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How (Not) to Evaluate U.S. Decline and the Emerging Great Power Rivalry

Interview with William C. Wohlforth, the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College

ABSTRACT

William C. Wohlforth is an American political scientist. Since 2000 he has been a Member of the Government Department's faculty at Dartmouth College. William C. Wohlforth graduated with a degree in international relations from Beloit College, worked as a legislative aid in the U.S. House of Representatives, and did his graduate work at Yale University, earning an M.A. in international relations and PhD in Political Science. He taught at Princeton and Georgetown. William C. Wohlforth's expertise covers international security and foreign policy. His most recent books are "America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century" (Oxford, 2018), with co-author Stephen G. Brooks, and "The Oxford Handbook of International Security" (Oxford 2018) co-edited with Alexandra Gheciu. He is currently working on a book on subversion among great powers.

Sergey Markedonov: The idea of declining U.S. world hegemony has become very appealing to scholars, diplomats, and politicians. They describe the emerging order in many different terms. Richard Haass proposed the concept of "Nonpolarity,"[1] Fareed Zakaria formulated the idea of a "post-American world,"[2] and Amitav Acharya wrote of a decentralized "multiplex world."[3] Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, discussing the growing uncertainty in international politics, concluded on the "Unraveling of the American Global Order."[4] Indeed, there is ample evidence of U.S. decline, be it the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, instability in the Middle East, or problems with its strategic allies (Turkey, the European Union). However, even now, the U.S. military budget is the largest in the world. America demonstrates its technological might and economically is one of the leading countries. Is it too early to say goodbye to American global leadership? Is there not particular haste and fashion in the conclusions about the decline of the U.S.?

1 Haass, Richard N. "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance." *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 44–56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20032650.
2 Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American world*. N.Y.: Norton & Company, 2008.
3 Acharya, Amitav. *The End of the American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity, 2018.
4 Cooley, Alexander, and Daniel Nexon. *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of American Global Order*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

William Wohlforth: I have written a lot about the U.S. decline and do not want to repeat myself.[1] Here I would like to emphasize something different: people exaggerate U.S. decline partly because they use different metrics to understand U.S. power than they use when they assess the power of other major states, notably Russia and China.

Two aspects stand out here. First, the United States routinely seeks to do things with its material capabilities that no other country tries to do. The fact that it often fails is then taken to show the United States is in some precipitous decline. As I write these lines, the United States is exiting Afghanistan ignominiously. That event is powerfully feeding current perceptions of U.S. decline. Yet, ask yourself: what other country has attempted to install a democracy in fractionalized, war-torn, traditional tribal society in a landlocked state some 12,000 kilometers away? You could question the United States' strategic acumen for undertaking such a task in the first place. Yet failure to accomplish the near-impossible is a bad metric for assessing power and a highly misleading way to think about comparing U.S. power to that of its state competitors, given that those governments lack the capability and incentive to attempt such a crazy thing in the first place.

If you step back from the day-to-day turbulence of international politics, it becomes clear that the United States routinely asks its military and other instruments of power to undertake intrinsically difficult tasks. For example, scholars agree that extended deterrence is harder than direct deterrence of attacks on the homeland, yet a core U.S. military mission from the Cold War to today has been extending deterrence to faraway allies. Other governments generally do not ask their militaries to devote themselves largely to this task. The result: huge expenditures to produce outcomes (the non-occurrence of undesired behavior) that are not observable. This creates the impression of a hapless Gulliver expending massive sums for little return.

If a weightlifter capable of deadlifting 400 Kg fails in an attempt to lift 1000, that tells us little about his capability vis-à-vis other lifters who've never attempted anything more then 300 Kg.

Scholars also agree that counterinsurgency [COIN] has always been tough and is getting tougher, especially when the counterinsurgent tries to follow international humanitarian law. Yet, the most salient observable U.S. exercises of power have been COIN with, at least in more recent conflicts, an emphasis on limiting noncombatant casualties while also creating democratic state institutions. Defeating determined insurgencies (that often enjoy external state support) in far-off lands while building democracy in a place where it has essentially no cultural or historical antecedents is an extremely hard thing to do. Few other governments try to accomplish such missions. This bias has been especially important in the post-1991 period, as the perceived salience of the non-observable results of U.S. power (deterrence) receded relative to the observable setbacks in the intrinsically harder compellence and COIN missions.

1 See, in particular, Norrlof, Carla, and William C. Wohlforth. "Raison de l'Hégémonie (The Hegemon's Interest): Theory of the Costs and Benefits of Hegemony." *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (May 27, 2019): 422–50; Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position." *International Security* 40, no. 3 (January 2016): 7–53; Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century.* Oxford University Press, 2016.

This raises a second reason observers exaggerate U.S. decline: a lot of U.S. power is devoted to making things not happen that it does not want to happen – yet the discussion is biased towards American attempts to use power to achieve desired outcomes. Power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes or prevent undesired ones. Though research suggests the former ("revisionism") is harder than the latter (defending a status quo) there is no reason to think one is more important than the other in the abstract. Making things not happen is every bit as important as making them happen. What matters is the state's interest. If the chief interest is defending what one has, then the power to produce that outcome is more important than the power that would enable revisionism. The more important an actor's interest is in making things not happen as opposed to making them happen, the more important the unobservable results of power are in assessing that actor's capabilities relative to rivals.

I think the U.S. interest in defending its still favorable global position trumps its interest in making things even better. Yet, in assessing U.S. decline, Washington's recent failure to execute the latter mission tends to dominate the conversation. And the reason is understandable: action grabs attention, yet most of the action in deterrence is unobservable.

The big story in recent years can be read as the United States being forced – both because of the intrinsic difficulty of the task but also because of counter-pressure from rising rivals – to stop expanding its preferred world order. China, Russia, and a range of regional powers have increased capability to ward off U.S. pressure and stymie U.S. initiatives near their borders. But even as it stops expanding its preferred world order, America is in a vastly more influential position, and it occupied when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, despite the fact that recent decades have seen dramatic growth by the People's Republic of China and a notable increase in Russia's state capacity. An example might be Ukraine. Many analysts credit Russia with clever use of military and other capabilities destabilize that country and thwart hopes of its joining NATO. If you accept that narrative, all it is saying is that Russia used some newfound capabilities to prevent yet another former Soviet republic from joining NATO. It has done nothing to change the status quo as of 2014. The U.S. gains in the two post-Soviet decades remain in place.

Nothing I have said denies the reality that the U.S. is less dominant than it was a decade ago. The point is that unique features of the American experience arguably cause observers to exaggerate the scale of U.S. decline.

S.M.: Kishore Mahbubani[1] expressed the idea of the global power shift to the East. Parag Khana predicted the Asian Future for the world.[2] However, Joseph Nye doubted those forecasts assuming that China would not be able to consolidate Asian-Pacific countries and become their leader.[3] How do you evaluate the potential of the East in the future in terms of global competition? Will the growing power and influence of the Asian states be the main challenge for the U.S. in particular and the West in general? Will the U.S.–China confrontation be inevitable?

1 Mahbubani, K. *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East.* N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2008.
2 Khanna, P. *The Future Is Asian: Commerce, Conflict, and Culture in the 21st Century*. N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2019
3 " 'The Future is not Asian': Joseph Nye," Nikkei Asia, February 26, 2020, accessed August 12, 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/The-future-is-not-Asian-Joseph-Nye.

W.W.: Each thinker you refer to has good arguments. K. Mahbubani is clearly right that a powershift towards Asia is underway. P. Khana overstates his case, but there is undeniable truth in his argument that Asia is returning to a much more central and influential place in world affairs. But J. Nye is also correct when he expresses doubts that the "Asia–Pacific" will exercise power globally as a defined geopolitical unit.

IR theorist J. Mearsheimer is probably right to predict that Beijing will continue to prefer a region without a powerful U.S. presence while the U.S., for its part, will continue to prefer an Asian presence. As J. Mearsheimer argues, if China continues to grow, then rivalry on this issue will persist and probably intensify.[1] The rivalry will be global, with the U.S. and China competing in all the world's regions, but the core theatre is Asia itself, and the core issue is a clash of defined national interests, with China wanting the U.S. out of its region and the U.S. wanting to stay.

As long as the United States sustains security guarantees to key actors like Japan, the region will remain contested.

S.M.: In your co-authored paper with A. Sushentsov, you considered what constitutes the tragedy of the U.S.–Russia relations.[2] In the early 1990s, the Russian political and intellectual elites enjoyed euphoria. They believed that all disputes and contradictions between the two powers had passed away. However, the former Yugoslavia crises and NATO enlargements as well overturned these naive ideas. In your view, what factors became the most important triggers of the deterioration of the U.S.–Russia relations? Do you see any chances and opportunities for normalization, and what is acceptable for both sides?

W.W.: Realist theory tends to portray great power politics as a tragedy, without obvious good guys and bad guys. That's how A. Sushentsov and I explain the downward spiral in the U.S.–Russia relations over European security. Even in the 1990s, Russian officials never saw a NATO-centric European security architecture as consistent with Russia's interests. Yes, they had hopes that NATO might be transformed into a pan-European system according Russia a coequal role with the U.S. Those hopes were dashed because the United States' own understanding of its interest would not allow it to reconcile itself to a NATO in which it was not hegemonic. In our view, then, the downturn in relations is not the result over this or that personality or this or that domestic impulse. Rather, it is the outgrowth of deeply set understandings in each country about how best to pursue security.

If we are right, then it would take a rather large geopolitical shift to alter the basic contradictions that beset Russia–U.S./European relations. Still, this doesn't mean that relations need be as bad as they have been in recent years. One could imagine the two powers moving towards a more "live and let live" equilibrium in which they try to agree to some mutual limitations on their rivalry, including in the area of arms control.

S.M.: As a scholar you have paid serious attention to Russian foreign policy, its history and current trends. What do you think of Western perceptions of Russian

1 Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.* New York: Norton, 2014.
2 Sushentsov, Andrey A., and William C. Wohlforth. "The Tragedy of US–Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral." *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (June 28, 2020): 427–450.

strategic culture? What features of Russian foreign policy in the past and present are less understood, provoking fears and phobias?

W.W.: There's no question that in this country there is a significant deficit in Russia expertise. The story is well known: the decline and fall of the Soviet Union and the seeming reduced salience of great power competition led to an exodus of people from the field, and a reduced level of private and public support of Russian studies. I agree with Center for Naval Analysis senior scientist M. Kofman that, perhaps partly as a result of this expertise deficit, one frequently encounters ill-founded claims about Russian foreign policy in Washington debates. Key, however, is M. Kofman's argument that inaccurate or stereotyped assessments of Russia – such as the endless repeatedly claim that demographic challenges will conveniently solve the Russia challenge for Washington – "are not only based on bad information, they have also become an alibi for the absence of U.S. strategy on what to do about Russia."[1] In other words, what often drives faulty Russia analysis is not "fears and phobias," but rather the fact that U.S. policymakers have failed to come up with a coherent strategy for dealing with Moscow.

It follows that, in my judgment, Russian commentators and media tend to vastly exaggerate the degree of so-called "Russophobia" in the United States. People in this country routinely say idiotic things about Russia. But they also say equally idiotic things about other countries. Whether Russia in special in this regard is debatable. I also regularly read and hear things in the Russian information space about the United States that are wildly divergent from reality. Consistent with the argument I developed with A. Sushentsov, I do not believe such phobias and misperceptions are especially important in explaining the downward spiral in U.S.–Russian relations. Hardheaded assessments of national interest on both sides arguably are front and center.

S.M.: Nowadays the idea of a new Cold War or Cold War 2.0 has become popular. What do you think about such a concept? When were the security risks higher: then or now, and why?

W.W.: Literally hundreds of books and articles have been written seeking to forecast the nature and scope of this rivalry. I have little to add to all of that wisdom other than the negative admonition that polarity narrative is too crude for mapping out the change in the material distribution of capabilities going forward.[2] Polarity – which is simply the number of especially capable powers at the top of the international system – is a popular concept for discussing changing power relations and the contours of inter-state competition. Multipolarity (three or more roughly comparable great powers) is likely to foster an order featuring institutions like the balance of power and spheres of influence; bipolarity (two superpowers looming over everyone else) makes competing orders arrayed around each of the twin leaders likely; and unipolarity (a sole superpower towering over the other major powers and everyone else) will tempt the leading state to fashion a global order to its liking. The tale of the current order is often told in these terms: the U.S. fostered a rules-based order against

1 Michael Kofman, "Russian Demographics and Power: Does the Kremlin Have a Long Game?" War on the Rocks, February 4, 2020, accessed September 30, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/russian-demographics-and-power-does-the-kremlin-have-a-long-game/.

2 Here, I draw on Wohlforth, William C. "Polarity and International Order: Past & Future." In Bertel Heurlin, Nina Græger, Ole Wæver, Anders Wivel, eds. *Polarity and International Relations: Past Present, Future.* Springer, forthcoming.

the USSR in the bipolar Cold War; the Soviet collapse led to unipolarity and a U.S. and allied effort to extend that order globally; the increasing trend toward multipolarity has thwarted that effort and is ushering in a return to balance-of-power politics and spheres of influence.

There are two problems with this story. First, neither bi- nor multipolarity captures where the great power subsystem appears to be heading. Multipolarity provides leverage on assessing international politics only to the degree that the great powers are truly fairly evenly matched. Standard measures of concentration show that capabilities were indeed remarkably evenly distributed among the great powers in the multipolar 19th century.[1] But the U.S. will retain too many advantages over China, and the U.S.–PRC pair will itself stand out too far from the others, for multipolarity to capture where we're headed.[2] At the same time, the U.S. and China will not as a pair loom over the other great powers to the degree that the U.S. and USSR did in the formative years of the Cold War, making bipolarity a misleading way to conceptualize the trajectory. By all measures, the early years of the Cold War saw the greatest concentration of power ever seen in two states over last two centuries. The two superpowers dominated all other putative great powers and all lesser states to an unprecedented degree; indeed, each dominated its own order materially far more than even the unipolar U.S. did in its apex as a unipolar in the 1990s.

Second, the great power club commands a smaller share of material power vis-à-vis the rest of the international system than it did in the 19th century and up to the middle of the 20th, when much of the world was owned by gigantic empires.[3] The number of states in the system has grown from about 20 in 1815 to 40 in 1948, when the polarity concept was created, to nearly 200 today. And while most are weak, by many metrics and in many categories the number and power of regionally capable states have been trending upward since the 1960s. The result is to enhance the salience of local imperatives over the implications of the way capabilities are distributed among the great powers, i.e. polarity. Each major power in each region has to think about more and more capable non-great power neighbors in its neighborhood than did the great powers of yore. Even if we set aside norms about sovereignty and non-interference and forget about non-state actors, the great powers' ability to settle questions among themselves and formalize relations of dominance over the rest of the system is less now than in 1815, 1918, and 1948. Much analysis of the diffusion of military technology and other trends in the economic and technological performance of middle or regional powers sums to the expectation that this secular trend will continue.

I see these two problems with the polarity story about the emerging U.S.–PRC rivalry as good news. Together, they suggest a more diffused rivalry than what we saw during the Cold War between the U.S. and USSR. The result may be to attenuate

1 I base these claims on the Singer-Small Concentration index, a modification of a Herfindahl index, applied to the great powers as identified in the correlates of war project and using that project's data on material capabilities and military expenditures, and Maddison's GDP estimates. See Singer, David J., and James Lee Ray. "Measuring the Concentration of Power in the International System." In *Measuring the Correlates of War*. Ann Arbor: Univeristy of Michigan Press, 1990.

2 On the former point, see, in addition to the sources in note 5, Michael, Beckley. *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018; Gilli, Mauro, and Andrea Gilli. "Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage." *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018): 141–89.

3 This is based on measuring the share of total world capabilities represented by the great powers as identified in the correlates of war project and using that project's data on material capabilities and military expenditures.

the degree to which antagonism between the two most powerful countries poisons relations throughout the world and fuels interventionist conflicts as the Cold War rivalry did in the middle of the last century.

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