

America in Transition: Power, Policy, and Global Influence

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Abstract

America has been the dominant world power since the end of WWII: an 80-year run that firmly established it as the leader in currency, technology, military and culture. Looking forward, the U.S. faces challenges both internally and externally that cast doubt on its ability to maintain the top position in the world order. Analysis of the U.S. on diverse data points show the declinist school of thought that America's best days may be behind it. With some help from Ray Dalio's ideas about the changing world order, it's easier to see how patterns from past rising and falling powers could apply today. That makes it pretty clear that China is shaping up to be the next big challenger on the global stage.

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Since its founding nearly 250 years ago, the United States has evolved from a revolutionary alliance of colonies to the world's greatest superpower. Over the last century, the country has led the world in technological development, economic output, and military supremacy. And if one were to imagine America 50 years from now, they might conjure an image of metropolises filled with flying cars, advanced technology, and the U.S. maintaining its position as the leading world power. But today's reality hints at a different future. Ongoing trade tensions, rising debt, political division, and economic shifts suggest that the U.S. may be heading toward a slow decline in global influence. The current administration's recent tariffs on China and other countries, for example, led to major disruptions in global supply chains and injected volatility into the U.S. markets. And it is unclear what impact the tariffs themselves, and possible retaliatory actions from former trading partners, may have on businesses, farmers, and consumers. Continued trade tensions and other rapidly changing circumstances may result in declining American dominance. In this essay, I will explore America's place in the changing world order. Will America preserve its standing, or will it decline in power over the next 50 years? After conducting research for this paper, I am of the opinion that the United States is headed for decline over the next half-century.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has been the dominant power on the world stage, with respect to cultural influence, economic and military power, and its status as the reserve currency. To look forward 50 years and predict whether America will prosper or decline, I first want to look to the past to understand the rise and fall patterns of previous world powers and base my argument on a few critical criteria. These include economic strength, which comprises the nation's GDP, financial debt, a robust middle class, a balance of imports and exports, class mobility, and natural resources. Other measures include education, population growth or decline, military, technology, health, and global relevance. America's historic and evolving role as a global leader is explored through three prominent schools of thought: the Declinist school, the American Exceptionalist school, and the Neoimperialist school. Historian Paul Kennedy, author of the book

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000, “tells Ezzat Ibrahim that the great wheel of history is turning against the United States”

(Ahram,2006). He focuses on the idea that the U.S. is losing its global power and will soon face a decline. Published in 1989, Kennedy argues that powerful nations have to strike an often-impossible balance between their economic, strategic, and military needs. His research includes empires of the Renaissance period through the modern era, which were unsuccessful in preserving this delicate balance, which ultimately led to their decline. In a brief, but most debated, portion of his work, he argues that the United States is facing similar challenges and cautions that it too is headed for decline.

The American exceptionalist school offers an alternative perspective to the declinist one and sees the U.S. as a unique and positive force in the world. Prominent political scientist Joseph Nye states, “today, the world is richer and riskier than ever before. I’m sometimes asked whether I am optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the country. I reply, ‘Gradually Optimistic’” (Nye JR, 2014). Conservative leaning think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, explain the origin of the often misunderstood exceptionalist term, “America thus is exceptional because it is the only country in the world that derives its legitimacy from its start not from a common ethnicity or monarch, but from natural rights—the idea that rights, such as the right to free speech, property, and self-preservation can be observed in nature and precede politics or government. This liberal tradition was mixed with a colonial experience that also made America unique in terms of the people who were attracted here.” Nye, cautiously optimistic about America’s continued exceptionalism, famously coined the term “soft power” as the second dimension in maintaining power. In contrast to hard power, soft power relies on inspiring other nations toward certain actions through measures of “attraction” rather than coercion. In a recent interview with the Harvard Kennedy School, where Nye is the former dean, he explains that “[t]he common metaphors we have: sticks, coercion, carrots, payment and honey, or attraction. And in a democracy, as we work with others, we actually are doing much more with honey, attraction, soft power than with hard power” (HKS, 2025). It should be noted that Nye views the current administration's actions as eroding America’s soft power, which could tip the scales toward US decline.

Unlike classical realism, neorealism sees the anarchic structure of the international system as the main force guiding state behavior. “Neorealism is a formulation of classical realism. Its key component is Kenneth Waltz, who outlined it in his book *Theory of International Politics* published in 1979. According to Neorealists international relations are shaped by structural constraints rather than human nature, which includes motivation and strategy. They also believe that it can be shaped by anarchic principles, which have been widely decentralized, meaning all states have similar needs, but what separates them is their capabilities to achieve those needs. What this means is that nations have to enter into a relationship only with nations that have the potential of improving their capability of meeting those needs” (IvyPanda, 2024).

The United States is in a period of rapid transition, hinting at an empire in decline, which aligns with the declinist school of thought. Throughout history, dominant powers emerged exercising dominion over other nations. “What accounts for such power? A Superpower country is a country that wields enough military, political, and economic might to convince nations in all parts of the world to do things they otherwise wouldn't” (Bremmer, 2025). There is periodic turnover in the ascension to power, as Ray Dalio (billionaire and founder of the world's largest hedge fund, Bridgewater Associates) explains in his “*Principles for Dealing with the New World Order*” (Dalio, 2022). In it, Dalio explores the cyclical patterns that drive the waxing of some superpowers while others wane. A look at past empires, such as those of the Dutch, British, and Americans, shows how nations typically rise by being productive, investing in education, encouraging innovation, upholding strong values, and managing their finances responsibly. These qualities help a country grow economically and gain global influence. However, over time, many dominant powers begin to decline as a result of climbing debt, internal conflict, loss of competitiveness, and widening wealth gaps. Dalio suggests that the US has already peaked and is now in the declining stage of the cycle, while China appears to be in the earlier stages and on the ascent, as demonstrated in *Figure 1*. If Dalio’s thesis is correct, we may be in the throes of another major transition in world leadership.



Figure 1: Visual of the rise and fall of empires (Ray Dalio)

National power depends on a complex milieu of access to robust education, economic strength, military might, right-sized population growth, technological advancement, and the health status of a nation's citizens. When comparing the economic strength of the U.S and China using Ray Dalio's framework from *Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order*, there are a few factors to consider: GDP, technology, trade, natural resources, class mobility, and currency dominance. The U.S still has the world's largest economy with a GDP of around \$34 trillion in 2025 (IMF), while China's is roughly \$19.53 trillion (IMF, 2024). China has a growing GDP rate of 5% reported in 2024, with the US only having a 2.8% growth rate in 2024. (Trading Economics, n.d) (Reuters, 2025) However, the GDP growth over a single year is insufficient as a predictor of a nation's economic standing. A look at historical GDP growth rates over the previous decade paints a more complex story, with China's growth rates ranging from 2.2% in 2020 to 14.2% in 2007 (World Bank Group, 2025). The United States, meanwhile, has ranged from a nadir of -2.9% in 2009 to a peak of 6.1% in 2021. While both nations have experienced fluctuations, only the US has experienced periods of contraction. Various independent think tanks provide conflicting narratives on the prospects for the Chinese economy, citing concerns about local government debt and declining private sector and consumer confidence as signs that "peak China" was reached in 2021 (RHG) (DiPippo, 2025). Others argue that China's investment in its innovation capabilities has put it in a competitive position to surpass Western firms over the next decade (Atkinson, 2024). Taken together, Dalio's perspective along with positions taken by the think tanks, it is clear that the West will have to contend with China rapidly becoming a formidable economic competitor.

One of the biggest shifts has been in the technology sector. In the past, China was mainly known for supplying the world with cheap and low-quality goods, with little innovation or pioneering technologies. Now, however, China is leading the world in producing solar panels, electric cars, and lower-cost Artificial Intelligence (Deep Seek). For example, companies like BYD are producing millions of electric cars every year, dethroning Elon Musk's Tesla as the best-selling EV maker in the world (Stewart, 2025). The US remains the leader in software, biotech, and advanced chip manufacturing driven by companies like Apple, Microsoft and NVIDIA. However, recent US tariffs and trade wars have raised concerns about disruptions in the tech supply chain and competitiveness.

Today, a country's economic strength depends on a complex web of technological advancement and its foreign trade balance. China maintains a healthy trade surplus, exporting far more than it imports, especially in manufactured goods and tech products. This surplus boosts its foreign reserves, which hit \$3.3 trillion in 2023, the largest in the world (TE, 2025). In contrast the US runs a large trade deficit, importing significantly more than it exports. The trade deficit has existed for decades, heightening long-term debt concerns, which Dalio points out are one warning sign of an empire in decline. It remains to be seen whether the aforementioned tariffs achieve their objective of alleviating some of the trade imbalances, though many economic experts indicate that they will further exacerbate the country's economic troubles.

Another big piece of global influence is currency. The US dollar is the world's reserve currency, used in most international trade and held by global banks. This gives the US major advantages in borrowing and global financial power, but there is a catch, which depends on the U.S managing its debts well. Right now, the national debt is over 150.5 % of the country's and it's rising fast (IMF, 2025). (Dalio, 2022) He warns that another sign of a changing world order is an empire experiencing rapidly escalating debt, and correspondingly, other countries start losing confidence in its currency. "China's yuan is slowly gaining strength through countries being involved in Belt and Road projects- a global development strategy to connect Asia to Europe and Africa to increase Chinese Dominance planning to be done in the year 2049, but it is yet seen as stable or open enough to challenge the dollar role" (Futurology, n.d).

Another challenge to American currency dominance comes from BRICS, an intergovernmental organization comprising ten major emerging economies, whose aim is to enhance political and economic cooperation and exert global influence. In an effort to challenge American economic dominance, the group seeks to create a multipolar world, and China has been exerting pressure to make its yuan (¥) the leading currency. T Internationally. The BRICS system reduces dependence on the US dollar and trades in their own local currencies. The goal with this system is to give these countries, Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa more control and reduce the use of the American dollar (Pistilli, 2025). While the dollar currently maintains its position as the reserve currency, pressure from BRICS may lead to it being replaced.

Another consideration in assessing a country's relative strength is the wealth gap between the richest and poorest members of its society. The wealth gap is a serious issue in both the US and China. In the US, wealth has increasingly concentrated at the top. With the wealthiest segment of the American population afforded broader education opportunities than their poorer counterparts. The lack of access to a quality education prevents many from attaining degrees that lead to higher-wage jobs, perpetuating a cycle in which improved economic conditions remain out of reach. Education is explored in more detail later in my paper. "That type of inequality can lead to division, anger and even instability, that also contributed to the fall of past empires" (Dalio, 2022). In China the story is a bit different, with country leaders prioritizing policies to lift the most disadvantaged citizens out of poverty." To take stock of this achievement, a joint study – Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead – was undertaken by China's Ministry of Finance, the Development Research Center (DRC) of the State Council, and the World Bank, with the China Center for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD) acting as the implementing agency. The report looks at the key drivers of China's poverty alleviation achievements over the past 40 years, considers the insights of China's experience for other developing countries and puts forward suggestions for China's own future policies. China's battle against poverty has benefited the largest number of people in human history, said Minister Ma Jiantang, Secretary of the Party Leadership Group of the DRC. To sustain poverty reduction gains, China will focus more on achieving endogenous development in areas that have been lifted out of poverty and introduce vigorous measures to support rural revitalization. Our goal is to achieve common prosperity and high-quality development, including through the rural revitalization strategy with a focus in five key areas: industry development, human capital, culture, ecological environment, and local governance." (WBG, 2022).

Both countries have experienced significant shifts in their middle classes. China's middle class has expanded significantly over the past two decades, while the US's middle class is shrinking because it's becoming harder for people to move up the economic ladder. "Children of low-income parents tend to grow up with lower income themselves. More than 4 in 10 children who started at the bottom stay at the bottom and close to 4 in 10 children who start at the top stay at the top"

(Olinsky, 2013). The US economy is also facing the largest wealth transfer in history as baby boomers pass trillions of dollars to younger generations, which could shake up spending, savings, and investment habits. “Baby Boomers were in the right place at the right time. Following World War II, this generation experienced immense economic growth and prosperity. The state of affairs afforded them the golden opportunity to accumulate much wealth in their lifetime. Boomers—born between 1946 and 1964—are currently the wealthiest generation on the planet. Their mean net worth falls between \$970,000 and \$1.2 million, according to *Fortune*. The Silent Generation—the parents of the Boomers—and Boomers will pass down \$84.4 trillion in assets through 2045. The transfer of wealth will create a wave of changes for Millennials in their ability to purchase homes, pay off student debt, travel, buy high-end products, and invest in the stock market” (Kelly, 2023). Which could be a boost to the US economy, growing GDP, reducing debt, and helping companies grow by investing in the stock market.

Natural Resources are another key strength for the U.S., with big oil, gas, and mineral reserves that contribute to its energy independence. China, on the other hand, lacks these resources and relies heavily on imports. That is one reason why it’s investing so aggressively in green energy, like solar and wind. China and the U.S. use energy in pretty different ways. In 2023, China used 81% more energy overall than the U.S., but since its population is about four times larger, the U.S. still used over twice as much energy per person. China also used about 20% more energy per unit of GDP, meaning it is not as energy-efficient yet. While the U.S. produces a significant amount of its own oil and gas and even exports natural gas, China relies heavily on imports, bringing in 42% of its natural gas, 7% of its coal, and is the world’s largest importer of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG). Despite its reliance on imports, China is the world’s top coal producer, nearly 5 times more than India, and its domestic energy production is growing. China is also investing heavily in renewable energy and expanding its energy infrastructure, positioning it well for its future energy needs (Ball, 2025).

Another key component of power dominance is a robust educational system. An examination of America’s educational system paints a complex, and often conflicting picture. Access to higher education has improved, with a higher percentage of Americans attending college and earning a

degree. Between 2010 and 2020, the percentage of US college degrees increased from 38% to 45.2%, a significant jump (University, n.d). Those with college degrees outearn their counterparts without degrees and contribute more toward economic growth and productivity. That sounds like good news for America in the long term, but the rising cost of college and student debt is starting to disrupt this system. More people are questioning whether earning a college degree is still worth it. , If this scrutiny leads to reduced college enrollment, it can slow down economic growth (Kerney, 2023). Examining education within the broader context of the wealth gap, it is unsurprising that poorer communities often lack the resources to offer high-quality schooling, which puts their youth at a disadvantage and makes higher education out of reach. The cycle perpetuates and deepens the growing educational and wealth gaps. Additionally, President Trump has signalled a willingness to shift educational decision-making from federal agencies to local communities, which critics warn may lead to a loss of public-school funding in favor of private options through school choice policies (Carrasco, 2025). If the critics are right, these policies will lead to a weaker labor force and have negative effects on the economy, and as Dalio argues, a weakened workforce is yet another ingredient that leads to decline. A closer look at specific subject performance, especially in math and reading, shows the US lagging behind the rest of the industrial world. Students in China, Japan, and South Korea perform significantly better in math and science, and the gap is only widening. China is making education a massive priority, pushing millions of students through university programs that focus on future industries like AI and Robotics (Degni, n.d).

Ray Dalio states that even if you are wealthy now, if other countries are better at educating their populations, they will be more competitive in the long run. That is one reason why he sees China gaining strength while the U.S shows signs of slowing down. In my view, I worry that despite almost unlimited access to information, America is still regressing educationally. With the rise of technology and social media, we have lost focus on meaningful growth, both mentally and socially, both crucial components in youth development, in my view. Instead of reading a book or engaging in real conversations, younger generations are glued to their screens, making TikTok videos or scrolling endlessly. It's not just about education in the classroom; it's about how this shift is affecting our ability to think critically, solve problems, and communicate face-to-face. These are

basic skills that play a huge role in America's long-term success, both in terms of prosperity and productivity. If we do not address this digital dependency soon, we risk raising a generation that is less prepared to handle real-world challenges. There are nearly 100,000 public schools in the US (IES. n.d), but quantity alone says nothing about how well students are doing. America is falling behind, where China is quickly gaining ground.

Another factor that affects world power status is population: whether it is growing or declining, and if immigration is occurring with a beneficial or negative effect. When you compare the U.S. and China, both are dealing with population shifts, but in different ways. Like most first world countries, birth rates in the U.S. have been falling. More people are choosing to forego parenthood altogether, while those that do partake are doing so at a later age and with fewer. The lack of a younger population, coupled with longer life expectancy inverts the population pyramid and places a strain on society as there are fewer young workers to support each retiree. National programs, such as Medicare and Social Security are also stretched thin as a result, with less income from a smaller workforce to support a growing elderly demographic. With 2.1 children per woman required to maintain population levels, the U.S. falls short reporting 1.67 in 2023 (Macrotrends, n.d). Fortunately, America is able to supplement the deficit in its fertility rate with immigration. Due to its state as a world power with enormous economic potential, the U.S. is able to attract not just a large total number of immigrants, but highly specialized and talented immigrants who contribute towards strengthening the domestic economy while weakening others through "brain drain". As with the US, China has a shrinking population, but at a much faster rate. Its replacement rate is 1.18 (Macrotrends, n.d), nearly 30% lower than America's replacement rate of 1.67. Currently at 1.426 billion people as of 2022, the UN forecasts that number to decrease to 1.313 billion by 2050 and to less than 800 million by 2100! (Silver, Huang, 2022) That is a staggering 44% decrease in country population within 75 years. Compounding the issue is a lack of immigration that could offset such a rapid decline. China's immigration population represents a meagre 0.1% of the total population, compared to 14% for the U.S. (Poston, 2023). This signals that with current policy in place, there is no help on the way to alleviate the growing strain on the

Chinese economy due to a shrinking workforce and growing elderly population, jeopardizing its position on the world stage.

While both America and China face shrinking populations (this is a larger world issue as well), the U.S. is ultimately better positioned to handle this transition with an ever-growing immigrant population. Of course this presents its own set of challenges, such as integration into American culture, which can serve as another point of divisiveness and internal conflict but does offer a path in the opposite direction that China is currently headed, which threatens its current position as the likeliest challenger to American supremacy.

Military strength both in scale and capability serves as one of the greatest predictors of world power. Paul Kennedy states that “wealth is needed to unpin military power, and military power is usually needed to acquire and protect wealth”, highlighting the cycle between an outgoing world power and a new upstart. He further cautions that “if however too large a proportion of the state’s resources is diverted from wealth creation and allocated instead to military purposes, then that is likely to lead to a weakening of national power over the long term” (Kennedy, 1988, xvi). The military complex is essential to protect everything that makes a nation powerful: citizens, resources, borders and trade. Trade in particular is of importance; Previous powers such as the Dutch and British both controlled sea trade routes with superior naval forces. They further protected sea and overland routes of trade through the establishment of foreign stations, or in some cases, colonies to ensure control and uninterrupted harvesting or exchange of goods or natural resources to further strengthen their position. This key point around military might to protect national interests both domestic and foreign is a slight departure from the historical definition. There is no real need in 2025 to be able to raise a standing army of many millions of foot soldiers to storm the beaches of a foreign nation a la Normandy during WWII. Rather, the vast investment into advanced warships and fighter planes (when was the last aerial dogfight?) is to project power to the rest of the world on the implication that any efforts they make to disrupt the world order would be futile. To achieve this, the U.S. spends vastly more on military spending than anyone else. In fact, of the top 10 countries ranked by military spending, the U.S. total (at #1) would exceed the spending of the other 9 countries combined. In order to keep ahead of this ever-evolving technological arms race, the

U.S. continues to invest vast amounts of money into their military complex, but at what cost? An argument can be made regarding what sacrifices are made in the name of social services (Medicare, Social security, Maternity benefits) to fund such a force.

China has been investing a large amount of money in its military as of late. They have also been making big moves in cyber warfare and space tech which are big factors in modern conflict. “The “moat” theory of national security holds that the U.S. is well protected by large oceans to its east and west and weak neighbors to its north and south. For centuries this may have been true, but oceans are no longer a match for modern technology. Cyber threats have unlimited range, adversary satellites encircle us day and night, and drones are fundamentally changing how war is conducted. While the Chinese balloons violating our airspace in 2023 grabbed headlines, even more concerning are the mysterious drones recently flying over sensitive military and industrial sites in Virginia. These drones, with wingspans of up to 20 ft., have a relatively short range, meaning they were launched by foreign operatives or military forces in our backyard. Over 600 incidents like this have been reported since 2022. Though China has been labelled a “pacing challenge” by the Pentagon, it is more accurately a peer military competitor. Beijing’s total defense spending is now estimated to be on par with that of the U.S., according to the Pentagon’s own estimates as well as America’s intelligence community.”(Harrison, 2023).

“In the 1980’s political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. invented the term soft power, defining it as a country's ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure. In practice, that process entails countries projecting their values, ideals, and culture across the borders to foster goodwill and strengthen partnership” (CFR, 2024). In addition to China’s focus on building hard military strength, it is trying to compete with American soft power by pushing global infrastructure deals through its Belt and Road Initiative project. Military and soft power dynamics are layered, making a simple analysis of gains or losses in relative strength difficult. While America’s current spending and technology far outpace China’s, China’s investments in both the size of its military force, tripling its military spending since 2010 (macrotrends), and the breadth of its soft influence is fast making it a formidable competitor. Couple that with the U.S spending almost as much on its

military as the entire 2025 payout of social security (SSA), and it becomes possible that China may eventually take the lead.

Moving on to technology, this is the main engine that drives the nations forward or holds it back. When we look at the US and China's race in technology, it's not just about inventing cool apps or cool gadgets, it's about who is going to control the future. As previously mentioned, it was the Dutch's superior shipbuilding technology that generated vast wealth and prosperity: "The strong shipping industry boosted the Dutch Republic's rise as a major naval power in the 17th century. During this period – known in the Netherlands as the Golden Age – the lion's share of Western European trade was carried out by the Dutch merchant fleet (NL, n.d)." The U.S. has been a technology driven country for quite some time: from the Model T assembly line and landing on the moon to housing today's tech giants such as Apple, Microsoft, and Google, whose products touch almost everyone on earth. But here is where Dalio waves a red flag, because America is great at inventing things, but not great at manufacturing them. "The U.S. may have the brains in leading AI chip development globally, but China will continue to have the brawn to manufacture applications for those chips, and that won't change anytime soon", billionaire investor Ray Dalio says (Rogelberg, 2025). The U.S. is still innovative, but when it comes to the actual production of things it's a different story and becomes reliant on other countries for materials and labor. This leaves the US vulnerable to relying on foreign countries, which provides them leverage and the ability to copy intellectual property. Meanwhile China has been quietly playing the long game. They have significantly in AI, humanoid robotics and advanced manufacturing (Huld, 2025). Dalio states that China is way ahead when it comes to applying technology (Mishra, 2025), so while they may not invent the shiniest new toys, they are really good at incrementally improving existing technology and applying it for use in everyday life.

No comparison of relative strength and technological advancement would be complete without examining artificial intelligence. The Navy, for example, is using AI-powered drones and unmanned submarines to fight wars. "Rapid progress is made in the field of humanoid/android robots, especially in China and in the U.S. Like drones and other technologies, androids are rapidly

being militarized (Grazier, 2025).” Still in its relative infancy, it is not clear who will win the race, but the outcomes will undoubtedly reshape the world order.

Health: The U.S spent approximately \$4.9 trillion on health care in 2023, which is about 17% of its GDP. This marks a 7.5 % increase from the previous year, with projections that indicate that health spending will continue to go up, potentially reaching 19.7% of GDP by 2032 (CMS). Outsized spending, however, has not corresponded with good health outcomes. China spends only 6% of its GDP on healthcare, with similar rates of life expectancy and infant mortality (Golinkin, 2025).

Additionally, preventable diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and drug overdoses are still major causes of death in the U.S. (Johnson, 2024). This largely revolves around issues of health education, access to cheaper, highly processed foods to more expensive whole foods, and the enormous lobbying might of the food industry. This poor ROI on healthcare spending for the U.S. could affect its status as a world power, as an increasingly unhealthy population will place strain on all facets of the country, including worker productivity, life expectancy, and budgeting to offset rising costs. Changing course would be an enormous task: everything moves slow in the U.S. system due to so many conflicting interest groups fighting for their voice to be heard. No one would disagree that eliminating all high fructose corn syrup from our food would be beneficial to our health, but good luck getting food producers (costs would rise) and farmers (the corn industry would be crushed) to agree to that without a fight.

China is quickly expanding its healthcare capabilities to the far reaches of its territory and has the distinct advantage of doing so at a pace the U.S. can only dream of. Because there is only one party ruling the country, it does not suffer from the same lobbyist influence of the U.S., and can implement drastic, sweeping changes related to healthcare on a moment's notice. During the COVID epidemic, China built multiple hospitals in 10 days or less each, an astonishing feat that would have taken America multiple years to construct a single location (Aljazeera, 2020). Similarly, if it's in the state's best interest to ban certain ingredients or chemicals from the food supply, China can do so without any congressional vote, bill, or pushback from wealthy private companies. Ultimately this gives China the opportunity to construct and enforce a much more effective national

healthcare policy that would not only outperform the U.S. in health outcomes, but at a much more efficient and lower cost as a percentage of GDP.

Another aspect to world power is public relations (PR) efforts and how it shapes perception and global relevance. The U.S. is known worldwide for its cultural (music and film) and economic (technology and military) exports and aided by the fact that English is the de facto 2nd language for the non-native speaking population. As someone who was raised in South Africa, I can personally attest to the huge influence American culture had on my upbringing through cultural consumption and language adoption. China has ramped up its PR in the last 2 decades to shake off its image as a cheap goods manufacturer and a threat or enemy to the West. With significant advancements in solar, AI, and EV battery technology, it no longer copies and mass produces but leads in innovation. The country also has invested heavily in other nation's infrastructure in an attempt to forge good will and positive relations. There is still much work to be done, however, as lingering issues of censorship, currency manipulation, and the lack of Mandarin's prevalence worldwide (although it certainly is taught everywhere now in U.S. elementary education!) represent significant headwinds in surpassing the U.S. in cultural relevance.

Based on the analysis of world power criteria, and taking into consideration the 3 dominant schools of thought regarding America as a world power, I find the U.S. to be at a crossroads. Currently it enjoys its status as lone superpower, with the ability to exert its influence through culture, trade, military, and monetary policy to serve its interests. However, I do not subscribe to the School of Exceptionalism. The current administration's isolationist, "America First" policies are alienating long-standing relationships with allies, emboldening competitors who see a window of opportunity to change their narrative, and eroding the idea that America as the world power is for the good of the world. Similarly, I do not see the U.S. continuing to play the dominant, neorealist-style power in the future. The world is shifting—our grip on global influence is loosening, not tightening. With internal division, economic competition, and our retreat from leadership roles on the world stage, I think we are moving toward a multipolar world where America is just one of several big players, not *the* player. The idea of America in decline has been touted numerous times since WWII, but this time it feels different, largely due to internal factors vs. external factors. We

are more divisive politically than ever before, with an eroding independent base and migration to extremes on the left and right, making compromise in government almost a lost cause. Foreign interference via social media certainly plays a role, but policies implemented by our own government with regards to tariffs threaten our position as the world arbitrator, shakes confidence in our allies and emboldens our competitors who may see an opening to capture a larger share of the world stage. Coupled with declining education, worsening health, increased consumer spending and a decrease in willingness to work, America certainly fits somewhere on Ray Dalio's curve towards after the apex and on the decline. How far along and how much time the U.S. has left as the dominant world power is unknown, but with the shrinking of the world due to technology and transportation, I believe the next transition will happen much more rapidly than it has in the past, establishing a new world order.

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