



Superpowers cannot fall without alternatives

There has been much political soul-searching in the United States about the eclipse of American power and influence across the world. Some have even suggested this steady decline to be irreversible and inevitable. The word 'decline', often associated with empires has entered political debate, with talk of a post-American world and the inexorable rise of China to superpower status, the election of Trump, with his illiberal and populist approach to domestic and foreign affairs and Russian incursions into Ukrainian sovereignty all contributing to the sense of a faltering power. Never since the Cold War has American primacy been so severely challenged. Repeated US foreign policy failures, inertia at home, economic slumps and even the treatment of black minorities illustrated by the 2015 Ferguson riots and the Black Lives Matter movement that has arisen thereafter, have all been utilised to evidence this 'death by a thousand cuts'. When the leader of the Philippines, crudely labels the US President of the free world 'a son of a whore' the implication is that America is dying and friend and foe alike are preparing for a post-American world.

Many scoffed at the rise of President elect Donald Trump and his rather simplistic pronouncements, yet Trump's rallying cry, 'Make America Great Again' chimed with a large swathe of US public opinion. A recent Pew survey showed half off all Americans were very pessimistic about America's place in the world, believing China would soon overtake the United States or has done already. When Trump spoke of retrenching from foreign entanglements, even casting doubt on European and Far Eastern alliances, he found an audience in the US receptive to the call of fixing problems at home first. The return to what some call 'normalcy' seems to have won over large numbers of Americans, suffering the consequences of the financial crisis and the forces of globalisation.

A number of Muslims observing these events have quickly pointed to the failure of American liberalism, the weakness of capitalism and confirming in their minds that American decline is inevitable because of its inherent ideological contradictions. It is easy to see why this narrative of decline would be readily embraced by an Ummah that has experienced the misery of US foreign policy. Trump, with his rejection of foreign entanglements and loathing of trade agreements, his populist call to repatriate jobs and illegal migrants, his rejection of globalisation and mandatory Muslim registers, his call for a better Russia relationship, his gung-ho attitude to China and Taiwan, all embraced by large numbers of Americans would serve, apparently, to illustrate one thing, the ultimate demise of America. However such hopeful thinking fails to appreciate decline and fails to capture what is taking place.

When evaluating American decline or otherwise, the key criterion is whether American ideology remains at the centre of solving problems at home and abroad with the majority of its citizens consent.

Is the United States declining? Can the experience of past world orders shed light on the experience of America today? These orders declined when meeting the presence of an external challenge, a reappraisal of fundamental ideas, the failure to solve problems coherently externally and internally; responding to challenges without the clarity that adherence to an ideology requires and the faltering convictions of the citizenry and political elites to the idea and the method (*Fikra* and *Tareeqah*) of the ideology. Past ideological states experienced this cocktail of decline. *But what about America today?* To appreciate where the United States stands in the contemporary world one must evaluate whether some or all of these characteristics are present.

Is there an ideological failing taking place? America must be judged in relation to this understanding of decline. Although there is fraying at the edges, talk of American decline is greatly exaggerated. America still adopts a liberal capitalist system and its legal frameworks remains secular and it still leads the western world in carrying its ideology. However, ideological coherency remains a fairly effortless task in the face of no real external ideological challenge. The Trump election, does however raise questions as to whether a great number of Americans still subscribes to the values that underpin US ascendancy in the world. That is the values of carrying its ideology.

The conclusions are threefold. Firstly, American ideology remains the dominant source of solving problems and crafting international strategy. *Ideological decline is not the phenomenon America is currently experiencing.* Secondly, however notwithstanding this, there has been a failure to keep America's mission of carrying this ideology alive in the minds of ordinary Americans; and thirdly the problems the US currently faces is as a result of a challenge to American global power.

The challenge to America is not one of decline, but one of maintaining the Second World War order it crafted and its unipolar status inherited after the Cold War. It is here fractures can be observed. American ascendancy after World War II owed itself to a deliberate policy of building global structures; a network of global alliances backed up by military might. This was the method (*Tareeqah*) America employed to convey its ideology. This rule based order sought to create political and economic organisations and at the same time to guarantee this order through military power and security arrangements that would manage the rise of alternative powers. During the Cold War, America led the liberal world. With the untimely demise of the Soviet Bloc, America confronted a new order, its 'unipolar moment' where it could now effortlessly widen its reach to become a truly global one. However within twenty years, it found itself in a world of multiple regional challengers, some created by its own failures. These challengers today attempt to reverse US supremacy in the all-important Europe and Asia region.

Deconstructing Decline

States formulate strategies to navigate international relations. Great states try to dominate international relations and exert influence therein. These great states live in a world of other great powers and so seek to negotiate the risks associated with potential alliances and conflicts. Amongst great states are leading states, those states that exert the most influence upon the world and set global rules of behaviour. Today the United States is unquestionably the leading state and since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, its power and influence has far outstripped all other powers. Some, like Fukuyama, claimed this marked the end to future ideological alternatives. At the end of ideology, it was announced, would come boredom. Conflict and competition would be over more mundane issues and a new world would herald a more peaceful world. In the heady days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Thomas Friedman ridiculously predicted the interconnected world would make interstate war near impossible. No two states with a McDonald's would ever go to war because those in McDonald's countries "don't like to fight wars, they like to wait in line for burgers".

Great powers, whether leading or not, have to devise plans and undertake deliberate actions in the international arena. What is important here is what drivers inform these plans? Ideological states develop their plans upon intellectual precepts. These concepts colour their plans and provide for them an intellectual leadership or a platform for others to embrace and emulate. The presence of these ideological precepts also enables these states to be imbued

with a productive way of thinking, as they become used to dealing with problems according to a clear and constant basis. Non-ideological great powers also devise plans in the international arena, albeit based upon less rational drivers. Russia devises plans in the international arena, however its drivers can be described as nationalistic and value-less or at least devoid of a coherent set of intellectual precepts.

An ideological state builds its international policy upon a coherent set of intellectual precepts. These concepts provide coherency to internal and external policy as long as the majority of its citizenry and ruling elites are unified as to the suitability of these ideas either through conviction or mere acceptance. The United States is built upon such a core reserve of ideas and as the world's leading state, its reserve depends upon the adoption of these liberal values and the promotion of these abroad.

When talking of decline, however, what is important is to distinguish between deep decline and a shift in global power hierarchy. A great power declines when it loses its ability to think coherently, that is, it fails to set plans and execute these plans in a coherent way. A number of reasons may lead to this fall, but primarily for an ideological state it would stem from an inability of that state to set plans from a coherent ideological basis, thus leading to short-term or even an ad-hoc approach to international relations. This schism in thinking is usually precipitated by an ideological challenge that makes those in the political medium and the general society question the health and suitability of the ideology in competing and keeping up. Such a decline that comes from intellectual paralysis would be deep and to illustrate this, the Ottoman Caliphate and the Soviet Union serve as important examples.

The Ottoman Caliphate from the thirteenth century established an order that once spanned the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Eastern Europe. By the fifteenth century it was the world's largest order and established an Islamic system of polity upon its Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. As Kissinger rightly states, "Islam was at once a religion, a multiethnic superstate, and a new world order".¹

Then the Ottomans faltered. The high point of Ottoman expansion westwards came with the siege of Vienna in 1683. Having become accustomed to military victories, the shock of Vienna reverberated across the Ummah. The Sultan in Istanbul had always declared himself 'the shadow of Allah on earth' and thus the path to creating a single world order where all peoples would come under this one leadership was inevitable and to some predetermined. This defeat followed a period of consistent bad news in Ottoman international relations. In the eighteenth century Ottoman gains were reversed, to a ravenous Europe. But what lay behind this decline? Vienna, Egypt, the Balkans, World War One were military failures, however such failures could have been reversed with renewed planning and strategy. These in fact reflected a far deeper phenomenon and that was an intellectual one.

The failure of the Ottomans was a failure to modernise. After Vienna, the court of the Sultan had gradually become sclerotic, as resistance to modernisation from orthodox factions halted meaningful reform. This failure had been sown centuries earlier, yet became evident in the eighteenth century when the once formidable state met a resurgent and ravenous Europe. The combined effects of the reformation and industrial revolution challenged the certainties of Ottoman superiority. Europe developed a productive way to think after the peace of Westphalia (1648), one where states would base policy on secular principles. This allowed them to remove major impediments to progress. The Ottoman stagnation stemmed from its inability to make Islam relevant to the contemporary age, and this was because it was firmly wedded in the notion that the sum of human progress had already been achieved. It then followed that any academic endeavour to interpret Islam from first principles was at

best futile and at worse an attempt to subvert God's word. The closing of the doors of Ijtihad set the Muslim Ummah on a path to intellectual stagnation.

The impact upon the Ottomans was debilitating when confronting a revived Europe. The Ottomans debated to what extent the printing press should be permitted, or whether gunpowder was allowed in warfare or whether tobacco shared the same rule as alcohol as it shared similar effects. With every European invention, no matter how benign, Muslims fiercely debated whether it could be accommodated. Some stood in disbelief at the advancement of Europe, stunned by its new age of discovery. *How could those who manifestly disobeyed the true religion overcome God's dominion?* A belief in the destiny of the world coming under the banner of God meant that European ascendancy was a mere mirage, and the balance would surely once again be reset. Some scholars surmised the fate of Muslims was down to a lack of adherence to age old Islamic *fataawa* and if the demand to accommodate European modernity continued this would no more than solidify this decline. This intellectual incoherency did not just affect those in authority but inevitably shook Muslim societies especially those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that came face to face with European colonialism.

If an intellectual failure was the cause for the eventual Ottoman decline, the same can be said about another ideological state, the Soviet Union. Since 1917, Vladimir Lenin sought to construct a state and society built on the precepts of Socialist Communism. For the founders of the state, Communism was an intellectual leadership to the world and eventually the world would embrace the dictatorship of the proletariat. But by the 1980s the Soviet Union had suffered a series of setbacks, primarily in state finances that severely shook its citizens and allies' confidence in the suitability of Communism. When Gorbachev declared, "we cannot continue like this" he, in reality, confirmed the failure of Communism and his reforms opened the door for rapid decline. For sure Brezhnev's disastrous decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 contributed to the sense of failure, but this alone did not bring down the Soviet Union. Rather, the move to modernise the economy of the Soviet Union by removing the heavy state control on enterprise, crystallised in the minds of many Russians that this rigid adherence to state control was the cause of their decline. This compromise came about as a result of the challenge posed by an advanced American economy. The only option left to Gorbachev was to strike a compromise with the West by removing ideology from international relations, thus giving him room to rebuild Russia. Such a move, together with his domestic economic restructuring was left unchallenged by ordinary Russians and created the grounds for further calls for reform, notably by the then charismatic Boris Yeltsin.

Measuring decline is not a science. However from the aforementioned examples of the Soviet Union and The Ottomans broad indicators can be drawn. For an ideological state to decline, that is a state that builds its policies on a coherent set of ideas, it needs to undergo a process of diluting its basis so as to fail to serve it in life or detach its international political stratagems from these ideological precepts thus losing the ability to think and plan productively and sacrifice the responsibility to convey this ideology to others. For both states, these challenges contributed to a reassessment of the fundamentals of the states' ideology amongst the ruling classes, political medium and general citizenry. Such a reappraisal meant that the states internal cohesion had fragmented and with it the will of the state to pursue failed policies.

What distinguishes the 'decline' of the United Kingdom to the other two states is although Britain faltered, this failing did not lead to a reappraisal of Britain's fundamental tenets. In other words it was not a deep decline, but rather a failure to maintain global power. It was, in other words, a fall in Britain's status as the leading power and its ability to craft and

guarantee a liberal world order. The political will was there but not the resources. This is why Dean Acheson scathingly declared, 'Britain has lost an empire but not found a role'.

US decline?

Is the United States declining? Can the experience of past world orders shed light on the experience of America today? The presence of an external challenge, a reappraisal of fundamental ideas, the failure to solve problems externally and internally; responding to challenges without the clarity that adherence to an ideology requires and the faltering conviction of the citizenry and political elites. Past ideological states experienced this cocktail of decline. *But what about America today?* To appreciate where the United States stands in the contemporary world one must evaluate whether some or all of these characteristics are present. In other words is the ideology failing them? In reality it is not absent. Rather, America's failure is twofold. Its position as a global hegemon is receding and a large number of Americans have lost the enthusiasm associated with remaining a global player.

As for the first failure, the push against American hegemony.

When Barack Obama was asked about the current state of affairs the US finds itself in he characteristically responded, "The world has always been messy" ² suggesting presidents had faced greater challenges during the Cold War, and this is true. However Trump placed decline at the centre of his election campaign. For Trump, 'Make America Great Again' had struck a cord with millions of Americans that feel the country is on a steady trajectory to decay. Obama's inaction over the bloodshed in Syria had added to this narrative. American weakness, the argument goes, has allowed Russia to become a key player in the Middle East, with some arguing President Putin "is now calling the shots". ³ This conflagration of challenges has contributed to the sense of American unease about itself and the belief that the world will soon move beyond US primacy.

It is accurate, however, that America faces a torrent of problems beyond any experienced in recent times, especially in Europe, the Far East and the Middle East. But the presence of problems *per se* is not an indicator of decline of a leading power. Neither is a marker of decline the inability to solve problems quickly. Rather it is the inability to generate coherent stratagems and execute effective plans that would point to a profound failing. Furthermore the nature of the challenges has to be assessed. Do these challenges provide an effective contest to the core ideas that underpin the leading power, or are they geopolitical challenges most leading powers would face in a world of competing great powers. To give an example, the Islamic Caliphate did not decline when the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258. The destruction of the capital shook the Islamic world to its core, yet Islamic politicians were able to reassert their will within time and reclaim Baghdad and go on to conquer Istanbul. This was because there was a deeper ideological reserve and unity of purpose that was called upon to resolve problems. The situation remains that the United States continues to formulate strategy for all regions and in particular the all-important Eurasia area.

The way to understand America's current problems is to observe the challenges it faces in the global arena. If its post Cold War policy was to maintain its unipolarity and undermine all potential competitors, this policy is unravelling at a fast pace. The unease many Americans have of 'global commitments' are symptoms of this unravelling. And it is this fertile ground of discontentment that Trump cynically exploited in his election campaign.

The chief problem America faces is in the Far East. China's rise threatens US client states and security arrangements in this region. China announced last year it would increase military spending by about 7-8% to \$150 billion⁴. China's economy is said to have already

overtaken the United States when measuring by purchasing power parity (PPP) and it is predicted within ten years its size of economy (nominal GDP) will be larger than the United States⁵. China has been expanding its territory deep into the South China Sea by the development of artificial islands, refusing to accept the adjudication on its legality by an international tribunal. Chinese battleships have cordoned off the waters and airspace around the islands and have in effect set them up as military outposts. China's One Belt, One Road strategy also seeks to expand its economic reach by competing with US economic zones. China wishes to invest trillions in integrating trade and infrastructure with the Middle East and Europe as well as build strong maritime links with Southeast Asian countries. The Chinese have also setup the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that has over \$100 bn to loan in Asian infrastructure. Its policy is to rival the international structures of the IMF and World Bank and win over US allies in her region. What the world is witnessing is the gradual pushback of American influence in the Asia region.

The rise of China certainly poses by far the greatest challenge for American order setting. However, such a challenge has not led to a reappraisal of American values neither does it fundamentally provide an alternative to liberal capitalism. In other words, the challenge is one of shifts in global power rather than one that precipitates American decline. The US has failed to manage the rise of China as it did with the rise of Japan. It believed China could rise peacefully, hemming it in with a network of allies and making China content with remaining an economic powerhouse. Yet China's thirst for power to compliment its economic prestige is the normal passage of all great powers. The US has acknowledged this inevitability and after a series of failed attempts by the Obama administration, Trump is expected to take deliberate strategies to isolate and confront the rising power.

Furthermore the global financial crisis of 2008 led to criticism of American-style unbridled financial capitalism from the Chinese. When evaluating the crisis, there were for sure calls for greater regulation and a reigning in of Wall Street, as there was in the 1930's after the last big financial crash, but what was less apparent was the fundamental questioning of a liberal, capitalist economic order. When Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders made a run for the Democratic nomination, questioning the out of control financial sector, his remedy remained firmly within the scope of the system, calling for tighter regulations and reforms. Sanders had not questioned the basic precepts of liberal ideology, but like New Dealers before him, called upon the state to manage a malfunction within the system. Even the Chinese, who criticised the unmanaged free market, provided little in terms of alternative beyond a more authoritarian capitalism. The Chinese model is less an existential threat to America and more China's attempt at undermining America's status as a hegemonic power, especially in its region.

Another problem America faces is in Europe. It knows full well that in recent memory, Europe was the centre of world affairs and great powers. It has managed the rise of European powers primarily through the NATO alliance that connected European security to US security, through the expansion of the European Union and through a policy of containing Russia. The Americans championed EU expansion to keep the three great powers within, weak and indecisive and championed continued British membership to ensure it prevented true EU integration. At the same time it encircled Russia by incorporating the Baltic and eastern European states into NATO, thus having troops and missiles on the borders of Russia. The Brexit vote and the pushback of Russia into Crimea pose problems for the superpower. In the short term Europe faces real threats to its existence with the rise of populist parties and the Eurozone crisis that remains unsolved, however without Britain the real possibility of an alternative security structure to the US and further integration remains a

possibility. This is why it seems the Trump administration now favours the dismantling of the European Union. In recent weeks it has courted populist parties and spoken out against a German dominated Europe.

The chief cauldron of instability remains the Middle East and Muslim World. The Syria conflict has been absent of great power competition, with Russia joining America in a policy of backing Assad, yet America has faced continued obstacles from the rebellion on the ground that has stood in the way of a US solution. If the US witnesses an unraveling in Europe and the Far East, these come in the form of power competition. It, however, knows full well that any ideological competition will come from the Muslim World and the presence of a state that is truly free from Western interference. The rise of Khilafah is seen to be a real possibility and so it has sought to use the ISIS state to discredit Islam and provide a straw man to ferment hatred within its people.

The second problem America faces is to keep alive America's global ambitions in the minds of ordinary Americans. It has been stated that for any ideological power, there needs to be broad agreement about the suitability of the system with the nation's political elites and acceptance within the wider society. For sure liberal democracies allow for a greater degree of pluralism, with dissenting voices commonplace. However this pluralism often remains within the broad boundaries of the adopted ideology. At any rate, radical dissent usually faces censure by the public and press, remains a minor force and at best is utilised by the mainstream to reinforce the suitability of its ideas. There has been at least for a decade but particularly after the onset of the financial crisis a growing discontent amongst ordinary Americans. It is easy to exaggerate this discontent and draw lazy conclusions about decline. Over the past months, the American presidential campaign has unearthed and pronounced these feelings and thoughts. The Donald Trump campaign could be dismissed as opportunist, replete with hyperbole and duplicitous, however he had managed to tap into this discontent.

Ideas are fragile and require reinforcement and nurturing with the passing of generations. Trump cynically exploited a feeling across America that the responsibility of leading the world has not enhanced the lives of ordinary Americans. In the first presidential debate against Clinton he exclaimed, "And we've spent \$6 trillion in the Middle East... we could have rebuilt our country twice," and America should not be the "world's policeman".⁶ When Trump speaks of trade wars and renegotiating NAFTA and tearing up trade agreements with Europe and the Far East, he is responding to millions of Americans that have seen their jobs move to Mexico and China. There is widespread weariness in America about the commitment of carrying the ideology. The Cold War gave Americans purpose, the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts left an indelible scar on the public consciousness. Public discourse is replete with sentiments that America cannot fix all of the world's problems and should refrain from getting involved in far off places it neither understands nor has the capacity to fix. The economic crisis of 2008 compressed the standard of living of many ordinary Americans and the force of globalization has meant many feel betrayed by gross inequalities. In his campaign Trump railed against globalism and called it a contradiction to Americanism. This was cynical electioneering to maintain a lead in the polls, however he will have to respond to this simmering dissatisfaction.

The problem America faces at home is convincing skeptical Americans of the need to lead the liberal world order. During the Cold War focus on a credible state threat made this possible, with the decline of ideological challengers and the failure of the War on Terror coupled with a faltering economy, policy makers have failed to convince weary citizens of this mission, leaving electoral campaigns to promise retrenchment only to backtrack once in

power. Trump is not alone in calling for drawdown, all US presidential campaigns have railed against free trade and foreign policy adventurism only to backtrack once in power. Famously George W Bush critiqued Clinton in the 2000 campaign by calling for an 'end to global social work', only to preside over the most interventionist period in post-Cold War history. Even Obama talked about more caution when it comes to intervention, weary of the Iraq war legacy, only to continue these wars by other means. However Trump for sure has taken it one step further. His promises in reality will amount to little except a change in style and approach. It is believed he will use the 'Islamic threat' to maintain US commitments abroad.

This *fraying at the edges* does not imply America is in decline, rather that America faces a twin problem of a skeptical public towards foreign commitments that may undermine its commitment to be the guarantor of this order and with it liberal capitalism *and* a recognition that America may lose its unipolar status to ambitious regional states, chiefly China in Asia. America must deal with the real prospect of a Chinese century in Asia and beyond.

For an ideological great state to decline, it must go through a reassessment of its most fundamental ideas. It comes about usually from sustained external challenges that question the very foundations that undergird the state. These challenges usually come with alternatives that precipitate such questioning. The presence of challenge *per se* does not prove decline. Neither does the presence of multiple political and military competitors, no matter how sustained, shake a nations belief in its values unless paired with an intellectual thought. America is a nation built upon a set of precepts that remain consistent. It realises the strength of these ideas, notwithstanding the current malaise felt by some of its disenchanted public. Trump may represent the extremities of what American ideology would presently regard as acceptable, but it is hard to believe he is interested in overturning liberal democratic capitalism.

Decline would come about as a result of a shock. And in the case of past ideological states, this shock would combine the presence of a peer competitor in the form of a great power with an ideological alternative. Only the rise of Islam could conceivably do this as only Islam can combine the presence of an ideological alternative with global power ambitions to spread justice. This is why the world needs Khilafah (Caliphate).

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Abdullah Jaleel**

¹ Kissinger, H. (2014). *World Order*. London: Allen Lane. p.99

² Baker, P. (2014, August 29). Seeking to Ease Worries, Obama Says the World Has Always Been 'Messy' . *New York Times* , p. 4.

³ Coughlin, C. (2015, September 29). *Vladimir Putin is calling the shots over Syria - while Obama is sidelined*. Retrieved September 01, 2016, from The Daily Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11900206/Vladimir-Putin-and-the-end-of-American-influence-in-the-Middle-East.html>

⁴ Agence France-Presse. (2016, March 04). *China to increase defence spending by '7-8%' in 2016 - official*. Retrieved September 01, 2016, from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/04/china-to-increase-defence-spending-by-7-8-in-2016-official>

⁵ Wright, T. (2014, April 30). *China's Economy Surpassing U.S.? Well, Yes and No* . Retrieved September 01, 2016, from The Wall Street Journal: <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2014/04/30/chinas-economy-surpassing-u-s-well-yes-and-no/>

⁶ Fortune. (2016, September 26). *Read the Full Transcript of the First Presidential Debate Between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump*. Retrieved September 26, 2016, from Fortune: <http://fortune.com/2016/09/26/presidential-debate-transcript/>