Powers. Spain's imperial collapse in 1898 was a stark and humiliating defeat, as the Spanish-American War highlighted the overwhelming dominance of a rising United States over a faltering European power, forcing Spain to retreat from empire-building to internal reconstruction while the U.S. expanded its colonial holdings (Balfour, 1997). By 1914, American exports to Britain, the preeminent power of the time, reached an impressive £160 m, marking the U.S. as a rising economic power a net exporter of capital and a driver of global economic cycles by the 1920s (Hyam, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999). The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 definitively ended its superpower status, brought on by America's overwhelming arms race and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which drove the U.S.S.R. into economic and technological exhaustion, culminating in its reluctant acceptance of a reunified Germany within NATO (Marples, 2004). In what remains perhaps the most debated decision in its history, the United States ended Japan's imperial ambitions with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, compelling Japan's unconditional surrender (Jansen, 2000). Going further back usurping others is perhaps the most obvious decline marker, the Qing Dynasty's decline began with the Opium Wars (1840s–1860s), where Britain and other Western powers imposed crushing concessions, ultimately reducing China's sovereignty and leaving its economy exploited by Western and Japanese imperialists (Orlandi et al., 2023).

#### **(8) Inability to Effectively Manage Crisis Events.**

The decline of empires was often accelerated by crises that disrupted their stability, resources and policy making. The British Empire was strained from the devastating impacts of global wars, economic shifts, evolving international perspectives, and growing nationalist movements across its colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean (Louis, 1999). The Soviet Union faced severe economic challenges, environmental disasters like the Chernobyl crisis, and increasing political instability, with Gorbachev seeking Western assistance to preserve the Union amidst these struggles (Marples, 2004). In the case of the Spanish Empire, the Bourbon reforms introduced under Charles III aimed to modernize governance but inadvertently alienated colonial elites, undermining the crown's legitimacy and accelerating calls for independence (Paquette, 2009). This phenomenon is of course not a modern one, and the Mongol Empire faced a pivotal civil crisis linked to succession that led to fragmentation as rival factions multiplied and formed external alliances, such as the cooperation between the Mamluks and the Golden Horde, eroding its once-unified claim to global supremacy (Jackson, 1978).

#### **(9) Losing Moral Authority and Legitimacy, Social Inequalities.**

The loss of moral authority significantly contributed to the decline of empires through policies that exposed contradictions and alienated populations. British rule in India was marked by authoritarianism, described as despotic in Asia while paradoxically democratic in Australia, presenting Britain in the East as a force

of military imperialism and in the West as a champion of free thought and religion (Seeley, 1883). The Qing dynasty's legitimacy crumbled following the Opium Wars, unequal treaties, and defeats by Japan, fuelling widespread protests and anti-Qing movements (Rawski, 1998). In the Second French Colonial Empire, French politicians, like Mille, unapologetically viewed oppression as a necessary price for France's economic and political dominance, while systemic racism and disregard for colonial subjects' lives formed the bedrock of imperial rule (Hargreaves, 1981). This became pivotal when the reconcentration policy in Cuba, which caused at least 200,000 deaths, garnered international outrage, particularly in the United States, exposing the empire's moral failings (Balfour, 1997). Similarly, the Spanish Bourbon reforms under Charles III, aimed at modernization, alienated colonial elites and eroded the crown's legitimacy, accelerating the empire's disintegration (Paquette, 2009). The Qing Empire also faced deep inter-ethnic tensions, with Han Chinese elites resenting ethnic quotas that favored Manchus and Mongols, further aggravated by the lack of a unified ethnic identity within the empire's governance framework (Orlandi et al., 2023).

#### **(10) Losing Cultural Influence and Soft Power.**

The decline of soft power in imperial systems often led to a breakdown of loyalty, shared values, and long-term commitment. British cultural dominance, sustained by institutions like the BBC and an imperial ethos, weakened under the economic and psychological strain of war, diminishing its global influence (Darwin, 1999). By 1945, the British government acknowledged that the colonial system's survival depended on treating Asian and African subjects as equals rather than relying on coercion (Louis, 1999). In the Soviet Union, public exposure of past atrocities and the abandonment of commitments in Eastern Europe and the developing world undermined its ideological foundations, prompting even supporters to doubt the government's legitimacy (Marples, 2004). The Spanish Empire's collapse was shaped by transnational movements and the rise of collective identities in Latin America that rejected imperial rule and fuelled independence efforts (Brown, 2006). The Second French Colonial Empire failed to foster soft power, instead institutionalizing racial and gender inequality, denying political and welfare rights to colonized populations, and creating cultural conflicts between indigenous traditions and French metropolitan ideals, deepening divisions (Thomas, 2005). In contrast, the Japanese Empire revitalized its authority through the Meiji Restoration, which blended modernization, military victories, and the emperor's symbolic role as a unifying figure of national identity and strength (Jansen, 2000).

#### **(11) Losing Technological Innovation and Industrial Leadership.**

Finding and exploiting key technologies and dominance in key industries has historically underpinned Great Powers and lagging it has often precipitated their fall (Finkel, 2005). By 1897, Britain's Royal Navy, once dominant, was outpaced by other nations, with its battleship count a third behind competitors, undermining its maritime supremacy (Louis, 1999). In the Soviet Union, the catastrophic Chernobyl disaster revealed the deployment of poorly designed nuclear technology, undermining confidence in Soviet industrial and technological competence both domestically and internationally (Marples, 2004). Spain's inability

to modernize its industrial base in the nineteenth century left it reliant on foreign-controlled resources and infrastructure, such as submarine cables and coaling stations, which were exploited by more industrialized nations to control key trade routes and shipping lanes (Balfour, 1997). Japan's technological shortcomings during World War II became evident as American industrial power overwhelmed its military, with advanced radar, bombsights, and codebreaking providing the United States with critical operational advantages. American submarines systematically destroyed Japanese merchant shipping, a loss Japan's limited industrial capacity could not recover from, highlighting the stark disparity between the two nations' technological and industrial capabilities (Jansen, 2000).

#### **(12) Failing to Build and Maintain Alliances.**

Strong international alliances have been a cornerstone of great empires in history. Exceptionalism, isolationism and transactionalism have been seen to limit the ability to counter global challenges that require collective global action, as history reveals the fatal consequences of miscalculations. Japan's 1940 alliance with Germany and Italy, intended as a deterrent against Great Britain and the United States, backfired by consolidating the perception of Japan and Germany as a unified global threat, inviting the opposition from democratic powers (Jansen, 2000). From 1808 to 1813, Portugal failed to diversify its alliances, relying heavily on British supplies and trade materially diminishing its power; Britain went on to monopolize Portugal's economic activities, turning Portugal into a dependent state (Pedreira, 2000). Spain, similarly, struggled to forge meaningful alliances due to its poor industrialization, rendering it unable to attract the support of major powers or counterbalance the United States' dominance in Cuba (Balfour, 1997). These examples underscore the necessity of strategic, cooperative, and well-managed alliances to sustain imperial power in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

#### **(13) Poor Sustainable Development and Environmental Stewardship.**

Environmental degradation and unsustainable practices have contributed to the decline of past empires (Zhang et al., 2007). Addressing the climate crisis and embracing sustainable development are essential for long-term stability and influence (Patel and Hansmeyer, 2024). In the Soviet Union, the catastrophic Chernobyl disaster revealed the environmental costs of centralized planning and technological flaws, with its impact fuelling resentment in the heavily affected republics of Belarus and Ukraine (Marples, 2004). In Qing dynasty China, repeated famines in the nineteenth century, such as the 1876–79 famine killed an estimated 9–13 million people, exposed the empire's overextended resource base and inability to address environmental challenges, contributing to unrest such as the Boxer Rebellion (Orlandi et al., 2023). In the Second French Colonial Empire, the segregation of urban resources and services into settler-dominated areas reinforced the colonial authorities' belief that North African Muslim societies were incapable of socio-economic progress without French intervention, while simultaneously deepening inequalities and environmental neglect in the broader population (Thomas, 2005). Neglecting environmental sustainability and equitable resource management

is a marker of the vulnerability of a power to potentially extreme societal stress.

In terms of the frequency and distribution of these 13 markers, the analysis indicates their presence across all (8) of the empires during decline phase, particularly those markers relating to their ability to set the rules of engagement, overextension and resource allocation, effective military power and its use, managing political unity and governance, and controlling their periphery. In addition, 88% (7) of the empires had markers for economic and financial instability, usurpation by foreign powers, crisis events, and a decline in moral authority and legitimacy exacerbated by social inequalities with 75% (6) of the empires having markers indicating a decline in cultural influence and soft power. Challenges related to technological innovation and industrial leadership, as well as difficulties in building and maintaining alliances were evident for 63% (5) of the empires. A smaller number, 38% (3) of the empires, had key markers for unsustainable development and hazardous environmental stewardship.

Looking at this from the perspective of each empire, the qualitative analysis reveals almost all the markers (92%) were exhibited by the Russian Empire (U.S.S.R.), The Spanish Empire and The Empire of Japan. The British Empire exhibited 85% of the markers for imperial decline, as did the Second French Colonial Empire and the Second Portuguese Empire. The Qing Dynasty exhibited 69% of the markers for decline. The Mongol Empire faced 61% of the markers for decline.

In summary, some markers of decline—such as challenges in setting rules, overextension, military effectiveness, political unity and controlling the periphery—were present in all empires. Other markers, like economic instability, foreign usurpation, crises, and moral authority, were common to nearly all empires too. Interestingly, social inequalities, cultural influence, technological innovation and alliances were markers for nearly two-thirds of the empires examined, with sustainable development being less consistently present for those empires (which have now clearly concluded has become a critical threat and marker of wars and conflict [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023; Zhang et al., 2007]. This analysis highlights the concentration of decline markers in the more recent empires, which tended to face a broader range of challenges compared to those from earlier periods.

In utilizing these markers to draw out insights pertinent to American power, it is important to recognize that, the markers identified may not be exhaustive, many are interdependent, and their specific weighting and character needs to be used sensitively. Indeed, the qualitative analysis of imperial decline is inherently subjective, relying on historical interpretation that can vary significantly among scholars, resulting in additional markers or different weightings. The influence of personal perspective and is also an inherent biases Limitations also include the influence of personal biases, the difficulty in comparing the impact of different markers, and the risk of oversimplification due to the unique contexts of each empire.

In discussion, the implications of the markers for American power in the context of current challenges and opportunities will be examined.

## Discussion

The patterns charted in the rise of 29 great powers allows for charting America's potential future power trajectory. The initial results indicate a decisive decline between 2032 and 2067 for the two most relevant patterns, scale and modernity. This was a function of critical forces driving decline for which the qualitative analysis identified key markers which were used to consider the vulnerability of America's power position today. In essence, American power was found to be subject to all the decline markers to varying degrees. However, America's key vulnerabilities include rising internal divisions, overextended military engagements, and declining moral authority, particularly in the Global South. The difficulty in maintaining alliances, coupled with unilateral approaches to multilateral organizations, has raised questions of legitimacy and amplified calls for multipolarity. Simultaneously, past and anticipated future shifts toward isolationist and transactional policies weaken its reliability as a global partner, further eroding alliances critical for countering rivals like China. At this critical juncture, the systemic and evolutionary nature of international politics underscores the urgency for America to recalibrate its global and domestic strategies to mitigate risks and sustain its leadership position. These markers of decline, as evidenced in historical examples, emphasize the need to address domestic vulnerabilities and engage strategically in global governance to avoid further systemic destabilization. Power cycle theory provides an additive framework to this analysis by identifying America's "critical points"—the transitional phases in a state's trajectory where existing vulnerabilities may be amplified (Hebron and James, 1997), and in addition examining them against China's based on China's history (Doran, 2012).

The quantitative analysis provides for several trajectories of America's potential reversion to its pre-expansion size, of which two are based on empires of scale of and/or modernity indicating the timing of decline as between 2032 and 2067. The actual path that American power will take will depend heavily on the presence and implications of the 13 historical markers of decline identified in the quantitative analysis.

## Historical markers of power decline: implications for American power

### *(1) Loss of Ability to Set the Rules of Engagement.*

For now, America's ability to set the rules of engagement remains powerful. Two major regional wars in the last 3 years, have tested America's ability to enforce its will on others indirectly thus far, have demonstrated that despite its multi-layered hard and soft power, either majorities or large minorities of the world have started to vote against America's position (Zogby, 2024). Firstly, Russia's war in Ukraine saw 52 countries, including India and China, vote against or abstain, rather than support the U.S. position on Russia (United Nations, 2022). Secondly, the Israel war in Gaza saw 120 countries, including several large European allies, vote for a humanitarian truce (United Nations, 2023), and the U.S. used its Security Council veto 12 times since February 2020 in relation

to the Israel-Palestinian conflict [United Nations Security Council (UNSC), 2024], including as recently as April 2024 to veto ceasefires and the State of Palestine's full membership to the UN (Lederer, 2024), effectively stopping the will of the rest of the world, thereby prevailing but losing world support. This is perceived as a contrast to America post the Great Wars, when it shaped international order by exercising restraint, building institutions, and offering public goods to allies to maintain stability (Ikenberry, 2001).

### **(2) Overextension Straining Resources.**

The tensions between economic consumption, production and military spend is a fatal weakness for those that cannot manage them well (Kennedy, 1987). American overextension is evident in its prolonged military engagements and economic vulnerabilities, particularly since 9/11 (Bello, 2024). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, instead of affirming U.S. dominance led to resource depletion and stretched military capacities. By 2004, nearly all U.S. Army brigades were deployed overseas, with most engaged in Iraq, leaving insufficient reserves for other contingencies (Fallows, 2004). Distracted from its focus on the economy, globalization and deindustrialization weakened America's manufacturing base losing 4 million jobs over a two-decade period (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), while China reached 28% share of global growth between 2013 and 2018, over double the U.S. share (Kemp, 2019). Prolonged military entanglements and economic decline are markers of decline in U.S. hegemony.

### **(3) Loss of Effective Military Power and its Use.**

While military capability as a marker for decline may not be one that applies as clearly to America as some of the other markers, it reveals a complex picture of the effectiveness of war *per se* in the various arena in which America has deployed its military. For context, American defense spending accounted for nearly 40 per cent of military expenditures by countries around the world in 2023, more than the next nine countries combined (Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2024). U.S. military interventions in the twenty-first Century in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with support for Ukraine and Israel, demonstrate a capacity to employ significant force to achieve its objectives, but also reveal critical challenges. Rapid successes, such as the fall of Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003, were followed by prolonged conflicts and insurgencies, highlighting difficulties in maintaining control and stabilizing regions (Malkasian, 2021). Premature withdrawals, such as the 2011 exit from Iraq, often left objectives unmet, with ISIS's rise necessitating renewed U.S. engagement (Brands and Feaver, 2017).

The 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan under the Biden administration further emphasized the challenges of long-term conflict, as the Taliban swiftly regained control, which were perceived to have negated two decades of U.S. intervention (Akram and Akbar, 2023). These conflicts frequently alienated local populations, as seen in Afghanistan, where civilian casualties and perceptions of corruption undermined support for U.S. efforts (Malkasian, 2021). The 2003 invasion of Iraq proceeded without explicit UN Security Council authorization, reflecting global opposition [United Nations Security Council (UNSC), 2003]. Indeed U.S. military aid is found to increase anti-American terrorism, as shown in a study covering 174 countries from 1968 to 2018 (Dimant et al., 2024). The aid correlates with increased

corruption, grievances and resentment and diminishes public opinion of the U.S. in these countries, increasing hostility and contributing to terrorism targeting American interests.

### **(4) Poorly Managing the Center, Political Unity, and Governance.**

Successive US governments are believed by their people to have failed to solve critical civil divisions in America and to address the underlying issues (Pew Research Center, 2024b), and this is seen to have resulted in antimodern thought on U.S. conservatism (Magalhães, 2022). The early indications of this are that it advances anti-liberal and anti-democratic directions in America and thus far has resulted in a violent insurrection in the U.S. Congress in 2020. Importantly, there is evidence that the rise of right-wing populism, not only undermines democratic institutions while in power, but makes it harder to safeguard democracy and rights even once defeated, with broader implications internationally (Ikenberry, 2018; Żuk and Paczeński, 2022).

In addition, the relationship between the federal government and the domestic states has become a significant battleground. The ongoing struggle over states' rights vs. federal authority creates tensions that, if unresolved, has the potential to shift power dynamics toward the pre-Civil War levels, potentially weakening the unity of the nation. The peaceful transition of power and the rule of law is one of the cornerstones of democracy, and one of the key factors in stability, and it is one that has been demonstrably under pressure in America, given the losing candidate's continued denial of losing the 2016 election, and as key Justice Department legal cases against the newly elected president related to the January 6th 2021 insurrection and attempt to stop the transfer of power have been dropped (The Atlantic, 2024). This has a bearing on America's moral authority when its leaders appear to the rest of the world as being above the law, which autocracies may recognize as a more normal situation in their countries, and arguably, the leadership styles adopted by American presidents have significantly contributed to the erosion of the nation's hegemonic legitimacy (Mendes, 2023). The marker of decline based on poorly managing the center effectively, for unity and governance is one that America is evidencing.

### **(5) Losing Control of the Periphery and Entanglement.**

America struggles to control relationships with key strategic allies, resulting in entanglements that are either unwanted or not in US interests; Israel's relationship with Palestine regardless of the merits of each side's cause, strains America's diplomatic resources, makes it look ineffective to the world, and calls into question its power (Hirsh, 2024; Walt, 2024). Similarly, the actions of Saudi Arabia as an important regional power and global supplier of energy, has challenged America's commitment to its values and ultimately has seen the US prioritizing the commercial, energy and military relationship over key American values (Hoffman, 2023). The inability to dictate terms to its periphery and whether the periphery is powerful enough to draw the center into its affairs to its detriment is an important marker of decline (Goldman, 2023) and one which is presently evident in America's position regarding Israel was in Gaza and the Russian war in Ukraine.

### **(6) Economic and Financial Instability and Decline.**

The American system of enterprise—encompassing consumerism, producerism, capitalism, technologism and strong



laws, regulatory frameworks and institutions—has outperformed all others in history, evidenced by the scale of its global market capitalization at US\$115 trillion (as of March 2024). Nearly half of the world's top 20 companies by market capitalization are American, with 96 of the top 200 global leaders, including 14 of the top 20 in technology and 11 in financial services, surpassing China (19 companies) and India (6 companies). U.S. corporations contribute 72% of GDP across OECD countries and generate nearly 40% of S&P 500 revenues internationally, reflecting their global integration. Despite representing only 25% of global GDP, U.S. firms account for almost 50% of global corporate leadership, aided by equity market premiums of up to 160% over China and a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship and innovation [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2024]. Historically, American corporations have adapted to shifts in global value, leading in energy and consumer staples in the 1980s (Exxon, P&G), industrials in the 1990s (GE, Boeing), and technology since 2010 (Microsoft, Apple). This adaptability and leadership, particularly in IT, established American firms as central to global economic and geopolitical power.

However, focusing on three vulnerabilities illustrates that there is a fragility in America's system. Firstly, in 2008 the world experienced the side-effect of the American system of enterprise in the form of The Global Financial Crisis, triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, a major American bank, the crisis was fuelled by the simultaneous and large-scale sale of assets in three key segments of the U.S. economy: the housing market, the financial sector, and consumer demand (El-Erian, 2008). The housing market collapse led to massive losses in financial institutions heavily invested in mortgage-backed securities, estimated by the IMF at that time to be US\$1.4 trillion, the largest in dollar terms of any post-war financial crisis, sparking a global credit freeze, and called "the most dangerous of the post-World War II era" (Collyns, 2008). The IMF reports how this financial turmoil spread internationally, resulting in the failure of banks and severe economic crises in countries worldwide, resulting in recourse to IMF credit (Collyns, 2008). This crisis also led to a rethinking and retrenchment on the part of China whose leadership had sought to follow and emulate the U.S., in a way that preserved control, by opening their financial markets, introducing more transparent laws (Pearson, 2015) and even experimenting with electoral participation (The Diplomat, 2016), all of which following this crisis seemed to their leadership to be part of a dangerous American system (Chow, 2010). Secondly, indebtedness is a marker for nearly all the empires in the dataset and American debt has been growing steadily from a trough in 1974 of 23% of GDP post-World War II to 97% of GDP in 2022 [Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), 2023a]. Finally, an additional and critical feature is the side-effect of income inequality which seem to be a feature of the American system of enterprise, where competitive, "survival of the fittest" dynamics are reinforced by systemic structures that disproportionately reward top earners and wealth holders (Saez and Zucman, 2020), creating a powerful force for societal divide, and which research indicates leads those left behind in this powerful wealth generation system to vote for more radical right-wing politics (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2021; Engler and Weisstanner, 2020).

### **(7) Usurpation by Another Power.**

Today, a number of potentially powerful players have great power status, or are on the verge achieving it, of which some are rivals and other are potential allies that can augment America's power. The current rise of China challenges the narrative of democracy as the basis of progress; as an economically successful authoritarian regime, and one which has thus far had no international wars, it challenges the narrative of democracy as a pre-requisite for economic success or peace, notwithstanding questions posed on its human rights track record. India's rise, on-going, represents a potential ally of scale, but may also offers the Global South's developing nations an alternative blueprint to both America's and China's on how to rise economically, politically and internationally as democracies preserving their national characteristics (Bajpae, 2024). However, in an international system where capital can be translated into power, China has already successfully built trading alliances and footholds across the world (Han and Paul, 2020). This poses a significant challenge to America and other major democratic allies since they have all suffered relative economic declines while China has been rising. China today is undoubtedly a great power as defined here. The fact that China has not declared its intention to replace America as the global hegemon is not relevant to whether it achieves this status in fact. China's increasing global footprint, economic scale, industrial might, and rising technological and military capabilities stand in contrast to the relative share of global economic value in particular that America is facing across several of these factors. The breadth of China's interests globally and its scale vis a vis America will demand that China actively determines critical matters in the world. Some researchers place China reaching this state potentially in the 2040s but not by a large margin (Rajah and Leng, 2022), others find that China will overtake the U.S. in the 2030s for a nearly 20 year period to fall behind thereafter [Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), 2023b], and others question whether it will ever happen (Cox, 2023; Scissors, 2023), and those hoping for a fall of China are warned by the IMF of the resilience of its governments (Prasad, 2023). Given its prodigious scale, we are reminded of the tortoise and the hare, with the above research indicating that China's patient long term strategy can pay off and in the absence of a radical American leadership strategy, leading to China potentially overtaking the U.S. as the leading economy, which provides the possibility of political clout.

### **(8) Inability to Effectively Manage Crisis Events.**

In today's polycrisis, active American leadership may involve leading multilateral institutions, driving conflict resolution in the current wars in Europe and the Middle East at a minimum, and addressing critical global challenges such as climate change, development and pandemics. Given the resolution of current global issues requires a functioning world order that is liberal and inclusive, based on the UN principles of human rights and the advancement of sustainable development, America's renewal of multilateral institutions and its support for global initiatives provide the opportunities for American Power in time of crises. However, the soon to be Trump Administration has clearly stated its aim of not supporting a multilateral system to handle interdependent crises (Lowy Institute, 2024), and in the 2016 term, the administration did exit the U.S. from the Paris Agreement

on climate change, UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the World Health Organization, which led to other nations stepping up to compensate for the lack of U.S. participation and leadership [International Peace Institute and Institute for Economics and Peace (IPI and IEP), 2024].

**(9) Losing Moral Authority and Legitimacy, Social Inequalities.**

The transition from America as a savior of European democracies and the international community from aggressors through two world wars, and its emergence as the sole superpower from the Cold War against the U.S.S.R., changed to vulnerability in the September 11th 2001 attack on America, with its subsequent war in Iraq opposed by the majority of nations at the UN with unconvincing evidence (United Nations, 2024). The crises continued in 2008 as its banks caused the collapse of the global financial system and drove economies around the world to seek IMF rescue (Collyns, 2008). Not much later, America was seen to be coercive, transactional and divisive in its engagement with international allies in matters related to Brexit (Brattberg and Rome, 2018), and NATO (Rapp-Hooper, 2020) leading up to 2020. The pattern of America as a wilful isolated power, out of touch with global opinion, continued with it being unable to lead its allies or rivals in UN voting on the two wars to 2024, with Israel its primary ally in the Middle East, accused of genocide at the International Criminal Court, and America implicated in that. The last quarter of a century seems to have undermined confidence around the world in America's leadership, particularly in the Global South (Stuenkel, 2023), yet its economic and military might remain pre-eminent, demonstrating the importance of moral authority. The change in global positioning from savior to transactional counterparty (or predator) is one that has begun and which in the election campaign President Trump embraced [Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2024].

**(10) Losing Cultural Influence and Soft Power.**

American primacy in soft power has been seen as a material asset (Nye, 2004), but this advantage has been eroding in a more complex and multipolar world, as domestic populism increasingly undermines the country's capacity to lead through international institutions and the provision of global public goods (Nye, 2019). Views of American soft power reveal a complex picture of strengths and weaknesses across global perspectives based on a survey of 23 countries (Pew Research Center, 2023a). While its soft power is bolstered by its technological achievements (72% rating the U.S. as the best or above average), entertainment (71%), and universities (69%), fewer than half of respondents viewed the U.S. positively in terms of standard of living (c.50%), democracy (44%), safety (39% saying the U.S. is about as dangerous as other wealthy nations), and tolerance (31% seeing the U.S. as less tolerant). Recognizing the importance of soft power, China has prioritized engagement with the Global South backed by infrastructure projects, scholarships, and professional training programs, with two-thirds of respondents across 34 African countries viewing its influence positively, despite preferring the U.S. model of development (Afrobarometer, 2021; Repnikova, 2022). In Latin America, about half of those surveyed in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico view China favorably, driven by trade and development partnerships. In Central Asia with similar strategies, China is seen as pragmatic

and generous, and an appealing alternative to Western powers (Repnikova, 2022).

**(11) Losing Technological Innovation and Industrial Leadership.**

Today, in an increasingly multi-polar world, technological rivalry is central to great power competition, particularly between the America and China. The E.U., and regional powers such as Russia, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and the UK, and rising India, recognize technology as a key pillar of security and influence but are much further behind. America dominates in deploying capital—mainly private sector capital—across 18 of 19 core technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data, quantum computing and the Internet of Things, leading globally in patent applications due to its vast technology market and homegrown industry leaders (Chin, 2019; Force for Good, 2024). However, China's huge public spend and scaled domestic market has enabled it to be well positioned to lead in certain key technologies, including EV and e-mobility, drones, and renewable energies, the latter being key to the transition of energy in the face of climate change (Force for Good, 2024).

While the U.S. is best positioned to lead the Information Age due to its global dominance in key geopolitical assets and core technologies, rising public debt makes it increasingly reliant on a divided political system for funding government (Pew Research Center, 2023b), private capital and uber capitalists, particularly techno capitalists with increasingly political agendas (Khanal et al., 2024). The transition to the information era provides America with a rare opportunity to slow down its relative decline. Given this is one of three era shifts alongside the Agricultural Era and Industrial Era, it will take the world into a highly valuable new territory (Toffler, 1980) providing the opportunity for America to renew its power and create a successor Information Age America that subsumes the industrial one. America is clearly in new territory as it embarks on the next phase of that journey, with a populist of Trump's standing who has eschewed giving up on the oil and gas industrial economy, and a billionaire technologist entrepreneur of Musk's standing who embraces technological progression (Politico, 2024). Both have declared their intent to disrupt the American system of government, regulation and enterprise, with few self-professed visible constraints (Financial Times, 2024). Given the intention is to reduce regulations, this may have the potential to propel America more rapidly toward making greater breakthroughs at greater risk. As to whether this renews American power or is a factor in its decline rests on whether it creates stability in its relations at home and abroad. This techno-power in the hands of a functioning democracy with checks and balances would be potentially more distributive of the wealth it generates, and hence more stable, which may be quite different to techno-power in a populist regime with autocratic, oligarchic, or elitist characteristics.

**(12) Failing to Build and Maintain Alliances.**

While National Populism in America fractured alignment with its allies, America's ability to form a strong coalition of democratic allies is a clear determinant of the shape of the curve of American power. The global dispersion of military power, with a notable decrease in American capabilities, reflects a shift toward multipolarity and a potential decline in U.S. military dominance

(Bunyavechewin et al., 2024). Strengthening alliances and building a multilateral bloc consisting of the U.S., the E.U. and India creates a coalition of four nations which taken together have primary positions in global trade, industry, arable land, military power, and population size, and to which other democracies can coalesce, providing a formidable bloc that provides sufficient multi-dimensional sources of power to be the leading geopolitical bloc of the twenty-first Century [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2020a,b]. This involves not only military alliances but also economic and technological partnerships. If such an alliance were to be effective, China's position as leader would be short-lived if at all [Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), 2024].

However, a more Nationalist "America First" model of power has stated its intent to leverage its strong position to extract value rather than build a coalition that shares power under its leadership. Indeed, the changes wrought by the seismic technological and information era changes underway usher in a future defined by sustainability, artificial intelligence, and a new geopolitical landscape which have to date been resisted by National Populists. The evident vision of America goes back more than a century to one that prioritizes its national borders and rethinks American democracy through initiatives such as Project 2025 (Sirota, 2024), eschewing Great Power leadership in favor of using its economic and military assets for transactional purposes, while carving up the world between regional powers (Clarke and Ricketts, 2017; Wojczewski, 2020). However, as history shows, such vacuums are filled by others, and America's withdrawal would effectively vacate the apex position for China and other coalitions to fill. While global power is shifting toward emerging states, this transition does not necessarily signal the immediate collapse of the liberal internationalism (Ikenberry, 2011). Indeed, in a reversal of historical roles, China increasingly embraces and seeks to shape elements of the existing global governance architecture, while the United States under its current administration signals disengagement from multilateralism and the liberal international order it once championed (Breslin, 2023; Chan et al., 2021), thereby undermining its leadership and alienating key allies enabling a shift toward its rivals (Lake et al., 2021).

### **(13) Poor Sustainable Development and Environmental Stewardship.**

America has played a critical role in global climate and environmental action as the world's highest emitter in history and ranking currently second for the year (Crippa et al., 2021), and as the biggest investor in addressing climate change (The White House Press, 2024). The roll-back of that under a new U.S. administration would have risks for America at home and abroad. A withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, as previously pursued, would erode international trust in the U.S. and undermine global climate goals, potentially making it easier for other leading nations to deprioritize their commitments. Expanded fossil fuel investments and deregulation could exacerbate greenhouse gas emissions, moving the world closer to a temperature increase of 3.9–4.6°C by 2,100 under the UN's "Regional Rivalry" scenario, which features fragmented multilateralism and aggressive fossil fuel development [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023; Rogelj et al., 2018]. Rolling back the Inflation Reduction Act, which allocated nearly US\$500 billion to clean

energy, risks curbing U.S. renewable energy growth and reducing global investments in low-carbon technologies (Congressional Budget Office, 2022). The absence of senior U.S. leadership at forums like COP29 has already created a leadership vacuum, with China in particular positioning to step in to fill the gap, realizing the potential to influence the Global South through climate financing initiatives (Shepherd and Northrop, 2024). These shifts are likely to strain global climate diplomacy, delay critical mitigation efforts, and heighten the burden on private sector investments, further challenging the 1.5°C target outlined in the Paris Agreement (Climate Action Tracker, 2024; Patel and Hansmeyer, 2024).

In addition to analyzing the markers of decline and their impact on America power, it is important to consider the results of the recent presidential election given one of the key messages of the Trump campaign has been around the need for American renewal, at home and abroad, as well as the need to strike a more beneficial deal with the rest of the world, with allies, rivals and enemies. The electorate accepted this premise (or rejected the alternative) in large enough numbers to provide Republicans with a win of the popular vote, Congress and the Senate, effectively accepting a renewal of American power based on National Populism, and Trump's particular approach to transactionalism. This National Populism, emphasizes exceptionalism, isolationism, nativism, protectionism, and xenophobia as both behavioral features and core values, and dismisses the international liberal order that America currently leads [De Spiegeleire et al., 2018; Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2019]. It is antagonistic to electoral democratic processes in America, indicating acceptance only if elections deliver victory (Akande and Kellner, 2023). Trump's National Populism, in common with others across much of the West, has been promising voters that they can reverse the wrongs of the world by somehow stopping the future and reverting to an industrial past (Wojczewski, 2020). This new brand of American policies aims to halt the growing flows of people, technology (unless it is American) and clean energy and trade and promises to bring back manufacturing jobs and oil and gas (Oliphant, 2024). However, the evidence shows that this era is long past and being replaced by the global growth in share of renewable energies, the digital economy, urbanization, and that any reversals will only be at the margins, and to the detriment of many, if not most, people [International Energy Agency (IEA), 2024; Force for Good, 2024]. However, whether as a populist at home or a player on the world stage, America of course has the clout to extract value from others, but this paper's examination of history suggests this ultimately leads to disbenefits in both domestic and foreign arenas. And while such policies may play well to the populist agenda, it may not benefit a state seeking fundamental renewal or extension of power, and it does not address critical markers in the decline of previous great powers. In addition, multiple new powers have historically risen in the wake of a great power, reflecting synchronicity in a broader pattern of power transition, such as the rise of Germany challenging British dominance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kennedy, 1987), and the rise of secondary and tertiary powers alongside the rise of leading powers in many previous periods of history (Chase-Dunn et al., 2005; Models and Thompson, 1996). Such structural shifts in power, particularly the emergence of a rival power approaching parity, heighten the risk of conflict and violent

transitions in hegemonic leadership (Organski and Kugler, 1980), requiring alternative pathways to be considered.

## Observations on the implied pathways for American power

As the analysis has demonstrated historical power transitions have been marked by inter-connected factors leading to declining power which suggest that powers cling to exceptionalism, ignoring the reality of changed circumstances, placing faith in the restoration of their dominance through a variety of means including conflict, repression and allies. The markers for decline evident from an examination of other great powers are all present in America's current position.

Therefore, one would assume, that if unaddressed, America faces the seemingly historic fate of all great powers, decline. However, several paths for addressing the decline are worthy of consideration for policy makers given this very particular point in history involves a transition from an industrial to an information civilization.

The first pathway would see America transforming its Industrial Era model into one fit for the Information Age, recognizing the shift to the Third Wave in civilizational development (Toffler, 1986). This would see America vie to renew its leadership, and retain its pre-eminent position, bucking history's pull to be usurped by a rising challenger, likely China in this case. However, turning the course of decline was something the Great Powers examined found nearly impossible to achieve given the complex character of their empires resting on specific factors that seemed to determine their mode of operation including historic, geographic, cultural, societal, military and relationship factors, as well as a web of internal conflicts and intrigues. A similar picture of constraints could be painted for America with its conservatives wishing for America to be great through oil and gas rather than transitioning to the next generation of energy sources (Powers, 2019).

The second is a path that sees America leverage its strengths in a more predatory transactional model, trading off its well-built asset superiority in economic, technological and military fields using them to extract value from allies and rivals alike; this path sets it on a slide into exploitative relationships and potentially tyranny (Munger and Klein, 2022). This model, in spirit, is far closer to the value extraction of imperial colonial models, but arguably far more efficient for today's globalized, technology and electronic trading era being far more suited to extracting value without having to occupy and manage subjugated populations. Tyranny at home becomes far more possible and the American far right fascination with revolution and civil war and risk to America's democratic system becomes far more possible (Haas, 2023). which American generals have warned of (Goldberg, 2020; Mathur-Ashton, 2024). This path is far more difficult internationally given that the decline of a great power often sees the rise of other powers and power blocs that can counter a declining incumbent power making for a complex game of power positioning (Lobell et al., 2015), and avoiding the inherent conflict of powers, the Thucydides Trap,

becomes a challenge (Allison, 2015); the E.U., China, India, and the UN as the representative of countries at large, have powerbases of their own, and would learn to become effective out of necessity.

A significant third path is to embrace power-sharing, either among the largest democracies (the E.U. and India being the largest potential strategic allies to develop a robust triumvirate), and/or more radically through a re-imagined multilateralism. Such a mission would bring to bear the resources of America to the task of leveling up the world in a grand mission to unblock progress for the Global South and economically and socially excluded in richer nations, including at home, addressing the existential threats facing the world, such as climate change, the risk of perpetual war and nuclear war, and redefining the global system in the process (Kortunov, 2022). While this path is compatible with the first path, sharing power while seemingly a humanistic and perhaps idealistic position, risks soliciting opposition at home, if not contempt if it is seen as appeasement or betrayal of America's pre-eminent position (Imperial War Museums, n.d.), and can be exploited by political rivals who frame multipolarity as weakness, backed by those that believe in preserving a perceived unipolarity (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023; Kagan, 2002). However, post-crisis periods, such as the aftermath of major wars like World War II and the Cold War, can create conditions conducive to power-sharing and the emergence of new multilateral ideals, where the incumbent power might share power as the "first among equals" (Ruggie, 1994).

Today, given the existential ecological crises facing the planet and the dangerous conflicts involving nuclear powers—in two major on-going wars, where both Russia and Israel are nuclear powers, and Iran is a neighboring power with unspecified nuclear capabilities [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2013]—the need for a peaceful path wherein human security for all is re-affirmed as an inalienable value becomes increasingly urgent. Therefore, the role of a hegemon that leads in addressing such issues is a relevant one (Ferguson, 2004). America's choice to be the architect of a more humanistic robust and functioning multipolar world might allow it to shape the new multilateral architecture rather than have it imposed by rivals and coalitions of nations that are now more openly resisting its leadership; with positive views of the US falling across the world, including in Europe, the Middle East and Asia in 2024, and while 85% of people believe that it is important to have democracy in their country (Alliance of Democracies Foundation Latana, 2024), 40% of international adults sampled and 72% of Americans hold the view that the U.S. *used to be* a good example of democracy (Pew Research Center, 2024b).

The first months of the second Trump Administration provide some clues as to how America's leadership is thinking about the path ahead. The announced executive orders (Federal Register, n.d.) provide evidence for the nature and direction of power exertion. Of the 152 orders signed as of 13 May 2025, a majority concentrate on domains that prioritize domestic consolidation and transactional leverage. Specifically, 29% focus on civics and civil society, addressing issues such as education, diversity, equity and inclusion rollbacks, and symbolic cultural measures, while 24% pertain to economic, trade, and investment policy, largely aimed at reindustrialization and protectionist trade measures. By contrast, only 5% of orders relate to multilateralism and foreign Policy, and just 7% address energy and environmental



Policy, indicating a de-prioritization of global coordination and sustainability concerns. This distribution underscores a strategic emphasis on unilateral economic advantage and internal ideological alignment, rather than institutional engagement or coalition-building, key dimensions historically associated with sustained hegemonic leadership.

These executive orders, alongside the words and actions by the president collectively appear to indicate a desire for America to continue to enjoy the benefits of hegemony without bearing any of its costs. Specifically, they point to a radically simplified world order based on transactionalism and bilateralism with fewer rules and institutions, led by a reindustrialized, energy-independent and trade-balance neutral United States. Further, the administration's initial focus appears to be on strengthening America's economic and military, rather than its political power (as well as on strengthening the executive branch's power in government). However, while its economy is one of the strongest in the world on key metrics, it shows signs of important vulnerabilities [Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), 2025] and its markets have become far more volatile (Conteduca et al., 2025; Financial Times, 2025), it is unclear whether this approach can even strengthen America's compulsory power; while it does seem to be clear that it cedes institutional, structural and productive power, and thereby weakens America's hegemonic position over time. These priorities also appear to set America firmly on the second of the three paths laid out above, leveraging its material superiority to extract value from counterparties in a world where the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

This orientation places the United States on a trajectory historically associated with hegemonic decline. While the pursuit of compulsory power, through military and economic dominance, may yield short-term advantages, it risks undermining the institutional, structural, and productive forms of power that have sustained U.S. hegemony since 1945. By privileging unilateralism and transactionalism, the U.S. cedes ground in precisely those domains, norm-setting, institution-building, and value generation, where long-term leadership is determined. Such a model does not emerge in a vacuum, it places the U.S. in direct competition with actors already entrenched in similar modes of engagement, particularly authoritarian states whose legitimacy does not depend on liberal norms or opposition at home. Unlike these regimes, however, America's traditional strength has rested not only on material capabilities but also on its perceived legitimacy and its capacity to mobilize international cooperation. Retreating from these foundations may accelerate relative decline by eroding both the appeal and the effectiveness of its leadership.

This orientation aligns with the several of the markers of hegemonic decline discussed in this paper. The administration's early trajectory exhibits strong alignment with at least half, including a retreat from multilateral institutions and alliance networks, a diminished capacity to shape global norms, and a weakening of cultural and ideological soft power. Further risks emerge from the administration's overreliance on economic and military levers, neglect of environmental stewardship, and growing executive centralization at the expense of political cohesion. While some structural capacities appear to remain intact, such as military superiority which may be weakened as military command and intelligence have been shifted away from the seniormost

commanders recently (Nichols, 2025; Starcevic, 2025; Stirling, 2025), and industrial ambition (while noting that tariff and economic wars have begun to shift sentiment away from US trade and investment rather than toward it), the broader pattern suggests a shift away from the institutional foundations and alliances that have historically sustained American primacy.

Ultimately, preserving global influence will require more than the assertion of dominance, it will require articulating and sustaining a vision of order that solicits followership, and implementing changes that counter the decline markers identified. It also recognized that in a period defined by systemic crises, the actor best able to resolve collective challenges will shape the future international system.

## Limitations and considerations in utilizing the lessons

In examining current and historic power systems, structures, characteristics, dynamics and projections, there are a wide range of potential limitations to consider. Such analysis therefore draws out lessons for consideration rather than definitive prescriptions. Hence, in forming geopolitical power policy, the lesson provided in this paper can only be indicative of the considerations required in forming strategy. The presented analysis of American power has many limitations of course, including its reliance on the accuracy of historical records of dates and events, the use of limited traditional metrics of power which cannot capture the complexities of the period, and historic environments may not translate well to contemporary global dynamics. The models used to predict the decline of American power are based on historical patterns and records of dates and key events too, and these might not hold up well in the face of the unprecedented energy, technological and geopolitical shifts of today, including the digital revolution and a form of multipolarity. Additionally, the focus in the qualitative analysis on historic markers such as military, economic, and cultural power may overlook contemporary forms of influence, such as social media, which allow for power and influence instantly and on an unprecedented scale. Qualitative analysis as a tool is inherently subjective and subject to selective bias. The analysis also depends on current trends and data, which might not accurately predict future changes in political, economic, or technological landscapes.

More specifically, in considering the narrative on the shape of American power, various scenarios may change the outlook on American power, including breakthrough technological changes (for example, if the world were on the brink of a breakthrough in fusion), the spread of war (for example, if the U.S. were to be drawn into the war in the Middle East to protect Israel, or China were to initiate a violent takeover of Taiwan), or if the world were already in the buildup to a third world war leading to the division of smaller powers around the US and others (given its military and economic supremacy, the U.S. may garner greater support than rivals).

Future research, modeling the sensitivity to historic events and dates on the rise and decline curve of great powers may yield variations in the trajectories of American power. Incorporating diverse perspectives particularly from non-Western participants

in the global power structure, can provide a fuller analysis. Additionally, examining the impact of disruptive events—such as wars, technological breakthroughs, and shifts in governance—can provide alternative scenarios for American power. Using different measures of power may provide for different projections on America's future trajectory. However, recognizing that great powers function within a complex system, and that the complexity of the system has been increasing over time, any attempt at a snapshot will no doubt be out of date as variables and interactions multiply, providing opportunities for trajectories of the great powers within them to change too (Bar-Yam, 2002). In addition, the analysis of rivals and allies, which can include nations such as China, power blocs such as the EU, or groupings such as BRICS, is required to understand the systems effect of the rise and fall of others in America's position. Further, an analysis of the Trump administration's policy announcements and implementations and actions can provide an indication of whether the markers of decline have been addressed or exacerbated.

Finally, the analysis presented in this paper provides an indication of power and its trajectory, recognizing that power trajectories are non-deterministic in nature, and subject to multiple factors including social, environmental, ecological and random events and forces. This analysis is therefore designed to provide additional insights into an important matter for analysts and policy makers rather than provide a prescription.

## Conclusion

America's global power and influence is at cross-roads, facing a series of internal and external challenges to the geopolitical pre-eminence it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War, and arguably since the end of the Second World War.

Based on the quantitative trajectories of 29 great powers, the analysis indicates potential endpoints of U.S. hegemony around the middle of the twenty-first century, between 2032 and 2067, depending on which historical archetypes are most applicable. Qualitative analysis identifies a series of economic, political, social, technological, and cultural markers that have accompanied the decline of major great powers in history. Among the most acute vulnerabilities are strategic overextension, internal fragmentation, diminished alliance cohesion, diminishing control over peripheral regions, and declining moral authority. All these markers present in the United States today, albeit to varying degrees, underpinning the quantitative findings of American decline. However, the current period of systemic upheaval—marked by the shift from an industrial to an information-based global order—offers a potentially unique opportunity for American renewal, if the U.S. can reorient its leadership to align with emergent global challenges and address intense competition from rivals such as China.

The current period of civilizational level change—marked by the shift from an industrial to an information-based global order—offers a potentially unique opportunity for American renewal, if the U.S. can reorient its leadership to align with emergent global challenges and address intense competition from rivals such as China.

America today has the economic, political, technological, and military resources to lead the world through this transition, and renew its global leadership position in the process, but

this will require addressing the structural weaknesses identified in this study. Whether America will seize this opportunity remains uncertain. The incoming administration's goal of national renewal has been framed not in terms of inclusive leadership or alliance-building, but through emphasis on protectionism, transactionalism, and nativism, which suggest a more unilateral and confrontational posture indicative of a very different conception of American power to the one that has sustained its global hegemony to date. Early indications of executive orders and policy implementation indicate that these exacerbate the loss of hegemonic status by further triggering a decline in the key markers of decline.

While American power provides for choice regarding the paths it takes to extend that power and allows for essential decisions to be made on whether that is one of division or unity regarding both the domestic and international arenas, the window for doing so is likely closing with every key policy decision and action. While a fragmented, transactional approach may extract short-term advantage and look like success, it risks longer-term instability by diminishing trust and global standing. Therefore, while a strategy of inclusive leadership, institutional renewal, and coordinated multilateralism offers the more sustainable path to preserving American influence in a world tending toward multipolarity, it may not be viable with the passage of time and more confrontational and value extractive actions. America's choices are of course also key factors in accelerating or decelerating multipolarity. However, the transition to a new information and technology-based era and the many challenges that the world faces at this point provide an opportunity to extend American power and share in the benefits of technological advances, but leading the world in addressing these issues and sharing of those benefits would require a reversal of current policy and action, which a propensity to take short term wins may not permit. The question of how America will address the historic markers of decline that it faces in the current version of "America First" is therefore a critical one at this juncture for its future power position.

## Author's note

The authors are affiliated with both Force for Good, which among other activities works in support of the UN Secretary General's 2030 Roadmap for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and Greater Pacific Capital (GPC), as part of the leadership and research teams. The Lead Author is also affiliated with the World Academy of Art and Science. This paper is part of on-going research effort on civilizational power, great power systems, American Power, and the rise of India and China. Preliminary versions of this paper were published by GPC in August 2024, and the preliminary outputs of modeling with published in 2020. Feedback from those publications has allowed for the analysis to be enhanced and this paper to be produced. Funding has not been taken for this research from any external party.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

KP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CH: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ND: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1511913/full#supplementary-material>

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