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## **THE FATE OF EMPIRES: PAUL KENNEDY'S THESIS 25 YEARS AFTER**

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**Book Review:** Kennedy, PM, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Random House, New York, 1987.

25 years ago British historian Paul Kennedy unleashed a storm in political circles, a feat seldom accomplished by an academic, no matter how distinguished. His work – “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” seemed to offer a complete, coherent, persuasive and – even more strikingly – a prediction concerning the decay and demise of great powers or empires. The Kennedy thesis was pretty simple: imperial overstretch incur exceedingly high military costs for defending the empire in comparison with the benefits extracted from the exploitation of dependent territories and, consequently, the empire eventually falls. Power in international relations is a function of both the relative and the absolute economic prowess of one particular country. The historical record, at least in modern times, consistently shows that in large-scale, protracted military conflict the side with the strongest economy and base of production eventually wins.

Few seemed to bother with the complexities of the argument, or with its relative lack of novelty – especially its economic interpretation of international power which had a history stretching at least from Hobson and Lenin to the books of Robert Gilpin, especially his 1981 work on cycles of power. Far more interesting were the predictions that the United States and the Soviet Union would decline as global powers, with the European Economic Community but especially Japan rapidly rising to world primacy. Kennedy’s forecast was mostly infirmed on the medium term; the Soviet Union did indeed crash and disappear, but the United States was for nearly two decades stronger than ever, while Japan slumbered through prolonged crises and recession, the newly created European Union was not seriously interested or able to project power on a global scale, and China rose at an unprecedented pace.. This hardly mattered; the book is so persuasive and successful that is still in print and on the shelves of self-respecting bookstores. “The Rise and Fall” was translated in 23 languages,<sup>1</sup> references to it are legion in academic monographs, popular histories, learned journals or political

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian edition was published by Polirom Publishing House in Iași in 2011, translated by Laurențiu Ursu, Teodora Moldovanu, Lucia Dos, Ramona Lupu.

magazines. Political pundits routinely talked about imperial overstretch when discussing America's recent adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continuous worries about the rise of China have been inspired by Kennedy's insights concerning the link between a nation's enrichment and its security priorities.

But what if we could move to the core of the argument? How well does it fare compared with other possible explanations for the decline of great powers, be they cultural or military? Let us think of a few examples, some discussed by Kennedy, others preceding the timeline of modernity in which he is immediately interested; and then let us return to the present and the speculations concerning the immediate future, of which so many prominent scholars seem to be attached.

His thesis as applied to the Ottoman Empire is pretty common: in the immediate aftermath of the stabilization of the empire in the late 16th century (after the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent) the Turks entered a period of economic and societal stagnation, inability and unwillingness to modernise both in commercial and military terms. This translated into increasing difficulties to maintain expansion and eventually in the impossibility to mount an adequate defence of the empire at large. From the failure of the siege of Vienna in 1683 to the ignominious treaty of Sevres the history of Turkey is just a long story of decay. This familiar narrative shares more than a few similarities with Edward Gibbon's 18th century interpretation of Byzantine history, who basically argued that since the adoption of Christianity in the early 4th century the entire period until the mid-15th century (over eleven centuries) is the story of a decline. There is no need to shoot dead horses here; to argue that a time span longer than the existence of nearly all extant states is just a decline is plainly wrong. To argue – as some historians do in the case of Turkey – that the country just decayed for a period longer than the history of the United States is bizarre, or highlights that the meaning of “decay” is indeed very hazy. Until the last months of World War I no foreign great power inflicted irreparable military defeat on the Ottoman Empire, although the Russians did come close in 1878. The Habsburgs were kept by the “decaying” Ottomans to the north of the Danube, much like the Hungarians before the 1520s. The borders with Persia – with whom many wars were fought since the 16th century – were pretty much the same in 1918 as in the 1600s. Only the loss of North Africa, from 1815 to 1912 to predatory Western powers was a significant reversal of fate. Seen in this perspective, imperial overstretch seems less compelling. The causes for the eventual demise were multiple and complex, military and cultural as well as economic and as late as the beginning of the 20th century the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire was not necessarily inevitable.

Two other empires collapsed in 1918, Austria-Hungary and Tsarist Russia. While Austria-Hungary was a great power in name only by the time the Great War started in 1914, Russia was a beleaguered but undoubtedly serious world power. Kennedy's thesis is virtually useless in understanding what happened with the Muscovite empire; military expenses were not crippling the country before the war. The economy, while indeed unable to generate prosperity for the masses and clearly servicing the great noblemen and the emerging high bourgeoisie, was growing tremendously,

fuelled by foreign direct investment (especially French). Indeed, Russia's economic infrastructure was developing so fast that the industrial powerhouse of continental Europe, imperial Germany was expecting serious competition from the east within a few years after 1910. The Russian Imperial army, despite its logistic problems and archaic structure of promotion, was in no way seriously inferior to that of its foes and the Russian economy was, when mobilized, generally able to cope with its transport and ammunition problems. There was nothing structurally wrong with Russia from a strategic perspective and the country had more than ample resources to fight the war. Rather, it was its repeated and bloody military defeats against Germany and the collapse of the back of the front which led to revolution, an early exit from the war and a protracted power struggle. Though crippled and territorially truncated, within a decade and a half a new Muscovite empire, the Soviet Union, was back in the world power game.

Kennedy started his analysis, somehow old-fashioned, with the presumed beginning of modernity in the Age of Discovery, or, for those of Weberian inclination, the days of Reformation. But those who worked in the field had no qualms about extending his theories to previous world powers. The Roman Empire and its successors in the East, the Byzantines, seemed like perfect examples of the thesis. In this narrative, Rome had overextended as early as the days of Trajan (98-117), his conquests in Dacia and Mesopotamia being strategically indefensible and hardly useful after the consummation of initial plundering. A system of extended forts and garrisons on a *limes* stretching for thousands of miles had to be built. Eventually, the resources ran out and the empire succumbed inevitably under the weight of its own military commitments, increasingly challenged by invading populations. While this explanation has been popular for centuries before Kennedy, it is again deeply puzzling to view the three centuries time span (from Trajan to Odoacer's actions in 476) as just a long decline. In 400 AD Western Roman power still extended from Britannia to Nubia and from Hispania to Pannonia, much like in the days of Emperor Tiberius. In a sense, only when the coalitions that the Roman politicians formed with barbarian warlords such as the leaders of the Vandals, Visigoths or the Huns started collapsing the strategic situation went seriously bad. When the war chieftains discovered that it was feasible and more profitable to carve their own petty kingdoms than to serve as hire blades for the Romans then the situation turned dire for the Western Empire, but this happened no sooner than Genseric's onslaught in the Diocese of Africa at the beginning of the fifth century. Even that was not the death knell for Rome, who as late as 453 – in its traditional coalitions with barbarian allies – was able to inflict a serious defeat on the Huns. In many ways, the end of the Western Empire was swifter than commonly assumed and much less related to any economic inability to support a large military establishment.

A similar argument can be made in the case of Byzantium, at least until its real fall, to the Franks of the Crusade of 1204. Despite all the challenges, despite the loss of its most productive regions (in Egypt and North Africa) as early as the middle of the seventh century, despite a long series of military defeats against barbarians from the north and west and Arabs from the south and east, despite two centuries spent in

vicious fights over theological reasons, for all the incompetent rulers who repeatedly wrecked the economy and the army, as late as the middle of the 12th century, under Manuel Komnenos, the Greeks were holding the same frontiers in the Balkans and the Middle East as they did five centuries before and were able to send military expeditions in Sicily and Hungary. A combination of savvy diplomacy based on bribery, persuasion and the creation of a good network of matrimonial links combined with a technologically advanced navy and capable land forces more than compensated for all the misfortunes and botched strategies. It was only the diversion of the crusade by the money-hungry Venetians, combined with weak Greek leaders after the fall of the Komnenos which led to the tragedy of 1204.

But enough for the past; Kennedy's thesis anyway was always far more persuasive for political scientists and political leaders than for historians. While the major pundits of the last decade were clearly sympathetic to the thesis of great power decay through overstretch, they were less inclined to use the term "great powers", as they moved from what they saw as an old-fashioned, realist language of international politics to the themes of "civilizations" or "empires", the first resurrected from the dustbin of political analysis by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s and the second coming to the fore in the years after 11 September 2001. Unsurprisingly, most of them are interested in an interpretation of the current position of the United States of America on the rise/decline ladder and in predictions concerning its trajectory. Some, like Jared Diamond, view economics as important enough to explain the fate of individual nations, but in his civilization framework he sees viruses, geo-climatic conditions and approaches to the environment as more important on the long run. Others, like Fareed Zakaria, while acknowledging that the link between economic and military power is profound, have a less deterministic perspective and argue that relative decline (the phase in which the USA is currently mired) does not necessarily lead to demise as a world power. Among the pessimists, John Hobson sees the brief Western interlude of power between the early 1800s and the beginning of the 21st century as merely a footnote in world politics and economy, nearly always dominated by Asian powerhouses. The relative decline of the economic power of the West will also lead to it becoming a geopolitical underdog. To this perspective one can also add John Darwin, whose analysis of the decline of what he terms "the British world system" has economy at its very centre.<sup>2</sup> Yet others change their opinions much like the wind changes its direction. At the beginning of the 21st century, as the US dragged itself and its allies in imperial warfare in the Middle East and Central Asia, the famed British historian Neill Ferguson wrote books extolling the link between economic dominance and military might and pronounced US primacy as intangible for a long time.<sup>3</sup> In less than a decade, as Washington withdrew from Iraq,

<sup>2</sup> J Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies*, Norton, New York, 2005 and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Viking, New York, 2005; F Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: the Unusual Origins of America's World Role*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998 and *The Post-American World*, Allen Lane, London, 2008; JM Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004; J Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> N Ferguson, *Empire: the Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, Basic Books, New York, 2004 and *Colossus: the Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, Penguin Books, New York, 2005.

having accomplished little, and was obviously unable to defeat the Taliban militias in Afghanistan, Ferguson moved away from the concept of empire and wrote a book on how civilization's collapse can come quite suddenly. Compared with his exhortations, Kennedy's magisterial work, with over one hundred pages of references, can easily pass as established scholarship.

But what does remain of Kennedy's thesis, a quarter of a century after its enunciation? Hardly anyone can wholly embrace it now in good conscience, but one would argue that its role is still powerful. "The Rise and Fall" is praiseworthy not only for the lasting impression it made on academics, pundits and political leaders, but as a useful link between economic and military history and international relations. If its conclusions are farfetched, its depth is impressive, the writing is captivating and the methodology can still inspire.

