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The end of the 'forever war'

Taliban forces of 75,000 overran the well-equipped 300,000+ strong Afghan army, trained and supported by US-NATO military, in a world-shattering week that toppled the US Afghan client regime and bought to a historic close that era of neoconservative US foreign policy that symbolically began with 9/11 and the Global War on Terrorism. The event has been taken as further indicative evidence of the end of American Empire. The ignominious end of the Afghan War after twenty long years, often referred to as the 'forever war', was brought to an abrupt end by Joe Biden in such haste that it surprised everyone and caused a rift with NATO allies who wanted to stay a presence in Afghanistan. Whatever spin can be placed on the end of US involvement, the withdrawal was messy and unplanned, air lifting US troops and well over 120,000 Afghan US supporters from Kabul airport. Many more Afghans who were part of the US war effort remain trapped in the country. Even with American support, the Afghan army was routed in a week and the Afghan government also collapsed. The embattled president Ashraf Ghani fled the country reportedly with a 'helicopter full of cash'.¹ His swift departure left the best possible opening for the Taliban, who are talking of forming an 'open, inclusive Islamic government' and have established an interim government yet without the representation of women. President Biden first went on record as saying that nation-building was never part of the original mission yet the official justification for the Americans being in Afghanistan after the killing of Bin Laden had evaporated.² Mission-creep set in with the downscaling US forces from 20,000 a couple of years ago to less than 2,000 in the final years. The thousands of defence contractors in Kabul indicated a massive privatisation (neoliberalisation) of US military effort including contracting-out of training, introduction of new AI weapon systems, military intelligence, coordination and logistical support. The coordination of the US mission had badly faltered; even US allies were not kept informed of the immediate withdrawal. Yet the scramble was poorly planned, no doubt also designed to avoid the possible embarrassment of a massacre at Kabul airport. It might be argued that the Marshall Plan, formally the European Recovery Program (1948–51), was by contrast 'successful': it transferred over US\$13 billion for economic rebuilding of the economy aimed at establishing the free market to create a bulwark against communism in Europe.

The global perception of US foreign policy indicated not only a global loss of face but also the recognition of problems with foreign policy transitions from Trump to Biden and a degree of confusion in the White House. Again, the truth of a poorly equipped indigenous enemy fighting for their own homeland against a technologically sophisticated world superpower has struck a chord. This has been an enduring lesson of US foreign policy since Vietnam. Biden tried a succession of excuses, most recently explaining that no longer is the US committed to the view that 'freedom' and 'democracy' can be installed through a military campaign, or against the collective will. It is clear that the Taliban now want to establish a government that is both representative and recognized by the rest of the world. China, Pakistan and Russia have already

indicated a sympathetic reception of the Taliban government. The Taliban honoured their pledge not to attack and allowed US forces safe passage until the 31st August, 2021.

Women's rights and education for girls in Afghanistan will be the real litmus test on how far the Taliban has come into the twentieth century—a non-negotiable issue with the West that the Taliban must register if it is to become a full world state with UN membership. The military evacuation, the largest since Dunkirk, could otherwise have been a blood bath. The establishment of an Islamic Republic in Afghanistan run through a form of democratic government is not what the US wanted but now it is here to stay for a while. Afghanistan, the so-called 'graveyard of empires', now returns to (a second) Taliban government, an Islamic Emirate, that may surprise us all. Already the regional land-bridge from China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran looks like a substantial BRI corridor. The Anglophone countries must really search for common ground with serious scrutiny of the version of Sharia law that the Taliban represents. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a Deobandi religious-political revivalist movement within Sunni Islam has historic links to the Hanifi school, one of the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence based on the work of Abu Hanifa in the eighth century.³

The end of the war in Afghanistan has significantly added to discourse that predicts the decline of the American Empire. One form of these 'discourses of declinism' is historical, after Edward Gibbon's (1776-8) *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which holds a central place in western historiography. It provides an account based on the loss of virtue by citizens and the hiring of mercenaries with some similarities to the tens of thousands of American and European defence contractors that vie for funds. But the decline Gibbon focuses on is not military overreach but moral decline. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is certainly pertinent as one of the very first historical accounts of the fall of a great power but 'discourses of declinism' are characteristic of Abrahamic eschatological narratives and apocalyptic cultures and since taken many other forms.

Collapsology

The discourse of *collapsology* is a scientific endeavour that utilises complexity theory with a transdisciplinary line of inquiry assessing the risks of the collapse of contemporary industrial society, including climate warming, mass extinctions, floods and fire, overpopulation, scarcity of resources, and the increasing frequency of natural disasters. It seems that the 'end-times' discourse of eschatological narratives common to a number of the world's major religions has coalesced with scientific discourses based on ecological principles that began with The Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) and Paul Ehrlich (1968) *Population Bomb*. There were clear predecessors in Thomas Malthus and Karl Marx. Similar themes have been developed by Joseph Tainter's (1988) *The Collapse of Complex Societies* that investigates past civilizations in terms of complexity theory, network theory and energy economics. He advances the idea that the ultimate explanation is an economic one based on diminishing returns on investments in social complexity. Jared Diamond's (2005) *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* broadened the debate focusing on environmental damage and climate change exacerbated by globalization and rapid population, confounded by poor political choices growth, that has hastened the risk of a global ecological collapse. Diamond (2005) defined collapse as 'a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time.' He uses the 'comparative method' to examine 'past and present societies that differed with respect to environmental fragility, relations with neighbors, political institutions, and other "input" variables postulated to influence a society's stability' (p. 8).

This interdisciplinary field has addressed the problem of 'growing systemic instabilities' and the creation of a sustainable environment with the publication of Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens' essay (2020) *How everything can collapse: A manual for our times*. Collapse is seen as a

remote possibility: ‘we find it hard to face up to the very real possibility that these crises could produce a collapse of our entire civilization’. They argue ‘Collapse is the horizon of our generation. But collapse is not the end – it’s the beginning of our future.’ The Momentum Institute to which they belong investigates issues to do with the Anthropocene including the risk of collapse and degrowth policies. The institute was established in 2011 by Agnès Sinaï, a political ecologist and anti-globalist journalist known for her trilogy *Politics of the Anthropocene* (2013, 2015, 2017). The best introduction to this emerging literature is the French humanities journal *Cairn.info* which published *The Age of Catastrophe?* (2020) with essays by François Hartog, Emmanuel Hache, Pierre Charbonnier, Romain Noël and Gabriel Salerno, and the American philosopher Eugene Thacker. The issue begins: ‘Which term do you prefer? Apocalypse, catastrophe, collapse, or extinction? It’s just a matter of taste. For some years now, the fear of cataclysmic climate change has spawned a vast literature in the social sciences, and France has not stood on the sidelines. This dossier presents a broad overview of the main arguments put forward.’⁴ Eugene Thacker (2020) asked ‘Do you think people are wrong to focus on such issues as climate change and the sixth extinction?’ responds:

On the one hand, I do think that the era we’re witnessing is unique in several respects. Global pandemics, state-of-exception quarantines, protests and rioting in the streets, food and resource insecurity, and Deep State Star Chamber conspiracies involving BSL-4 Labs, 5G, Big Pharma, chem trails, geoengineering, Soyilent Green, and possibly even other-dimensional aliens. But on the other hand, I take a look at chronicles of the Black Death or the Great Plague of 1665 or the 1918 flu and wonder if this isn’t the same tired human drama being played out over and over again. If there is something unique about the “now,” perhaps it has to do with contradiction: a world view that demands a new logic, a logic of rifts, gaps, lacunae. On one side, an extensive world, a non-human world; on the other, an intensive world, a human world. On one side, a shifting climate and changing planet. On the other, a multitude of social media bubbles that serve as insulating echo-chambers for humans incessantly gazing at themselves.⁵

More pragmatically, I would argue that we must all become more aware scientifically of characteristics of collapse of complex ecosystems and its global characteristic and dimensions. I am inclined to follow the likes of Melinda Pálkás (2018) who reviews the characteristics of collapsing ecosystems:

The synergistic effects of direct human perturbations and climate change have been causing the mass extinction of species. The current extinction rate is about 100–1000 times the background rate. The local biodiversity intactness in terrestrial ecosystems is perhaps already beyond the planetary boundary on more than half of the world’s land surface [1]. About 70% of the forests are within 1 km of the forest edges, which reduces biodiversity by 10–70% [2]. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species [3], 10–30% of the world’s amphibian, bird and mammal species are threatened by extinction. Wilson [4] suggests that half of the species will face an extinction by 2100. Nonlinearities, positive feedbacks, abrupt collapses and regime shifts are being observed globally. The rate of temperature increase, ocean acidification, sea level rises, anoxic ocean dead zones and extinctions make the recent mass extinction comparable with the “Big Five”, even with the greatest End Permian extinction event, which wiped out 90% of species [5].⁶

She indicates that the first stage of mass extinctions have been driven by deterministic factors attributable to direct human effects that undermine biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems and the next stage will be characterised by stochastic events that ‘bring about sudden collapses of weakened ecosystems’. The outstanding political question concerns collective will formation within a multipolar international system to avoid global catastrophe through climate warming.

Geopolitical and military overreach

Yet even so there does seem to be something to the theory of US geopolitical and military overreach focused on the issue of whether the 800-1000 US bases around the world are sustainable or, indeed, an appropriate response to Chinese ‘infrastructuralism’ and the rising economic power of China in the Asian Century. The Watson Institute report that US militarism since

9/11: '(i) The US federal price tag for the post-9/11 wars: \$8 trillion; (ii) Deaths in the post-9/11 wars: 929,000; (iii) Civilians killed as a result of the fighting: 387,000.⁷ These statistics should not disguise the extent to which the American war machine is tired and outworn. Paul Kennedy (2021) asks the inevitable question 'is the era of Pax Americana ending, to be replaced by the Asian century?' only to postpone an immediate answer to recognise the way the international system no longer a bipolar one, now comprised of a multipolar system dominated by several large states including China, US, India and Russia, not to mention the European Union, Japan, Indonesia and Iran, none of which can command the others and which require coordination through world agencies like the UN. Examining the changes from the context of the 1980s after the fall of the Soviet system, Kennedy (2021) notes 'America's armed forces are considerably smaller and older than they were in the 1980s'.

In the twenty-first century many US commentators in various opinion pieces and policy briefs have suggested effectively the end of long-run Western global dominance. Paul Kennedy (1987) in *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, correlated Great Power ascendancy with economic resources and warned of military overstretch. Many commentators hold that the era of Western hegemony seems to be coming to an end with the economic shift from West to East gathering pace. Robert Kagan (2004, 2021) of the Brookings Institute and co-founder the infamous 'Project for the New American Century' has consistently argued that the decline of America is a myth and that it will remain a superpower. The economic shift from West to East should not be taken as evidence of American decline even though it clearly presages the rise of Asia and the increasing dominance of China. It may mean the waning or the end of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019) but who knows what new political, military or trading relationships the 'Five Eyes' Anglophone countries of US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand will enter into, or with whom.

Decline of the West/rise of Asia

The decline of the West has been a powerful world historical narrative and an essential part of the dialectic of the rise of Asia since the early twentieth century. Oswald Spengler's (1991; 1918) *The Decline of the West* involved a rejection of the Eurocentric view of history to indicate that the civilization decline of cultures considered as organic entities lasted approximately 1000 years. Western medieval philosophers held the westward movement of events that once it reached the end of the earth it would have to confront the idea that we are approaching the end of the ages. This becomes a common theme in the onto-epistemology of the eighteenth century, driven by the theological speculation of the Abrahamic religions. Hegel's (2001, orig. 1857) lectures on the philosophy of history described meaning in terms of the realization of human freedom. He found the first phase in Asia but he argues that while the political life of the East exhibits rational freedom it does so without advancing subjective freedom. In China and India in contrast to the West, there was mere 'duration, stability...ahistorical history.' In the 19th century economically deterministic theories tied the decline of the West to the rise of the East. Marx's initially saw China in terms of the 'Asiatic mode of production' ruled by an urban clique who appropriated the surplus in a pre-capitalist mode of production. Yet the Marxist view of history, as President Xi puts it, 'illuminated the path of humanity's exploration of the law of history and humanity's search for their own liberation.'⁸

These are highly speculative matters with deep historiographical assumptions that require careful treatment and the evaluation of deeply buried eschatological assumptions. Contemporary historical developments and growth forecasts does not mean that transition to the 'Asian Century' is guaranteed even although it looks inevitable. Asia faces great cultural and religious diversity and it faces many new risks including growing inequality. Major differences in modes of governance, including the rise of Islamic states such as Indonesia, the existence of Communist

governments in China and Vietnam, and the emergence of strong capitalist democracies like Singapore and South Korea, should not necessarily impact on regional integration through trade. ASEAN has successfully negotiated major free trade agreements (TPP, RCEP) but must confront a raft of ecological and political problems including those of perceived legitimacy.

The *Economist's* series on America's changing geopolitical standing and the future of American power contains articles by those who warily predict decline and those who advance the thesis that America's civilisation will prevail.⁹ Some years ago Kumar (2014) commented on the return of the concept 'civilization' and Arnold Toynbee's use of it to argue for the equal value of all civilizations yet the rise of China was not so much on the radar as it is today. If we roll back the years to George Bush's 'The War on Terrorism' we can see the beginning of the neoconservative 'Project for the American Century' founded by William Kristol and Robert Kagan which precipitated by 9/11 led to the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq.¹⁰ It was ultimately a narrative about moral decline and corruption at home. The think-tank developed a robust interventionist form of Reagan global militarism initiating a period of which the end of the war in Afghanistan is the conclusion. An Indian paper, *The Financial Express* suggests: 'Withdrawal from Afghanistan will mark the end of the American empire: India should return to the strategic fundamentals. In all probability, Afghanistan could return to the 1996 situation or maybe not, as some would like to believe. But the Biden administration wouldn't care less for the ensuing regional fallout.'¹¹

US declinism

This adds to the chorus of scholars who embrace a version of 'declinism', the general view that, following Oswald Spengler, that the West is in a period irreversible decline while the East is rising. The theory has been applied specifically to the end of the American Empire, sparked by the rapid and unseemly end of the war in Afghanistan. Thus, the conservative British historian Niall Ferguson (2021) suggests that the end of America's empire won't be peaceful and that as America pulls out from twenty years of war in Afghanistan, America's decline mirrors Britain's a century ago.¹² Rebecca Gordon (2021) writing for *The Nation* suggests the 'The US Empire Is Crumbling Before Our Eyes' with signs of the same factors that caused the Roman Empire to collapse: 'gross economic inequality; over-spending on military expansion; political corruption; deep cultural and political fissures.'¹³ She first discusses the doctrines –Munroe, Truman, Bush—that have been used to legitimate imperial reach through which America has extended its territorial acquisition and control, including the 'neocolonial model' to gain control of poorer countries under the Washington Consensus and structural adjustment policies. The true extent of imperial power after the collapse of the Soviet Union was revealed in Bush's 'unipolar world' as part of the neoconservative Project for the American Century that set the stage for invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the Iraq War. Twenty-first century America after Trump exhibited 'an empire in decay' based on: 'Grotesque Economic Inequality, Wild Overspending on the Military, Corruption So Deep It Undermines the Political System, and A Country in Ever-Deepening Conflict'.

Wade Davis (2020), who holds a chair in 'Cultures and Ecosystems at Risk' at the University of British Columbia, talks of the 'Unraveling of America' and how COVID-19 signals the end of the American era.¹⁴ He clearly embraces a version of declinism:

No empire long endures, even if few anticipate their demise. Every kingdom is born to die. The 15th century belonged to the Portuguese, the 16th to Spain, 17th to the Dutch. France dominated the 18th and Britain the 19th. Bled white and left bankrupt by the Great War, the British maintained a pretense of domination as late as 1935, when the empire reached its greatest geographical extent. By then, of course, the torch had long passed into the hands of America.

In these ‘declinist discourses’ much is made of a divisive politics that has disabled democracy as an operating system with a heavily polarised polity and the politics of insurrection still in the air in Washington with a solid far-right element backing Trump at the next election and parties split along lines of racist (BLM) and sexist (abortion) politics. How can a split America lead the world on risks of global collapse when it cannot even heal its own divisions or provide for the collective welfare in a pandemic of its own people?

Decline and fall

China is only *one* player in the new multipolar international system although it is the one that has been most demonised in the China-threat discourse crafted by Trump and to a large extent continued by Biden in the trade and tech wars (Peters, 2019, 2021; Peters et al., 2021). The belief in ‘declinism’ is to be traced to the western historiographical tradition dating from Edward Gibbon’s (1974; orig. 1776-8) *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and arguably represents an apocalyptic vision that stretches back even further to the *Book of Revelation* as part of Christian eschatological understanding and a theology of creation entailing a teleological view of nature moving towards a transcendent future. It is not surprising that the Christian Right are ready to believe the fulfilment of these dangerous Biblical narratives they anxiously perpetrate. The same deep cultural assumptions are embodied in all Abrahamic religions that vitiate historical writing and today also surfaces differently but strongly in poststructuralist and post-modernist discourses giving rise to cyclical theories of historical and cultural renewal. Gibbon was the first historian in English to give an ‘evidential’ vision of the decline of the Western society based on the experience of the Roman Empire that collapsed through the loss of virtue by its citizens. It became a historical model thereafter developed differently by Marx, Goethe, Nietzsche, Vico, Spengler, Gramsci and Toynbee. Gibbon’s ‘model’ raised the inescapable comparison for both the British and American empires, contributing to an explanation of moral decline that has caused the decadence of society, the degeneration of institutions and infected the general health of liberal government – a kind of internalist theory of natural growth that contains the seeds of its own decay.

If we have passed from the Cold War bipolar system of international relations to a multipolar system comprised of China, US, India, Russia, EU, and Japan it is necessary also to acknowledge various political and trade associations like ASEAN and the Eurasian Economic Union. Under this new international system, if it is to work in the interests of the global community, it is an urgent and necessary priority to reform and strengthen world institutions like the UN, WTO, and WHO and streamline decision-making. Only a multipolar international system working in concert is able to avoid global catastrophes like Covid-19 and an impending ecological collapse.

Notes

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/ashraf-ghani-taliban-russia-kabul-b1903300.html>
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/23/bidens-claim-that-nation-building-afghanistan-never-made-any-sense/>
3. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0082.xml>
4. <https://www.cairn-int.info/dossiers-2020-9-page-1.htm>
5. <https://www.cairn-int.info/dossiers-2020-9-page-1.htm>
6. <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/61597>
7. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>
8. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>
9. <https://www.economist.com/future-of-american-power>
10. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130609011554/http://newamericancentury.org/>

11. <https://financialexpress.com/world-news/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-will-mark-the-end-of-the-american-empire-india-should-return-to-the-strategic-fundamentals/2239105/lite/>
12. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/08/20/niall-ferguson-on-why-the-end-of-americas-empire-wont-be-peaceful>
13. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/american-empire-decline/>
14. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/covid-19-end-of-american-era-wade-davis-1038206/>

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