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Is the US power in decline?

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1) Introduction

Big questions need big answers, in the light of the current global situation, one of the big questions that arises nowadays is the fact of questioning which is, or which are the most powerful global powers in the world, in order to answer who will need to face the global challenges that humankind faces nowadays or who will take the lead.

Much has been written about this topic by experts all around the world, and honestly, is very difficult to find new sources or ideas about the topic. One of the top internationalist in which I rely and admire the most due to his extraordinary professional background and knowledge in world affairs is Joseph S. Nye Jr. I strongly believe that he is the one that can give a complete analysis about the current global situation and the role that his own country plays in current international affairs.

Humbly, as an International Relations student, with this essay I will try to answer this question using a wide range of facts and figures from an objective perspective, to finish with a brief conclusion about how I see the world nowadays and answering the main questioning that we are dealing, is US power in decline?.

To answer this tremendous question, first, as a good internationalist, is necessary to answer other important questions that may arise, what is the concept of power nowadays? Power is a concept extremely complex, but at the same time essential to explain the essence of International Relations. Under my point of view, power is the authority that exercises an international actor to other, directly or indirectly according to the resources that they have.

Regarding the US, is absolutely correct to state that the United States of America is and has been the world largest country in all terms. According to *The Economist*:¹ "United States is in our planet a colossus, they lead the finance, commerce and the communications; its economy is the largest all around the world and its military supremacy is astonishing". They are probably the only ones

¹ The Economist, (2002). Power in your hand. [online] Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/1066262>

who can deal with the world challenges such as peace, poverty or climate change among others. In the light of all this tremendous success as a nation, in which I certainly believe that is due to the combination of the power and values at the time of reducing vulnerabilities they produce an enormous amount of envy and hate, especially in the Muslim world. However, is a fact that other international players are now in the game, this is due to the fact that world is nowadays is very small, and it changes extremely quickly. As a consequence it these issues must be consider in order to answer this question.

All major international experts predicted in the 90's a continuous increase of the American power (Nye, 1989), however I believe that the power has risks, and of course, every great power comes great responsibility. In fact, I believe that the real challenges that the US faces nowadays remain silent, and only their desire of resolving them unilaterally may result in a continuous debilitation. However, under my concern, there are two major strengths that should be taken into account, the actual revolution of the information era and the implied globalization, both they have increased the American power, and as a matter of fact, their capacity on influence other international actor with their attraction power, commonly known *soft power*. (Nye, 1990).

Without further ado, this essay will try to answer this big question; is the US power in decline? To do so, there will be available a wide range of arguments and facts that will explain the situation, to finally build a strong conclusion which is not necessary correct or absolute.

2) Discussion

Much has been said about how powerful has become the United States in last decades, as has been previously said, the concept of power is complex and truly relative. The capacity of obtaining results is normally associated with the term of power, but to do so, you need big elements or resources such as population, territory, natural resources, economic capacity, military capacity and political stability. To convert those resources in effective power requires a well-structured policy and a strong leadership, something that the US has done perfectly during last decades, and there is the result.

Traditionally, the proof of being a great power was the military element. A war was the best way to show who was the big player in the international arena. However, the factual change in societies of post-industrial great powers show that they desire the wellbeing rather the political supremacy when there is involve a tremendous amount of casualties. Also is important to highlight the absence of warlike principles in modern democracies have all supported that the military element is important, but not as much as it was in the past.

The United States has developed throughout history a magnificent military element. This issue can be explained by different factors, some can be explained by the investment they make for defence purposes; 583.000 millions of US Dollars in 2015², that represents the 4,04% of the total US GDP, which maybe does not seem much, but comparing to other nations, that figure represents even more resources than 7 developed countries defence budget together³. The tremendous expenditure on defence have provoked the born of a gigantic market regarding security and defence. Those companies sign every year millionaire contracts with the US government and with other foreign contractors. They have also a focus on the population, (remember the rights of weaponry in certain states

² UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FISCAL YEAR 2014. (2013). http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2014/FY2014_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf 1st ed. Washington D.C.

³ pgpf.org, (2015). *U.S. defense spending compared to other countries*. [online] Available at: http://pgpf.org/Chart-Archive/0053_defense-comparison

in the US). Some of these factors help in order to state that the US military element is by far the strongest all around the world.

However, under my concern, the majority of the nations believe that the use of military element may risk the economic objective (economic element). As a consequence, war is not as easy as before, war implies much more elements to take into account, and here comes the paradox, one of the main reasons of the power of new players in the international arena is the arising importance of other elements (economic, social, etc.) and the abandon of the military resource.

If there are new international actors in the international world, who they are? How important they are? As stronger than the US? All those questions are necessary in order to understand the possible American decline. Some say that China is the new international player to take into account, others predict a Russian-Chinese-Indian coalition. Others, they predict that if Europe faces their own enormous challenges may be the ones who will take the lead, personally, I think that is the most unrealistic prediction taking into account the current situation.

China is the most populated country and probably the best candidate to challenge the supremacy of the United States. The fact that the Chinese Government does not like the American foreign policy is a fact, and in various occasions they have invited other nations such as Russia or even France to unify in order to oppose the “hegemony” of the United States. Two well-known international analyst (Pollack and Shaffer, 2001)⁴ believe that *“is not inevitable that China becomes a threat for the American interest, but is much more probable that United States goes to war against Chine that any other great power”*. I believe that, although this affirmation is brilliant, it was made more than a decade ago, and as I previously said in the introduction, the world changes fast, and make predictions in international affairs is always complex. I am saying this because they possibly did not know the upcoming events that the US had to face during the last decade, and the current foreign policy that Russia is known carrying on. With this I believe that is true that one day China possibly will try to change the world in its favour, on all areas, and that means interfere on American interests, but under my point

⁴ Mark A. Pollack and Gregory C. Shaffer, edition of, *Transatlantic Governance in Global economy* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield 2001)

of view, nowadays is more likely that China would only be an ally of other nations more likely to confront directly with the United States, such as Russia.

In one hand, taking into account the economical element, China, although they grow economically at 7% every year, they still are far behind from the US economy in terms of equality, HDI, Purchase Power Parity among other factors. This means that China is now totally focused on develop their economy at all cost, but is necessary to take into account many different factors in order to say if an economy is big or if it is not. In the other hand, I believe that when you are extraordinary big is really complex to continue growing at the same level that in the past, not even counting the global economy crash that the US had suffered. When you are miserably poor, every big step that China takes has a real impact on their economy, and as a consequence they grow. The US and China economies may have the same size but different composition. To finish the economical element analysis, I would like to say that if China would be unable of controlling their population increase, migratory flows, environmental effects of the economic policy and the internal conflicts, among other problems we probably would be talking about the fall of China not the raise. As Nye says (Nye, 2003), policy often frustrates the economical projections.

Regarding other elements such as the social, we can perfectly say that China do not care about their *soft power*, it is a fact that to control 1.3 billion people you need to install mechanisms of deterrence more popular in dictatorship than in real democracies. There is not any power of attraction to other countries in terms of rights, values or beliefs, among other big list of problems that China faces regarding the social element.

The evolution of China being more powerful is truly and enigma, but I strongly believe that if the US remains in the area, keep their good relationship with Japan, do not support the independence of Taiwan and exercise their power reasonably, is not probable that any country or coalition will oppose successfully to the US role in world affairs. If the US and China go to war or maintain a Cold War would be a consequence on a bad foreign policy regarding two major issues, Taiwan independence and the possible alignment of China and North Korea in an eventual war with South Korea. Those reasons more than the real success of China as a great superpower such as the United States.

The other main player that could face the US power is Russia. By themselves, the power of deterrence that they have is a fact, the amount of nuclear ICBM and nuclear warheads could totally destroy the United States and their own decline has the consequence of being resentful to abandon a nuclear era (military element). They have a tremendous amount of prepared population (social element) and natural resources (economic element). The nationalism turn that Russia is now carrying on under the regime of Vladimir Putin would not be the same type of challenge that was the Soviet Union during the four decades after WWII. According to Nye, in terms of soft power after WWII, the communist ideology of the Soviet Union and their transnational organization had a great success for resisting Hitler, and in the third world, their identification with the people movements in favour of decolonization make them really popular, As a conclusion, they support the myth of the inevitability of the communist success. During the fall of communism due to several factors that I will not relate is necessary to say that the *soft power* of communism have disappeared. Nowadays, taking into account the latest intelligence reports by the US National Intelligence Council⁵ state that due to its residual nuclear power, its proximity with Europe and its potential alliance with China or India, Russia may decide to cooperate or cause trouble to the US, but not becoming a global opponent.

Regarding Europe, especially the European Union, is the most likely as an equal to the US. In terms of *soft power* and *hard power* Europe is as attractive as the US but the European Union (EU) now faces tremendous challenges that may difficult or question their role in world affairs. The political and social elements need much more cohesion in order to act as a single international actor on the international arena, not even taking into account the economic difficulties (economical element) that the EU lives nowadays due to the global financial crisis. Under my point of view, the relation stronger relation between the US and Europe will be really difficult to tackle by other international actor taking into account all elements that compound the term of power. Is a fact that Europe is

⁵ www.dni.gov, (2004). [online] Available at: http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Special%20Report_Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress%20on%20the%20Safety%20and%20Security%20of%20Russian%20Nuclear%20Facilities%20and%20Military%20Forces.pdf

the closest part of the world in terms of basic values and the strongest ally of the US in which their power also starts.

3) Conclusion

After doing all my research and taking into account all the elements that the concept of international power has, maybe taking a perspective of an American *soft power* lover I would say that the US power is not declining.

The power itself is changing and is not clear how much the US deal with could. The defence of the unipolarity and the hegemony is an exaggeration, to say that the United States will always achieve the results that they pretend is extremely difficult in such changing world we now live. Nye says (Nye, 2003) that international affairs is like a three-dimensional game of chess⁶. In the superior board, the military element, in which no doubt that the US is the leader by far. However, in the middle board, the economical element, is multipolar in which the US, Japan and Europe represent 67% of the global production, but it would be a great mistake not taking into account China in this board. The third board (political and social element) is about the foreign policy among the players of the international arena.

In the light of these facts, I believe that nowadays, humankind faces great challenges that the US cannot resolve without the cooperation of other important actors, even the protection of their own interests must be developed with other allies, it does not matter if they were and are the greatest nation in history, isolationism would only result on a real decline of the United States.

If the elements of international power remain the same in the US, they are well placed to continue being the greatest nation on the international arena. Every supposition or prediction is really complex due to the extremely fast changing world we now live in, but saying that that the United States in now on decline is an unrealistic alternative less plausible than the fact of saying that the US will

⁶ Nye, J. and Bustelo, G. (2003). La paradoja del poder norteamericano. Madrid: Taurus.

remain as a superpower, but it will not be as successful as it was in this world. The United States must not only preserve their *hard power*, also understand their *soft power* and how to combine both to develop their national and global interests to remain the greatest nation in history.

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