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The US Should Celebrate Its Decline

The Upside of Down argues that the U.S. is declining — and that’s a good thing, especially for Washington.

By Oliver Stuenkel
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“Being number one has its advantages, to be sure, but increasingly, we need other countries to step up — and it shouldn’t frighten us when they do.”

The debate about the future of global order is dominated by U.S. scholars who believe the United States’ leadership is set to endure (such as Robert Kagan’s The World America Made, Bruce Jones’ Still Ours To Lead) and U.S. declinists (such as Ann Lee’s What the U.S. Can Learn from China and Stephen Leeb’s Red Alert). Kagan and Jones believe that China’s rise will not threaten U.S. global leadership. The declinists (often called pessimists by critics) believe that unipolarity is soon coming to an end or has already ended.

Kenny’s The Upside of Down does not easily fit into any of these categories. The author early on says that relative decline is inevitable — it is not a matter of choice, as proponents of a muscular foreign policy (such as Kagan) would argue. “It is important to recognize that policies to ‘regain US dominance’ are destined to fail,” he writes. The rise of the rest is not only well under way, he says, it is also desirable. Kenny argues that the United States
should embrace, not resist, a world in which “the rest” catch up with the West. The author is aware that this may sound counterintuitive:

*International relations theory is too often presented in purely relative terms. The realist position effectively proposes that every country is solely out to be top of the pile. That’s impossible for the vast majority, of course, and dumb even for the few for whom it is plausible. This isn’t a zero-sum competition, and foreign policy thinking that treats the world that way is immensely counterproductive.*

Kenny’s comment that the United States could learn from Britain, which is quite relaxed about its decline, is not likely to go down well with foreign policy makers in Washington, D.C. His argument is obvious, but rarely made: The lives of U.S. citizens would not necessarily be negatively affected if the United States were merely one of several poles in a multipolar system. As he writes in a recent *op-ed* promoting his book:

*...the link between the absolute size of your economy and pretty much any measure that truly matters is incredibly weak. Whenever China takes over the top spot, it will still lag far behind the world’s leading countries on indicators reflecting quality of life.*

If the U.S. plays its cards right, the rise of China and India is terrific news — their rise will lift all boats, including that of the United States’ economy. Between 1990 and 2012, the proportion of U.S. exports going to emerging countries more than doubled, and it will soon rise even further.

Interestingly, Kenny writes that “there is absolutely no reason why the twenty-first century should not be an ‘American Century’ — if by that is meant America retaining or even enhancing its global reputation as a country to be emulated.” That raises an important question — is the United States admired for its education, civil rights, and openness, or rather because of its sheer economic and military superiority? Kenny says hard power does not matter at all. That sounds somewhat improbable. After all, it is precisely U.S. economic and military dominance that has allowed it, over the past six decades, to shape the world according to its interests and disseminate U.S. values, ideas and culture. It seems highly questionable at best that the United States can remain the world’s most attractive society once China has overtaken it. For a country that has become worryingly accustomed to ruling the world, anything but being in charge is likely to be quite catastrophic.

Finally, Kenny’s ‘happy relative decline’ proposition raises important questions about who will provide global public goods in the future. Who will provide maritime security, and who will provide security guarantees to countries like Japan? Kenny hardly mentions how U.S. decline will affect the dilemmas of security competition. Put differently, who will fill the void the United States will leave behind in geopolitics? Still, *The Upside of Down* is a great read full of interesting data, and a great contribution to the debate about the future of global order.

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