

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies.* Josef Joffe. New York: Liverright Publishing Corporation, 2014. Pp. 326.**

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That America is on the decline and about to be upstaged by new contenders from its position as the number one world power has been an incessant refrain in current literature, not surprisingly among its friends and opponents, but the 'Declinists' in America itself. This, as Josef Joffe lays out in his *The Myth of America's Decline*, is a fairy tale that has been sold mostly by those contending for the office. Editor and publisher of *Die Zeit*, a German newspaper, and Fellow, Hoover Institution and the Institute for International Studies, Joffe lays out convincing arguments countering the "doomsters" who have been predicting the end of the American empire and the shrinking of American power and prestige over the five decades since 1950.

Coming at the heels of the emerging multipolar world, *The Myth of America's Decline* is another addition to a raft of books dwelling on the subject of America and the rest – the Soviet Union, Japan, Europe and China - that runs us through a history of the "declinist" thesis that America is about to lose its dominant position, but, as the author maintains, has yet survived as the "default power" the "one and only to which other nations turn when they cannot take care of international business on their own" (p. xvi). Since the 1950s, as Joffe elaborates, the "myth," mainly homemade, that American is a "has-been" nation has unfolded as repertory theatre, season after season. The long and short of Joffe's argument in six of the seven chapters of the book is that the doomsters in America have been wrong in their panic approach to the rise of contenders that were about to challenge America.

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Joffe's account is based on his own observations of having lived through the waves of what he calls Decline 1.0 to Decline 5.0, from the "Sputnik Shock" of the 1950s, to the turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s, to the rise of Japan and resurgence of Russia, and finally to the rise of China. Even as the clubhouse doomsters like Joe Biden, Paul Samuelson, and the Yale historian Paul Kennedy warned of American "imperial outreach," optimists like Joffe believe that these prophecies have been cyclical decade after decade, yet America remains number one, in most disciplines, if not in all and has never been, and will never be replaced, in the latest declinist outcry, by China.

As if to reassure the American public that America is still very much the only power that many nations still look up to, the first 200 pages of Josef's account run the reader through the "five waves" of American "hasbeenism" to contend that America had always bounced back despite the language of "gloom and doom." What Joffe forgets to mention is the fact that the new political and economic globalisation sweeping the world is leading towards a global geopolitical power shift where America would need to share global governance with new stakeholders. For many of the readers in Asia, a region which is the major subject of discussion throughout the book, Joffe's arguments of America bouncing back after every major crisis since the 1950s would border on "hubris," clearly evident in statements by Joffe that America is still the "Default Power" or the "concert master" that many, specifically in the European Union, still look up to as the balancer and orchestrator.

Nobody can deny that America still has an edge over many of the new emerging powers. Yet, to write them off completely, which Joffe does in his examples of the Soviet Union, Japan, Iran, the EU, and now China, seems a bit trite. The overall balance, as Joffe leads the reader to his conclusion, remains tilted in favour of America because unlike the previous empires, the United States is a blend of the digital and the real, where America, in the global contest, has what it takes to play the game. A counter argument here, and one that Joffe tends to overlook as he holds the banner of American 'triumphalism' high, is that the information and communications revolutions are leading to a global cross-fertilisation of cultures, societies and people.

An astute reader would find many holes in the arguments by Joffe of America as an “indispensible” nation, especially in the age of increasing global social intimacy, with a host of problems including transnational terrorism, global crime, uncontrolled migration, refugees and regional instability that now require new forms of multilateral zero-sum politics that surely cannot be managed by America alone.

The book contains a lot of statistical information, but none is supported by any footnotes. Much of the information is a rehash of current history, personal observations and chatty asides.