The United States: From the Unipolar Moment to Relative Hegemony

Andrey A. Iserov

Andrey A. Iserov, PhD in History
National Research University–Higher School of Economics
Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs
Deputy Dean
Russian Academy of Sciences
Institute of World History
Senior Research Fellow

SPIN-RSCI: 5802-6017
ORCID: 0000-0002-6291-6861

E-mail: aisserov@hse.ru
Tel. +7 (495) 772 9590 * 22205
Address: 29 Malaya Ordynka, Moscow 115184, Russia

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Abstract
This article argues that contrary to the popular claims about American decline, the United States shows remarkable resilience. Drawing upon macroeconomic statistics, demography, and R&D dynamics, this article highlights trends that confirm a slow relative decline of American power rather than its sharp collapse. Despite a number of painful military misadventures, U.S. military strength still ensures 'free security.' The U.S. still outperforms its competitors, including China, in information and communications. The 'unipolar era' is over, China's rapid growth deprives the U.S. of its position as an undisputed global hegemon. However, this does not indicate America's irreversible decline, but rather its transition to *relative hegemony*.

The current discussion of 'American decline' masks the economic, demographic, and military reality beyond the U.S.'s real position in the world. In the fall of 1990, Charles Krauthammer declared the coming of the American *unipolar moment*, unique in human history, since there was no visible strong opposition to U.S. ascendancy then. Krauthammer thought the unipolar moment would last for "one decade, perhaps, rather than, say, three or four" (Krauthammer, 1990, p. 26). Twelve years later, he bluntly stated that even thirty or forty years of domination, which seemed bold in 1990, was a modest statement if the U.S. remained strong in its commitment to sustaining hegemony: "The unipolar moment has become the unipolar era" (Krauthammer, 2002, p. 17).

Exactly at the time when the U.S. reached the peak of its global power, scholars and journalists launched a discussion of American decline.[1] The U.S. was perceived as a global empire and thus subject to the Anglo-American, or to a broader European, traditional interpretation going back to Polybius (ca. 200–ca. 118 BC), Ibn-Khaldun (1332–1406),[2] and Edward Gibbon (1737–1794). Note that we refer here to the concept of gradual systemic decline, not sudden collapse. History shows that forecasts of the latter sort are rarely successful; moreover, even when they are, the reasons provided for the collapse are usually wrong. For example, the overwhelming majority of experts did not believe in the USSR's possible dissolution, but those who predicted it, did it on the wrong premises: the Soviet Union collapsed neither as a result of the war with China, nor after the revolt of the demographically growing Muslim Central Asian republics (their loyalty to the Soviet Union remained the strongest and in 1991 was in fact stronger than in the

[1] The most well-known book-length example is Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2004). The paperback edition, with a 22-page introduction was published under a different, and more ominous, title: *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2005). In fact, Ferguson underlines the necessity for the U.S. to increase its global presence, so that it would fit the responsibilities required to maintain its domination (highly valued and appreciated by the author).

[2] His influence outside Islamic scholarship dates back not to the French translation of al-Muqaddimah (1863), but to the English one (1958), which coincided with the mid-20th-century rise of social sciences in general and historical and macro-sociology in particular.

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) (see Amalrik, 1978, 1980; Carrère d'Encausse, 1978).

This article presents a brief analysis of long-term trends that characterize relative strength of national entities.

Let us compare the data for the U.S. for 1990 and now.

In 1990, the U.S. had a population of 248.7 million, which made 4.67% of the global population (one may recall that on the eve of the disastrous decades that followed the beginning of WWI this figure for the Russian Empire was at ca. 8%). In 2024, the U.S. population (341.2 million) accounted for 4.16% of the world population, i.e., decreased but not dramatically. For an economically developed nation with a declining religious commitment, the absolute population growth, even though achieved through immigration, is a remarkable indicator. There seems to be no strong evidence that recent immigrants would not follow the path of their predecessors and would not get dissolved in the melting pot. The Latino community is the fastest growing and currently accounts for 14.7% of American eligible voters. According to exit polls, in the 2024 presidential election, 42% of Latinos voted for Donald Trump, despite his anti-immigration and anti-Latin American rhetoric.[3]

In 1990, the IMF estimated the U.S. nominal GDP at 26.3% of the global economy (the European Economic Community then accounted for 27.4%; China, only 1.8%). The 2024 estimate is the same: 26.3%, up from 21.1% in 2011, but down from 31.3% in 2001 and 2002. The European Union's nominal GDP, following its expansion and later BREXIT, fell almost 1.6-fold to 17.3%; and that of Japan was only 3.8% (down from even 17.8% in 1994 and 1995). Interestingly, while Japan's 'lost decade' (and then decades) became an important subject for academic discussions, the global media hardly seemed to pay attention

[3] https://www.npr.org/2024/11/22/nx-s1-5199119/2024-election-exit-polls-demographics-black-latino-voters; https://theconversation.com/why-so-many-latino-voters-supported-donald-trump-248806

The Congressional Budget Office predicts that the annual legal, illegal, and temporary immigration flow would reach 1.2 million in 2037–2056, and 1.1 million in 2026–2056 (of which ca. 910,000 are lawful permanent residents, including refugees). In 1990–2021, annual immigration stood at 1.1 million; thus, the share of immigrant population would be decreasing (see, Congressional Budget Office, 2026, pp. 6-7).

to the Fall of Japan. The evident dramatic change is, of course, China's growth, whose 16.9% almost equals that of the EU countries.

De-dollarization is most visible in commodity markets (J.P. Morgan, 2025), even despite Washington's dollar weaponization policy. But even amid the current instability, global transactions remain largely dollarized, providing an inherent benefit to the U.S. economy (Eichengreen, 2010), though significantly alleviating the already large national debt: its public share exceeded $31 trillion in February 2026).[4] This debt (sustainable, as experts testify contrary to the popular belief) might slow the U.S.'s economic growth but would not undermine its economy. In the long term, it will probably require a 'robust fiscal stabilization' (Auerbach and Yagan, 2024; see also: Bernstein, Shaw, and Posthumus, 2025; Lichtenberg, 2026).

One should bear in mind that the long-term forecasts projecting the financial situation to 2100 and beyond, though certainly useful for policy planning, might prove fundamentally wrong as completely new factors may emerge. Remember that modern sophisticated math methods failed to forecast the 2008–2009 economic crisis. And nobody could foresee the spectacular and almost global birth rate decline in 1966 or 1976, at the time of heated discussions about the world's overpopulation.

While in 2000 the gap between U.S. investments abroad and foreign investments in the U.S. constituted ca. $1.6 trillion, in 2023 this figure rose to nearly *20 trillion* (almost 72% of the GDP!), and this growth was most spectacular in the recent years of rising global instability, since the COVID-19 pandemics. The main investors are currently Great Britain, Japan, and the EU countries (Medzhidova, 2024). This huge money flow might compensate for both the growing U.S. debt and certain underperformance (which should not be overestimated though) of the industrial sector (Grigoryev, 2024).

Today it is too early to say what the long-term results of Trump's second administration's reforms, foremost the tariff regulation, would be. Will Trump succeed in reviving U.S. industries by tax cuts, protectionism, and the weakening dollar? Will he contain

[4] https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/datasets/debt-to-the-penny/debt-to-the-penny

protectionism-driven inflation? In the first half of 2025, U.S. current account deficit was 4.6% of GDP, lower than at its 2006 peak of 6.2%, though 1.9% higher than the 2013–2024 average (Eichengreen, 2026; IMF eLibrary, 2025). In the third quarter of 2025, U.S. annualized economic growth was 4.3%—faster than in the previous two years and well above the forecasts, while imports fell, despite government spending growing faster than business investment (The Economist, 2026). In January 2026, IMF expected the 2026 growth to reach 1.8% in advanced economies and 2.4% (0.3% higher than the October 2025 forecast) in the U.S. (IMF World Economic Outlook, 2026).

Back in 1987, Paul Kennedy predicted that the "natural" share in the global wealth that America ought to possess was perhaps 16% or 18% (Kennedy, 1987, p. 533), but this forecast would still take a long time to become real. According to IMF estimates, China surpassed the U.S. in 2016 by purchasing power parity (PPP) GDP, with the U.S. share in the global PPP GDP in 2024 reaching only 14.9%—lower than Paul Kennedy's forecast.[5] Nevertheless, comparing nations' PPP GDP makes sense when one measures respective living standards (and hence PPP GDP per capita is a more telling indicator), but the national weight in the global economy is measured by the *actual* exchange rates, thus, nominal GDP reflects the respective positions better (Frankel, 2014).

According to the World Bank estimates, the U.S. GDP share of research and development rose from 2.45% in 1996 to 3.59% in 2022,[6] which is in relative figures lower than in just three countries—Israel (6.02% in 2022), Liechtenstein (5.87% in 2019), and South Korea (5.21% in 2022), but certainly much higher in absolute figures in comparison with competitors, above all China (2.56% in 2022; in 2022, the U.S. spent 2.18-fold more in nominal dollars but just 1.12-fold more in IMF PPP dollars). Nevertheless, we are currently witnessing spectacular successes of Chinese science which has been surpassing America's by the number of scientific publications since 2017, and seems to have taken over the leadership in the quality of research,

[5] https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPGDP@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD

[6] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GB.XPD.RSDV.GD.ZS?locations=US

above all in electrical and electronic engineering, materials science, physics, and chemistry.[7]

Still, just like in the 20th century when the U.S. profited intellectually from the Old World's distress (up until to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the European Socialist system), the academic immigration (brain gain) is greatly benefiting the U.S., despite Trump's fighting against the universities and toughening of the migration legislation. There are four times more foreign students studying in the U.S. than American students abroad, and by 2022, the founders of 25% of U.S. billion-dollar startups had immigrated to the U.S. as college students (Lodge, 2025).

According to the SIPRI estimates, in 2023, the U.S. spent 3.4% of its GDP on defense expenditures—down from 5.4% in 1990 but still a spectacular 37% of the global amount—*3.09 times more* than China which allocates only 1.7% of its GDP for defense. The U.S. armed forces are the third-largest worldwide, with 1.358 million men and women in active service, a bit less than in the much more populous India (1.476 million).[8] Back in 1985, the U.S. armed forces of 2.152 million deployed ca. 520,000 military and civilian personnel abroad (24%), and in the spring of 2025, this figure slightly exceeded 243,000 (18%—lower but still a very significant share).[9] U.S. military bases still encompass the globe, and U.S. Navy ships ply the seas as forty years ago, able to quickly employ force (as in Operation Absolute Resolve during the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife).

There is reasonable criticism that the huge military costs are not very effective, that the military-industrial complex lobbies expensive weapons instead of more useful mass and simple arms (Lachmann, 2020). One may claim that since China spends less, it has managed to overcome the U.S. in this critical field of strategic competition, and that the U.S. military budget and military planning in general are not living

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7 https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb202333/publication-output-by-region-country-or-economy-and-by-scientific-field See also: Honey and Flagg, M., 2021; Baker, 2023; Peng, 2025; Pisani, Boekhout, Heemskerk, and Takes, 2024.

8 https://milex.sipri.org/sipri

9 See: New York Times, 1985; Kennedy, 1987, p. 521; https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports

up to contemporary challenges. Recent American military interventions in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and in Iraq (2003–2021) were lengthy and failed to achieve their goals. In a tragic twist at the peak of Colin Powell's political career, he had to abandon his own doctrine suggesting short and decisive military operations with clear and achievable goals and an effective exit strategy (Powell, 1992). However, although these wars ended in a protracted nightmare for the local populations and further aggravated the complicated situation in the Middle East, the unaccomplished goals were not vital for U.S. security, and the American casualties were much smaller than those in the Vietnam disaster. The current war against Iran might follow the same pattern, even though it demonstrates the danger of being a U.S. ally in the Middle East.

In a certain way, the U.S. still enjoys limited (if we recall the 9/11 attacks) 'free security.'[10] Apart from the U.S. and China, only a few nations in the world can boast to have relative information and communication sovereignty, including autonomous messengers and payment systems. The current military conflict between Russia and Ukraine vividly demonstrates the importance of large armies and military technologies borne out by effective use of FPV drones and Starlink, a U.S.-made satellite Internet system. While not committing their soldiers to the field operations but supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces with its high-tech weapons and equipment, the U.S. is closely studying the ongoing military transformation.

Thus, the statistics and the recent international developments testify to the U.S.'s remarkable resilience. The 'unipolar era' is over but there is no clear evidence of American decline. In fact, it is the spectacular rise of China which allows us to declare the end of the American unipolar domination.

China is challenging the strengths of the American economy, but has not yet surpassed it in information technologies, including AI; materials science; life science technologies (biotech), including medical research; pharmaceutics; genetics; and mass agriculture. The global finances are still revolving around New York. The costs of the Ukraine conflict, huge by European standards, are easily bearable by

[10] The term proposed by C. Vann Woodward in: Woodward, 1960.

the American budget, and the fighting does not engage American soldiers. Moreover, the Trump administration has successfully forced its European allies to pay for the Ukrainian weapons supplies. The U.S. successfully controls the EU and even its large East Asian allies, like Japan and South Korea, to secure positions for struggle with China, in whatever form. Russia feels the strength and the grip of this control, but also the limits of U.S. hegemony. The last but not the least is the domination of American culture which continues growing: the English language now influences even the grammar, syntax, and phonetics of such long-established languages with rich literary and scholarly tradition as Russian: 49.6% of websites are English-language,[11] and the volume of English-language content on the Internet is probably larger. Generative AI systems, including even China's DeepSeek, are trained using primarily English-language content.

Drawing analogies, the U.S.'s present position in the world should be compared not with the Soviet Union's in the late 1980s or even with the Russian Federation's in the early 1990s, but with that of Great Britain at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Remaining powerful, it ceded its first place in the global economy to the U.S., and on the eve of WWI it was surpassed also by Germany. Today, the U.S. is still stronger than Great Britain was in 1913. So, the best term to describe the U.S.'s current global position is *relative hegemony*.

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[11] https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language

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