Is the “American Century” over? I am asked this question in nearly every meeting and interview. The context will vary. One group will cite America’s perilous fiscal situation where we borrow funds to unsustainable levels and refuse to come together politically to solve the problem. Others cite a soaring Chinese economy that may overtake us by the end of the decade. Is America now a diminishing power?

Through history, there have been only three true international systems. The first started in 1648 with the rise of the modern nation-state. This international system was centered in Europe, with European powers competing locally and extending their reach to globe-spanning empires. This international system was violent, breaking down frequently into terrible wars. It also was persistent, lasting some 300 years. World War II broke the back of the European empires and ended this first epoch.

The second international system emerged following World War II as the United States, leading a struggling band of European allies, stood opposite the Soviet Union and its captive colonies. This international system was about ideas more than money and resources. The nuclear arsenals of the two superpowers forced moderation in their standoff, though there were numerous skirmishes in proxy states where surrogates battled, drawing in support from the two camps. This international era ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Starting in 1990 we have seen the emergence of a third international system. This system is
characterized by a single global superpower—the United States—and a series of regional powers that exert influence beyond their region: Brazil in South America, India in South Asia, the European Union in Europe, Japan and China in East Asia. In the early days of this epoch, America’s power was towering, leading some to talk alarmingly about the “hyper-power,” arguing that America was too powerful and that other states needed to counterbalance the United States.

Now the prevailing arguments assert America’s diminishment. Surely the recession has had an enormous impact. Not only do the soaring deficits constrain our policy options, but the origins of the great recession and our difficult national recovery efforts have diminished our moral standing. But is America’s day over?

No. The fundamentals of national power rest with several objective factors. America’s population is large and growing, thanks largely to immigration. Despite the rancorous partisan debates in Washington, there is a profound public consensus on the foundations of American civil and political society. Change is pursued within the system. There are no calls for changing the system. Our economy is struggling with excess housing stock and government deficits. But American businesses have weathered the recession well.

Research and development spending—the foundation of future ideas and products—is soaring. Our universities—still ranking among the best in the world—are getting better every day. Our military is resilient after almost ten years of war, with the most battle-tested officer and noncommissioned officer corps in history. And while defense spending is high, it commands only 3 percent of our gross national product. From the standpoint of fundamentals of national power, America remains a titan.

Yet there is one major problem, and that is our continuing military actions in Afghanistan. As a realpolitik pragmatist, I survey the situation we find ourselves in with some detachment. A global superpower, if it is to retain this status, must be careful to use its considerable military resources wisely. We should use military force only where vital national interests are at stake, and only where the application of force can alter the geopolitical forces in a region to our advantage.

Objectively, this is not the case in Afghanistan. We have more than 100,000 military personnel in Afghanistan and are spending more than $100 billion a year fighting this insurgency. Yet the regional powers—Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and India—have as much or more political influence in Afghanistan than we do. There is no political solution to Afghanistan that they cannot affect and veto. They have vital interests in Afghanistan where we do not. In short, Afghanistan is an operation that erodes our status as the global superpower by consuming our military power and national treasure in pursuit of a political solution that will be determined by others.

We need to extricate ourselves from Afghanistan. How we get out does matter. But getting out of Afghanistan needs to be a priority.

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