

# WHOSE CENTURY SHALL IT BE?

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Michael Beckley of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government critically addresses a snowballing assumption in contemporary academic, journalistic and foreign policy discourse in "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure."<sup>1</sup> This premise is that the US-led unipolar order is in decay, and with the rise of China international relations are entering uncertain territory. "China's Century?" arrives in the midst of this erstwhile assumption's steady transformation into popular fact. Beckley argues instead that though the US has experienced increased hegemonic burdens in recent decades, its strengths in wealth, innovation and military capability vis-à-vis China have in fact increased over the last twenty years. By contrasting the positions and presumptions of the growing US declinist camp with those like himself who foresee enduring US predominance throughout this century, Beckley compels readers to more carefully examine the starting points of current debates on global issues, many of which hinge on US-China relations. This call for discursive prudence is therefore vital and the author's case well argued, as the US remains in many ways an economic and military Goliath. However, in presenting Chinese development as a mirror of sorts for American concerns of decline, Beckley neglects pressing domestic troubles at the core of Americans' fears of having lost their edge, China notwithstanding. In this regard it is essential to ask whether declinist fears pertain to American decline in and of itself, decline while China rises, decline because China rises, or some combination of the three. "China's Century?" bears the microscope down upon Beijing, but its true focus is indeed the US and the liberal order it created and taxes itself maintaining.

It is surprisingly not until the piece's final pages that Beckley delves into what are serious internal crises in the US by discussing the debt crisis of

<sup>1</sup> Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011): 41-78.

2011 and accompanying political gridlock that illustrate deep partisan fissures in Washington. Issues up for debate in the US Congress that Beckley ignores, like education policy, health care, decrepit infrastructure and income inequality, have all to some extent been amplified in the context of American perceptions of relative decline aside dynamic Asian societies, primarily China.<sup>2</sup> Of these, income inequality is both the most pressing issue within the US and most intertwined in commercial interaction with China, as technological diffusion associated with globalization, increased trade and unemployment all directly affect US incomes. It is also a weak point of Beckley's analysis.

"China's Century?" focuses on three categories of empirical evidence to measure national power: wealth, innovation and conventional military capabilities. In discussing the first of these, Beckley cautions that declinists put too much weight on non-comprehensive and static measures like China's ever-expanding GDP and snapshot economic reports. He prefers instead to measure national wealth with a balance of total GDP and per capita GDP, a reasonable and more precise comparison of two large economies, and one which will tip the scales in US favor far past the approaching year in which China's economy outgrows its US counterpart. Accompanying data shows US per capita incomes from 1991 to 2010 outpacing Chinese income growth, ostensibly supporting Beckley's central claim that, "China is rising, but it is not catching up."<sup>3</sup> The troubling growth in US income inequality during that period, however, is conveniently ignored, as are sound and unsound arguments for trade with China and technological diffusion exacerbating the problem. This inattention to connections between US domestic problems related to China's rise and the international macroeconomic picture Beckley discusses in detail permeates the paper.

Analysis of innovation points to sustained or expanding US leads over Chinese scientists in research and development, patent awards and academic excellence amidst reports of a surging Chinese scientific juggernaut. It is essential to consider, as Beckley does, that quality matters more than quantity. He notes the US produces approximately half the world's most cited scientific articles and that 70 percent of inward FDI to China is now directed to wholly for-

2 These domestic issues are discussed at length in relation to "China's Century?" and Robert Kagan's "Not Fade Away" in: Michael Cohen, "Rotting From the Inside Out," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/21/rotting\\_from\\_the\\_inside\\_out?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/21/rotting_from_the_inside_out?page=full) (accessed April 18, 2012).

3 Beckley, "China's Century?," 44.

eign-owned enterprises, making China's tech exports in fact, "not very Chinese, and not very high tech."<sup>4</sup> That the majority of Chinese students awarded science doctorates in the US between 1987 and 2007 chose to remain there, as professionals in a business structure better tuned than China's to capitalize on breakthroughs and absorb knowledge from competitors, advances the argument. But again, Beckley ignores more fundamental domestic innovation and educational issues. As multinational corporations based in the US invest in China and reap profits from labor there, displaced American workers despair as to how narrowly profits return to the US amidst broader concerns on intellectual property protection. Moreover, regardless of how much data Beckley provides for the continued dominance of US universities and the success of Chinese students in them, American panic at its nonperforming primary and secondary educational systems is a more rudimentary and long-term competitiveness problem. Initial fears about education focused inward, but recent American awareness of Shanghai students' PISA scores escalates concerns of decline, like those on income inequality, in a more international context.<sup>5</sup>

This inattention to US domestic unease in "China's Century?" does not work both ways. Beckley wisely raises the crucial issues of the looming Chinese demographic crisis and the evaporation of onetime sources of competitiveness like low-wage labor and amenable export markets. Growing income inequality and inflation afflicting the poor in the PRC could also have been addressed. His empirical analysis of the burgeoning Chinese military notes the PLA must secure China's nineteen land and sea borders, making its mission fundamentally different from US forces spread globally. Readers are left, perhaps more than the author, aware that both China and the US face profound and unique challenges. These problems do not, however, necessarily involve superpower rivalry. Domestic focus on these issues by the US and Chinese governments would best position each country to healthily compete with the other in a win-win manner.

Beckley's conclusion states unwarranted fears of American decline resulting from worried looks in this Chinese mirror may create difficulties greater than the problems on which those concerns are based. Declinist fear mongering

4 Ibid., 68.

5 Sam Dillon, "Top Test Scores From Shanghai Stun Educators," *New York Times*, December 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/education/07education.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed April 18, 2012).



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leading to trade conflicts and immigration curtailment can only impair sources of US power, particularly as America's relative immigration flexibility is a crucial competitive advantage over China's demographic dilemma. Pernicious effects on foreign policy, such as calls for aggressiveness while the US is still at its most dominant, contrast with demands for retrenchment. Beckley argues these divergent policies would be as equally unwise as they are rooted in identical anxieties. Rather, as a non-declinist, he calls for the sustainment of the US-led liberal economic order and an increased military and economic presence in Asia. This policy prescription is remarkably similar to the American pivot to the Pacific laid out in speeches across Asia by President Obama and Secretary Clinton just as "China's Century?" went to press. Regardless, pivoting with eyes focused more closely on China's rise than on real US domestic problems may be for naught. **PEAR**

