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Is America's Significance Sliding in Global Affairs?

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To the surprise of many observers, German Chancellor Angela Merkel last month said publicly and repeatedly that Europe could no longer rely on the United States of America.

Since World War II, this was the first time a German Chancellor had openly expressed lack of trust in the U.S. President Trump's isolation at the G 20 meeting in Hamburg was another sign of the U.S.'s sliding importance in world affairs.

According to Arnold Toynbee, the 20th Century British historian and philosopher, human history is the story of the rise and fall of civilizations. In the context of Mr. Toynbee's widely accepted thesis, what recently transpired in Germany must be a sign of concern to those who support the U.S. leadership role on the international scene. And very likely, it is a mark of satisfaction to those who oppose the leading role the U.S. plays among the community of nations.

But is it plausible that the U.S. with its technological lead, \$18.5 trillion economy, and well-financed military could go the way of other civilizations and prove powerless in preventing its own breakdown?

If we accept Arnold Toynbee's theory, the short answer would be yes. The U.S. would ultimately have to acknowledge that other powers could rise to equal, or even surpass, America's present hegemonic position among nations.

Despite Mr. Toynbee's thesis, the case of the United States appears more complicated. First, if there is the beginning of a decline in America's prominence, the rapidity or sluggishness of the process would depend on how America's governing system works and how willing government officials are to respect the constitution and implement the laws of the land. Second, it also depends on how the U.S. manages its internal and external affairs. What it does or refuses to do in the next decades will greatly influence whether it truly is on a sliding path, and, if it is, how swiftly or slowly its decline will advance.

The Soviet Union collapsed under intense pressures. President Reagan's costly arms race forced it to keep pace with the U.S. The load of the competition broke the back of the Soviet's much smaller economy and antiquated production facilities. America's doggedly-pursued policies to isolate the communist world proved successful. Finally, the Afghan people's refusal to blink in their deadly confrontation with the mighty Red Army, was the last nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union and communist ideology.

Now that the Cold War is won and the fear of communism overtaking the world has vanished, America shows the first signs of potential stagnation that could be indicative of a gradual decline not necessarily of American military power, but of its political will to play the leadership role it has been charged with for several decades.

As already mentioned, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union faced unrelenting challenges. Ultimately, they crushed its civilization. The United States, however, is in danger of decomposing by too little challenges. And Washington's reaction to the fall of the Soviet empire is quite similar to that of Wall Street's leaders.

When communism was dead and safely buried deep underground, most leaders of major corporations and financial institutions, perceived communism's demise as the ultimate sign of capitalism's goodness. Instead of merely understanding capitalism's triumph as the result of the system's efficiency, they mistook it for the system's righteousness not just in a sense of effectiveness and resilience but in the sense of justice, rectitude, yes, even virtue and morality.

This expansive comprehension of the capitalist system led corporate leaders to abandon all inhibitions and protections for the safety of customers and introduced self-serving management models. Had their fancy financing instruments which no one seemed to understand but everyone thought was the holy grail of the capitalist mind not led to the 2008 financial crisis, the captains of finance and industry were on their way to establishing the dictatorship of corporations.

The 2008 financial collapse brought two things to the foreground. First, it highlighted the financial bosses' selfishness and disregard for the general public's wellbeing. Second, it brought to the forefront the immense gap that had grown between the income that chief corporate officers paid themselves and the wages and salaries they handed out to the rest of their millions of employees.

As a result, the notion of the enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of the 1% versus the 99% of the population moved to center stage and became a general topic of discussion.

The 2008 crisis caused the corporate leadership to endure a shock as it should have but it emerged scot-free as it shouldn't have. The billions of dollars some of them had to pay to the government in penalties did come from their own pockets.

When communism folded and the fight for the hearts and minds of the global population declined in immediacy and importance, Washington began neglecting the Third World. It directed its attention and resources toward Eastern Europe where the countries had shed their communist governing system and wished to join the Free World.

The premise was sound. In contradistinction to most Third World countries, East European nations had well-educated populations. They owned a functioning industrial base that could be modernized and run by people who knew how to manage industrial plants and how to work with machines. Perhaps most importantly, they were part of the European culture. American officialdom felt a strong sense of affinity for them.

The diversion of resources to that region was a sound policy to the extent it wasn't done at the detriment of the Third World. However, it did happen at the detriment of developing nations.

As was the case with corporate captains, when the threat of global nuclear war became a negligible and distant possibility, many Washington politicians, especially some American officials stationed in poor countries, suffered from superiority complexes. On a personal level, they felt being modern-day Roman Centurions in a world populated by vassals whose livelihood was theirs to provide or take away. When they visited poor countries, they felt a measure of dislike for those people and thought they no longer needed wasting resources on those who couldn't take care of themselves. The human species got divided into those with whom one could identify and those who looked, behaved, and dressed so differently that no sense of kinship could be felt for them.

It took Washington some time to recognize that the post-Cold War period would require it to spend an inordinate amount of time and resources in the developing world. Worse, it found itself engaging for the right or wrong reasons in seemingly unending wars there. These wars weaken America's economy, adding to its already large national debt. In addition, American engagement in extralegal killings, and destruction of whole cities are disturbing news which overtime diminishes a healthy sense of humanity and civility within America itself.

If America's leaders wish their country to be the exception to Mr. Toynbee's thesis or, at least, to delay the onset of its gradual slide into inessentiality, they must change their internal and external policies.

Internally, the country needs laws to protect the individual from corporate excesses. In the absence of a counterbalance, such as the former communist threat, corporate leaders have displayed their willingness to act for profit against the wellbeing of their customers. In the present global system and the concentration of economic power by corporations leaving it to

competition is insufficient. The new laws must make corporate heads responsible for their company's transgressions. As the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis showed, it was easy for leaders of financial institutions to pay the government billion-dollar penalties. They didn't have to pay it from their own pockets. They got away with it by paying the penalties with their shareholders' money. This must be stopped.

The World Bank, another major lending institution, cannot be sued and operates outside the law. This provision is a leftover from bygone times and must be mended. After almost 70 years operating with immunity from the law, it has become corrupt. Like any other economic institution, the World Bank is managed by people. They disburse public funds and should, if necessary, have to defend their actions before a court of law.

Externally, when dealing with developing nations and its leaders, the U.S. must strictly apply its own values. It should cease embracing leaders who disrespect human rights and engage in corrupt practices. They should be clearly and noticeably opposed.

Further, the U.S. should identify and equalize its own interest with the wellbeing of Third-World populations, no matter how they look and how poor they are. American policymakers must begin to understand that security and stability, two things U.S. foreign policy must help establish internationally, can only come from the people themselves.