

The idea of an America in decline has become a major subject of discussion among many PRC observers. A seeming preponderance of Chinese authoritative, semi-authoritative, and non-authoritative Chinese elites believe that the distribution of global power is shifting in a direction that favors China over the West/the United States. However, what is less clear is how those many Chinese who see the U.S. as being in decline view the specific origins, nature, and extent of that decline and its implications for China. Chinese public statements on the decline offer no conclusive evidence supporting the claim that Beijing is basing its policies on the sure conviction that the U.S. is in an irreversible, structural decline benefiting China and that Beijing is therefore committed to a policy of taking advantage of this decline. A more nuanced understanding of Chinese discourse on U.S. decline and its implications for the United States is in order.

Even a cursory examination of publicly available PRC sources confirms that the idea of an America in decline has become a major subject of discussion and analysis for many Chinese observers, especially in journals (Figure 1).

For some committed Chinese Marxists, the U.S. decline has been emerging for many decades, inherent in the supposed weaknesses and contradictions of the capitalist and democratic West. But for most Chinese proponents of the notion, it began with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), followed by a series of domestic and international events adversely affecting the U.S., from growing domestic political dysfunction and the chaos of the Trump administration to the American military-political failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and the gross mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to many outside observers, the Chinese belief in America's decline (and that of the West in general) — described by one observer as “Beijing's declinist narrative”¹— has become a fundamental axiom of the PRC government, largely explaining not only Beijing's growing assertiveness internationally but also its deepening strategic challenge to U.S. global power and influence. Indeed, a declining U.S. (alongside China's continued growing power and international capacity) is supposedly seen by the Chinese leadership as both allowing and necessitating a largely irreversible Chinese effort to replace America as the new global hegemon and to become the decisive shaper of a new, alternative global order.²

¹ Jude Blanchette, “Beijing's Visions of American Decline,” *Politico*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2021/03/11/beijings-visions-of-american-decline-492064>.

² Rush Doshi, “Beijing Believes Trump is Accelerating American Decline,” *Foreign Policy*, October 12, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/12/china-trump-accelerating-american->

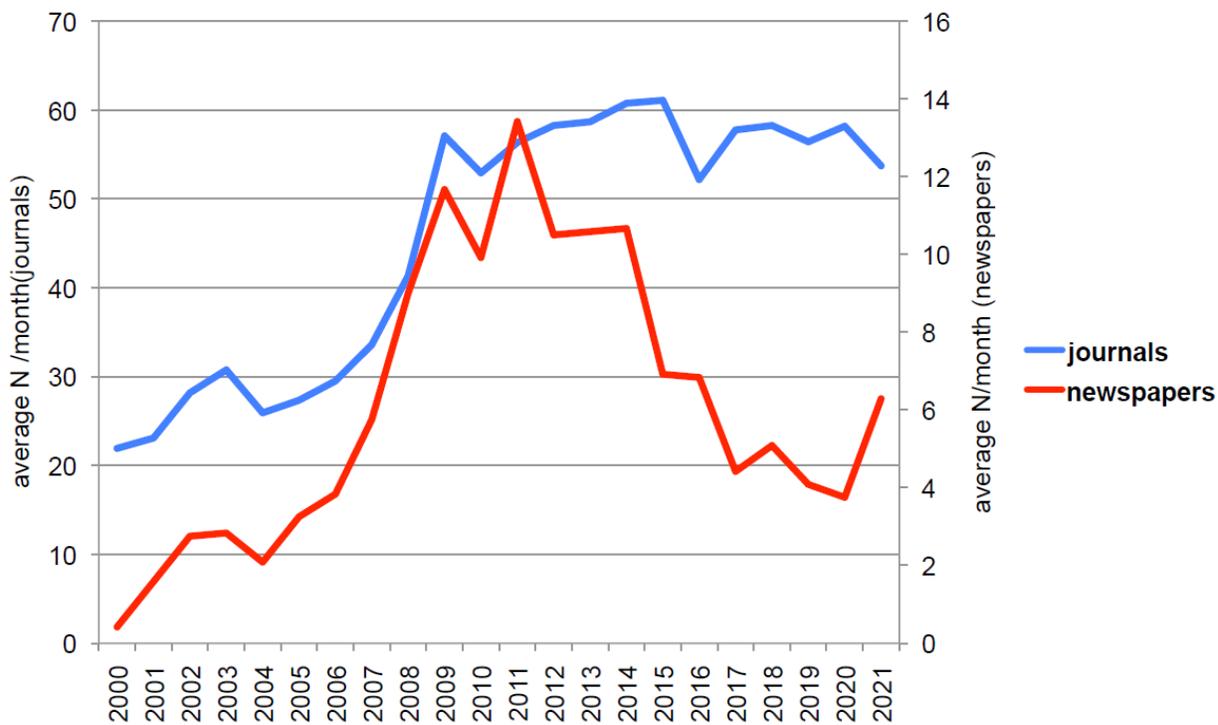
Obviously, such assumptions regarding Chinese views on the state of the United States and the implications for PRC policies and global peace and stability potentially have enormous implications and require close examination. This article takes a close look at what Chinese authoritative, semi-authoritative, and non-authoritative sources (in that order) say, and do not say, about American (and Western) decline, and it assesses the possible significance of such views for U.S.-China relations and global (and especially Asian) stability.³

[decline/](#); Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ Several types of PRC sources are considered authoritative in the sense of explicitly “speaking for the regime.” They generally include Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of National Defense (MND) statements and briefings and remarks by senior civilian and military officials appearing in the leading Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (or CCP CC) and military (People’s Liberation Army, or PLA) newspapers: *People’s Daily* (人民日报) and *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报). Authoritative statements include, in descending order of authority, PRC government and CCP statements, MFA statements, MFA spokesperson statements, and MFA daily press briefings. Authoritative commentaries in *People’s Daily* and *Liberation Army Daily* include, in descending order, “editorial department articles,” editorials, and commentator articles. Several types of usually homophonous, bylined articles appearing in *People’s Daily* are considered quasi-authoritative in the sense that, although indirect and implicit, they are intended to convey the view of an important PRC organization. A major example of this is articles using the byline Zhong Sheng (钟声), which is an apparent homophone for “the voice of the Central,” and they appear to be written by the editorial staff of *People’s Daily* International Department. Other quasi-authoritative homophonous bylines include “Ren Zhongping” (任仲平, homophonous with “important *People’s Daily* commentary”), “Zhong Zuwen” (仲组文, homophonous with “CC Organization Department article”), “Zhong Xuanli” (钟轩理, homophonous with “CC Propaganda Department commentary”), and “Jun Baoyan” (钧保言, homophonous with “*PLA Daily* commentary”).

Many types of low-level commentaries and signed articles appearing in a wide variety of PRC and Hong Kong media convey notable yet decidedly non-authoritative views. Such articles appear in the PRC government news service (Xinhua), CCP and PLA newspapers, the Hong Kong-based (and *People’s Daily*-owned) *Global Times* (环球时报), and many minor PRC and Hong Kong newspapers and academic publications. Despite the view expressed by some pundits, nothing published in the *Global Times* is “authoritative” in any meaningful sense, “because the newspaper is a commercial vehicle and does not represent *People’s Daily*, even though it is subordinate to that organ.” Alice Miller, personal correspondence, June 27, 2012.

Figure 1. Frequency of journal and newspaper articles in the CNKI database mentioning “U.S.” (美国) and “decline” (衰落) in the same sentence. 2000–2021



Of course, analysis of publicly available Chinese sources on this issue cannot confirm conclusively how Chinese notions of a U.S. decline influence the kind of policy calculus that Beijing holds toward the United States and the West as well as toward its own international behavior. But it can at least offer some indication of the public contours of the discussion and views existing among Chinese intellectuals and the most important factors likely influencing the thinking of the Chinese leadership, including the possible risks of basing PRC policy on the idea of continued American decline.

The remainder of this article will first examine Chinese views across the three categories of Chinese sources mentioned above and then, in the conclusion, briefly discuss the implications of these findings for Chinese and U.S. policy.

Authoritative Sources

There is little doubt that many Chinese see the GFC as an early harbinger of U.S. decline. However, at that time and for a few years afterward, authoritative sources did not raise such a view, instead stressing the oft-repeated need for “no conflict or confrontation” ... “mutual

respect” and ... “win-win cooperation,” as part of the development of “a new model of major country relations between China and the United States.”⁴

One source explicitly stated a few years after the GFC that “...China’s rise does not mean America’s decline. On the contrary, the United States can benefit from China’s progress.”⁵

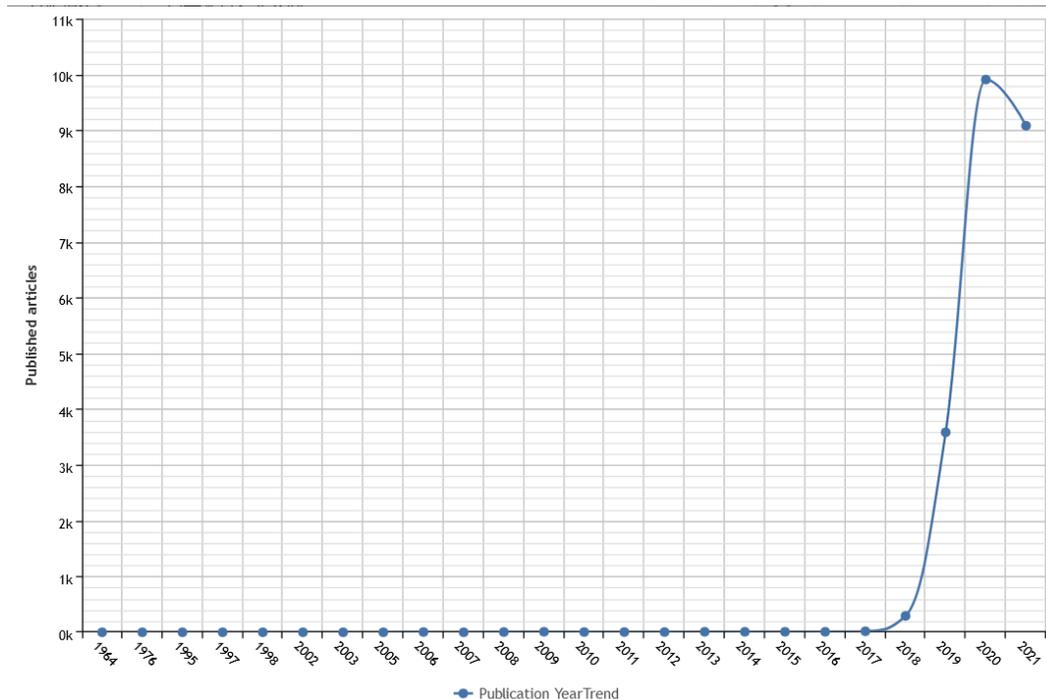
In fact, perhaps somewhat surprisingly — given the stress that many Western authors place on the idea that PRC policy is motivated by expectation of U.S. decline — even today’s authoritative Chinese sources still do not openly and clearly state that U.S. power per se is declining.⁶

⁴ Wang Yi, “Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States,” September 20, 2013, speech at Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/wang-yi-toward-a-new-model-of-major-country-relations-between-china-and-the-united-states/>.

⁵ “Pave the Way for Sino-U.S. Relations in the New Era: On the Eve of President Hu Jintao's Visit to the United States” [为新时期中美关系谋篇布局：写在胡锦涛主席即将访问美国前夕], Xinhua, January 16, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2011-01/16/content_1785553.htm.

⁶ For example, Doshi acknowledges that the Chinese top leadership often uses “oblique” language (e.g., “great changes unseen in a century”) and “euphemisms” (e.g., “multipolarity,” “international balance of power”) in its references to American decline, but he heavily relies on non-authoritative sources, such as Chinese scholar Jin Canrong, to make his case that the Chinese leadership as a whole implicitly but clearly believes that the U.S. is in decline. Doshi characterizes Jin Canrong’s assertion that the international structure shifting from “one superpower, many great powers to two superpowers, many great powers” as a “*major* declaration” (emphasis in original text) without further explanation why this should be considered a “major” declaration. Also, Doshi makes a sweeping claim that “[m]ost, like Jin Canrong, believed China” could fill the void in global governance resulting from the U.S. decline and “be better at solving problems than the West,” while ignoring the wide variation of perspectives even within the Chinese foreign policy community on this topic, which is surveyed in this article. Doshi, *The Long Game*, pp. 160, 267, 270, 281 (kindle version). For other examples of analysis solely reliant on non-authoritative sources to arrive at similar conclusions, see Jude Blanchette and Seth G. Jones, “How Beijing’s Narrative of U.S. Decline Is Leading to Strategic Overconfidence,” CSIS (OpenSource), July 2021, <https://opensource.csis.org/features/beijing-narrative-us-decline/>.

Figure 2 CNKI full-text search “great changes unseen in a century” (journals)

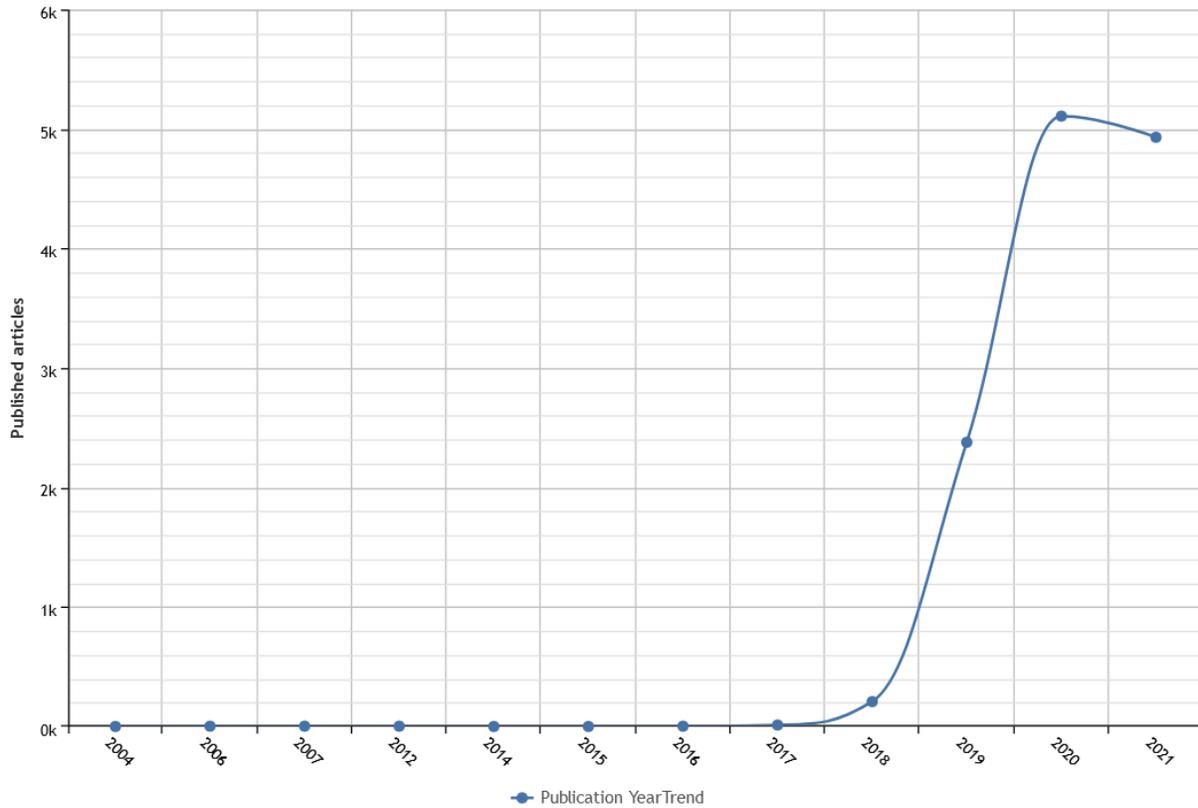


The closest that authoritative sources come to asserting that the U.S. is in decline is in statements about the international environment experiencing “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局). This term was first mentioned by Xi Jinping in December 2017, at a work conference attended by Chinese ambassadors, and it has since been mentioned by him many times as well as by other authoritative sources.⁷ In fact, the frequency of this term in Chinese sources of various types shot up only after December 2017 (Figures 2 and 3). As discussed below, many Chinese sources link this phrase to the notion of a rising East and a declining West (东升西降), thus clearly implying that Xi Jinping is also conveying that meaning (and hence the notion of a U.S. in decline) when he uses the term (Figures 4 and 5).⁸

⁷ M. Taylor Fravel, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on “US-China Relations at the Chinese Communist Party’s Centennial,” January 28, 2021. Also see, as an example of subsequent use of the term, Xi Jinping [习近平], “Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Orientation of the Central Party School’s Mid-career and Junior Cadre Training Session” [习近平在中央党校（国家行政学院）中青年干部培训班开班式上发表重要讲话], September 23, 2019, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-09/03/content_5426920.htm. Also see Yang Jiechi, “Firmly Uphold and Practice Multilateralism and Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 21, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1855530.shtml.

⁸ “A New Page in the World’s Righteousness (Q&A on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ④)” [人间正道开新篇（习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想

Figure 3 CNKI full-text search “great changes unseen in a century” (newspapers)



主义思想学习问答④)], *People's Daily*, July 22, 2021; Lin Songtian [林松添], “Take the Modernization Path of Peaceful Development, Develop Ourselves to Benefit the World’s Modernization” [走和平发展道路的现代化 发展自身造福世界的现代化之路], *People's Daily*, May 7, 2021. Lin is president of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries [中国人民对外友好协会会长]; Zang Anmin [臧安民], “Strengthen Political Awareness, Comprehend the Big Political Picture (Deepen the Study of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era)” [增强政治意识 把握政治大局 (深入学习贯彻习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想)], *People's Daily*, March 12, 2021, Zang is the secretary-general and spokesperson of the CC Organization Department.

Figure 4 CNKI full-text search “A rising East and a declining West” (journals)

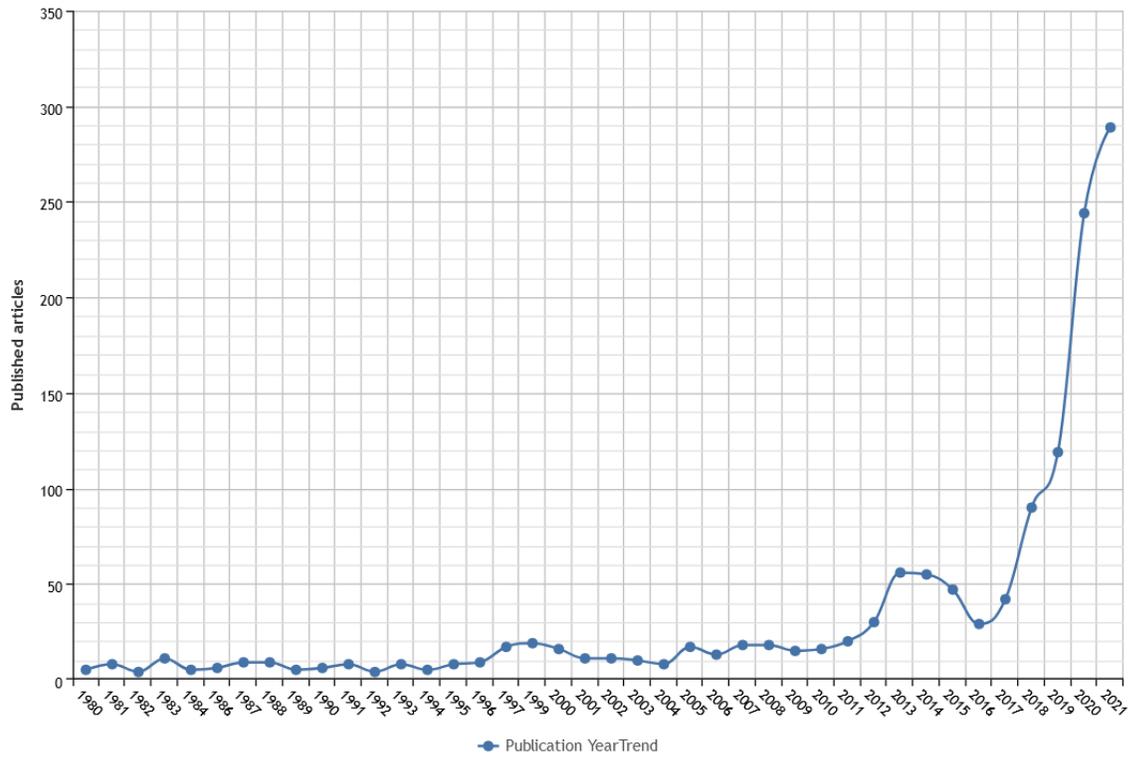
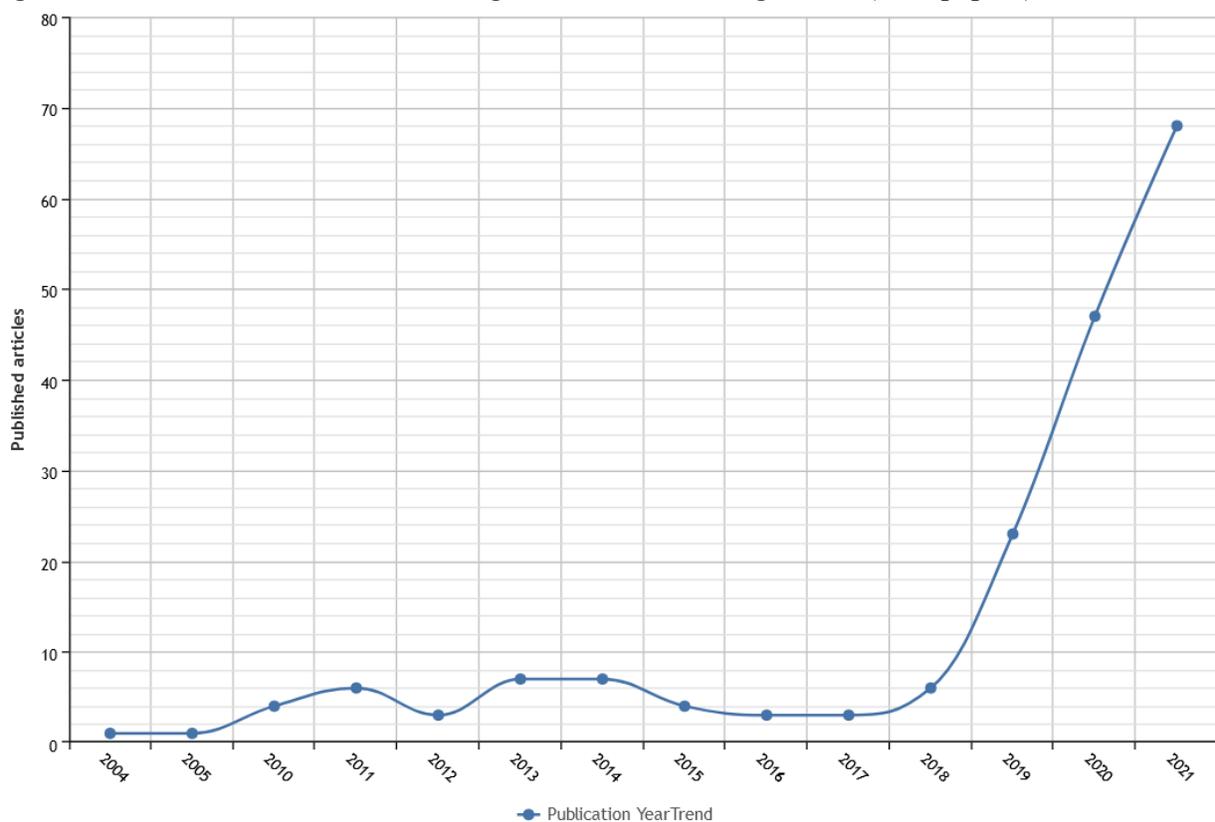


Figure 5 CNKI full-text search “A rising East and a declining West” (newspapers)



However, overall, we have found no open sources that contain direct quotes from Xi Jinping unambiguously using 东升西降.⁹ Of course, we certainly cannot rule out that he might have used them during internal meetings.

⁹ The closest a source seemingly comes to linking Xi Jinping’s concept of “profound changes unseen in a century” with the concept of “a rising East and a declining West” is a subsection entitled “Xi’s Words and Remarks” (习言习语) of a *People’s Daily* article published on July 22, 2021. However, even in this source, it is unclear whether the reference to the concept is by Xi Jinping or by the anonymous author. “A New Page in the World’s Righteousness (Q&A on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ④).” To further clarify, in our search of Chinese sources, we define a direct quote from Xi in two ways: 1) the source quotes Xi in the format of “Xi says/emphasizes” followed with content in quotation marks. In this format, the Xi quote ends with the quotation mark; 2) the source quotes Xi in the format of “Xi says/emphasizes” without quotation marks. In this format, the Xi quote is considered as ending at the first full stop. Stand-alone terms and expressions with quotation marks (e.g., “东升西降”) that do not come in either format of the Xi quote or with an explicit attribution to Xi are not considered as an unambiguous Xi quote, as quotation marks could also be used to simply underscore or suggest a special term.

In any event, while in some cases pointing to the obvious fact that no nation's power will continue to dominate the world indefinitely, many authoritative sources below Xi assert that U.S. power will nonetheless remain dominant for a long time into the future, a point also made by other types of sources (see below). As Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng stated as recently as July 13, 2021,

In terms of real strength, the United States is still the most powerful major country in the world, and will be insurmountable for a long time to come.¹⁰

In fact, some senior PRC officials have explicitly stated that the United States is “definitely not on the decline” and “will probably remain the world's No. 1 for a fairly long time to come.”¹¹

But while asserting the still-unrivaled nature of American power, many authoritative sources clearly indicate that the U.S. is weakening itself by trying to maintain its controlling, hegemonic position in the world in the face of the ever-increasing, worldwide historical trend toward multipolarity. In other words, such sources make a clear distinction between the self-induced decline of U.S. influence due to its insistence on behaving in a unipolar hegemonic manner and actual U.S. power, which remains unrivaled.¹²

In support of this view, authoritative sources often observe that its futile effort to resist the emergence of a multipolar world is causing the U.S. to lose confidence, become anxious, and generate “China threats” of various kinds, thus undermining its own interests.¹³ This reaction is seen as leading Washington to attempt to promote unilateralism over multilateralism and zero-

¹⁰ Transcript of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng's Exclusive Interview with Guancha.cn, July 13, 2021, Xinhua, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/13/c_1310057831.htm.

¹¹ “Keynote Speech by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at Vision China Event,” Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, September 18, 2019, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxs/zxxx/t1698729.htm>; “Transcript of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Interview With Belahodood of Al Jazeera,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 19, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1364778.htm.

¹² Transcript of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng's Exclusive Interview with Guancha.cn; “Wang Yi: China and the United States Are Not in a Struggle for Power. The US Is Now on the Wrong Side of History,” August 30, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1810951.shtml.

¹³ “Interview on Current China-US Relations Given by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi,” Xinhua, August 6, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1804328.shtml; “Stay on the Right Track and Keep Pace with the Times to Ensure the Right Direction for China-US Relations: Remarks by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the China-US Think Tanks Media Forum,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 9, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1796302.shtml.

sum over win-win or positive-sum strategies, and to confront China and Russia in destructive ways.¹⁴

For many authoritative sources, such U.S. actions simply serve to create friction and conflict for Washington and to undermine its ability to effectively utilize its still-dominant power. In this sense, for some authoritative observers, America's major challenge lies in its inability to adjust to the inexorable multipolar forces of history.¹⁵

Moreover, although clearly associated at the time with the unilateralist policies of the Trump administration, authoritative Chinese sources seem to think that these counter-productive U.S. responses are part of a larger hegemonic viewpoint that operates independently of any specific U.S. administration.¹⁶

Finally, although not *explicitly* linked to a process of American decline, authoritative sources in recent years have also pointed to signs of U.S. domestic problems in handling racial injustice, economic inequality, gun deaths, and of course the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, they have contrasted these U.S. failures with China's success in advancing the livelihood and health of its citizens.¹⁷

At the same time, Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently stated that the U.S. will "maintain its vitality" if it can address its domestic problems.¹⁸ And as Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin succinctly put it:

¹⁴ Transcript of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng's Exclusive Interview with Guancha.cn; "Wang Yi: China and the United States Are Not in a Struggle for Power."

¹⁵ "Wang Yi Delivers a Video Speech at the Opening Session of the Conference on China-Pakistan at 70," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 7, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1890601.shtml; "Yang Jiechi Speaks with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Phone at Request," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, June 11, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1883497.shtml; "Wang Yi: China and the United States Are Not in a Struggle for Power."

¹⁶ See, for example, "Wang Yi: China and the United States Are Not in a Struggle for Power" and "Remarks by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at the Forum on US-China Relations," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, February 1, 2020, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxss/t1738974.htm>.

¹⁷ "Yang Jiechi Puts Forth China's Stands at the Start of China-U.S. High-level Strategic Dialogue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 19, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1862643.shtml; "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 26, 2021," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 27, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1864659.shtml.

¹⁸ "A Conversation with State Councilor Wang Yi of China," Council on Foreign Relations, April 23, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-state-councilor-wang-yi-china>.

The U.S. is the greatest threat to itself. Getting its own house in order trumps all else.¹⁹

These statements at the very least suggest America's potential (if not actual) decline relative to China. And for some authoritative observers, the depiction of China as a major threat to the U.S. is in part an effort by Washington to deflect blame from America's domestic ills. As Yang Jiechi stated at the Anchorage meeting between senior U.S. and Chinese leaders in March 2021,

The United States has many domestic problems in areas like human rights. What the United States should do is to improve its image and mind its own business, rather than leaving its own problems unsolved, shipping its problems to other parts of the world, diverting attention of others, and making irresponsible remarks about China's human rights and democracy.²⁰

The implication is that the U.S. cannot resolve its domestic problems simply by blaming and scapegoating China.

Semi-authoritative Sources

In general, semi-authoritative sources are more willing than authoritative sources to identify the U.S. as being in decline and to discuss the various aspects of that phenomenon. Some sources do not shirk from explicitly placing the decline of the United States in the larger context of the above-mentioned global shift in power between a rising East and a relatively declining West (东升西降) as well as the above-mentioned concept of “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局).²¹

However, as with most authoritative sources, many semi-authoritative Chinese observers also stress that America's decline is largely a function of its subjective attitude toward the emergence of a multipolar world. Some explicitly and in some detail point to the “hegemonic anxiety” (霸权焦虑症) of the United States in confronting growing multipolarity, and its efforts, along with those of its closest Western allies (within bodies such as the G-7) to resist that reconfiguration of global power.²²

¹⁹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on June 9, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1882549.shtml.

²⁰ “Yang Jiechi Puts Forth China's Stands at the Start of China-U.S. High-level Strategic Dialogue,” March 19, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1862643.shtml.

²¹ Zang Aumin, “Strengthen Political Awareness, Comprehend the Big Political Picture”; He Yiting [何毅亭], “China's Development Environment Faces Profound Changes (Study and Implement the Spirit of the 5th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee)” [我国发展环境面临深刻复杂变化（深入学习贯彻党的十九届五中全会精神）], *People's Daily*, December 8, 2020. He Yiting is a vice president of the CCP Central Party School.

²² Jun Baoyan [钧保言], “It's Time for the US to Cure its ‘Hegemonic Anxiety’” [美国“霸权焦虑症”该治了], *PLA Daily*, August 1, 2016; Zhong Sheng [钟声], “China Does Not Allow the

And, as with authoritative sources, America's arguably growing domestic problems and its inability to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic are viewed by some sources as greatly augmenting or accelerating its hegemonic anxiety.²³ In other words, again as with the authoritative sources, the relative decline of the United States is seen by several semi-authoritative sources as being due to subjective beliefs and interests that prevent the U.S. (and the West) from accepting the historical trend toward multipolarity and doing what is necessary to cope with its domestic problems.²⁴

In fact, one semi-authoritative source echoes the comments of the Foreign Ministry spokesperson cited above:

Whether the United States is declining is an issue America sets for itself. At the end of the day, it will be up to Americans' own act.²⁵

Moreover, as some authoritative sources have also suggested, such U.S. resistance and inability to confront its own problems serve to exacerbate greatly America's relations with the outside world, as the U.S. seeks to blame and confront others for its own internal ills and pursue zero-sum solutions to common international economic, security, and other problems.²⁶

Semi-authoritative People's Liberation Army (PLA) sources also apply a similar perspective in the military realm, stressing that the U.S. effort to maintain hegemony with regard to the global scope of its naval military operations in the face of shortages in resources and platforms will simply produce greater decline.²⁷

As one semi-authoritative PLA source stated:

US to Act at Will in the South China Sea" [中国不会任由美国在南海肆意胡来], *People's Daily*, June 23, 2016; Zhong Sheng, "Promoting 'Small Circles' and 'Group Politics' is Going Against the Tide" [搞“小圈子”和“集团政治”是逆流而动], *People's Daily*, June 17, 2021.

²³ He Yiting, "China's Development Environment Faces Profound Changes."

²⁴ Zhong Sheng [钟声], "'Confrontation Game' Is as Harmful to Others as to Oneself" [对抗游戏损人害己], *People's Daily*, July 17, 2020.

²⁵ Zhong Sheng [钟声], "Decline, an Issue America Sets for Itself" [衰落, 美国自设的话题], *People's Daily*, January 22, 2013.

²⁶ Zhong Sheng [钟声], "Playing Power Politics is Bound to Lose Moral Support" [玩弄强权注定失道寡助], *People's Daily*, May 27, 2019.

²⁷ Fang Xiaozhi [方晓志], "Seeking 'Absolute Supremacy' Cannot Conceal the Dilemma of the Reality" [谋求“绝对优势”难掩现实窘境], *PLA Daily*, November 21, 2019. Fang is a deputy director of the World Military Studies Center at the PLA's National University of Defense Technology; Jun Baoyan, "It's Time for the US to Cure its 'Hegemonic Anxiety.'"

Absolute hegemony will eventually lead to absolute decline. A single-minded obsession with military means will only exhaust all resources for aggressive wars....²⁸

Non-authoritative Sources

As is the case in virtually all other foreign policy areas, non-authoritative Chinese sources regarding American decline are the most openly blunt and critical. Beginning largely with the 2008 GFC, many, *but not all*, non-authoritative observers concluded that the U.S. had entered a period of marked decline.

At that time, some asserted, as did many semi-authoritative sources, that America's decline was only relative to the rise of other countries and by implication not due to any growing internal weaknesses or lack of power.²⁹

However, not long after the GFC, some non-authoritative observers cautioned against concluding that the U.S. had entered an irreversible period of decline.³⁰ Echoing authoritative and semi-authoritative sources, one observer remarked in 2012 that:

No matter how much difficulty the U.S. encounters, it will remain a super strong power for a very long period of time, far stronger than any number two power.³¹

Another observer even asserted, on the eve of the Trump administration taking office, that America's power was "rapidly recovering," and it remained as the world's only superpower, and was "... unlikely to face substantial challenges for a certain period in the future."³²

²⁸ Jun Baoyan [钧保言], "One Cannot Seek its Own 'Absolute Security' at the Expense of Others" [不能牺牲他国安全谋求自身“绝对安全”], *PLA Daily*, July 30, 2016.

²⁹ Wang Tian [王恬], "The Decline of the US and the Rise of Other Great Powers" [美国衰落与群雄崛起], *People's Daily*, May 30, 2008.

³⁰ Wang Ruibin [王瑞彬], "Has America Really Declined?" [美利坚真的衰落了么], *Guangming Daily* April 8, 2010. The author was the deputy director of the World Economy and Development Research Institute at CIIS. Qin Yaqing [秦亚青], "Impacts and Lessons of the West's 'Systematic Dilemma'" [西方“制度困境”的影响与启示], *Guangming Daily*, December 12, 2012.

³¹ Wang Tian [王恬] and Zhang Yang [张旻], "The Number 1 Mentality Magnified the Shadow of 'US Decline,' Is It the End of the Western Global Hegemony?" [老大心态放大"美国衰落"阴影 西方全球霸权结束?], *People's Daily*, May 14, 2012, http://www.chinanews.com/gj/2012/05-14/3884732_2.shtml.

³² Feng Yujin [冯玉军], "International Structure, New Changes in the World Order, and China's Strategic Choice" [国际格局、世界秩序新变化与中国战略选择], *Study Times*, December 19, 2016; Chen Deming [陈德铭], "Trends in the Contemporary World's Economic Development

But overall, and especially as time passed, various types of statements about American decline have become more prevalent among non-authoritative sources, no doubt driven as much or more by Chinese interpretations of events within the U.S. than because of U.S. foreign policy per se or China's growing power.³³

And yet, considerable variation in viewpoints remains, including individuals who still question whether the U.S. is in fact declining, or if it is declining, whether the decline is permanent, and what an impact of a declining America might be on China.

Regarding statements of decline, some non-authoritative sources now openly refer to America's "inevitable" decline (无可避免的衰落), while calling on the U.S. leadership to ensure that its decline is stable and peaceful.³⁴

Some observers are imaginative in their labels for what the U.S. is supposedly experiencing. While some echo semi-authoritative references to America's "hegemonic anxiety," another observer describes the U.S. as being gripped by "hegemonic menopause syndrome" (霸权更年期综合症), marked by "...inner anxiety, oversensitivity, and a lack of confidence."³⁵

Another scholar refers to the U.S. condition as "hegemon decline syndrome" (霸权衰落综合症). Although the Trump administration was in many ways seen as amplifying this anxiety and in

and Ways to Respond (Six): Don't Be a Bystander or Follower, Be a Participant and Leader, Actively Participate in the Making of International Rules" [当今世界经济发展趋势及其应对 (之六) 不当旁观者、跟随者, 要做参与者、引领者 积极参与国际规则制定], *People's Daily*, August 9, 2015. Chen was president of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits when this article was published. Prior to that, he was China's commerce minister.

³³ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, "Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust," John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution (2012), p. 9.

³⁴ (Ret. Senior Colonel) Zhou Bo, "Can Joe Biden Ensure America's Inevitable Decline Will Be Peaceful?" *South China Morning Post*, January 22 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3118489/can-president-joe-biden-ensure-americas-inevitable-decline-will-be>, Zhou was formerly the director of the Centre for Security Cooperation of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of National Defense of China.

³⁵ Peng Guangqian [彭光谦], "Why Is America Hypersensitive to Military Issues" [美国对军事问题为何过于敏感], *Guangming Daily*, February 25, 2015.

effect accelerating this anxiety-driven process of decline,³⁶ it is also linked to “...changes in the international environment,” and predicted to be “...long and nonlinear.”³⁷

Yet, in contrast, at least one non-authoritative observer recently linked American decline more with the Trump administration than with the U.S. as a whole, and even asserted that “...the core of U.S. power has not been seriously eroded.”³⁸

As with semi-authoritative sources, some non-authoritative observers point to the fractured U.S. political scene and the election of the unilateralist and protectionist Donald Trump, along with the inability of the United States to effectively handle the COVID-19 pandemic, as indications of decline. Washington’s handling of the pandemic in particular is stressed by some observers as a watershed in confirming clearly that the U.S. is in decline.³⁹

This pandemic not only made it even more difficult for the stagnated world economy to recover, but also – and more importantly – highlighted the serious weakness of the Western capitalism-led international system, declared the bankruptcy of neo-liberalism, accelerated the wax and wane in international power, made more prominent the trend of “the East rising, the West declining” in the international structure, and led the profound changes to develop in depth.⁴⁰

³⁶ See, for example, Zhang Niansheng [章念生], Hu Zexi [胡泽曦], and Zhang Mengxu [张梦旭], “Why Is the U.S. Earnest to Demonstrate its ‘Trade Anxiety’” [美国为何热衷晾晒“贸易焦虑”], *People’s Daily*, April 9, 2018.

³⁷ Wu Xinbo [吴心伯], “Washington’s Blind Moves Only Accelerate the Decline of US ‘Hegemony’” [华盛顿的盲动加剧美国霸权衰落], *Global Times*, November 2, 2018; Wen Wang [王文] and Peng Wang [王鹏], “The Macrotrend of US Decline Remains Unchanged” [美国走下坡路的大趋势没变], *People.cn*, October. 10, 2018, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1010/c1002-30333335.html>.

³⁸ Liu Weidong [刘卫东], “Amid Unseen Changes There’s a Greater Need to Accurately Assess America’s Power” [变局之下更要准确评估美国实力], *Global Times*, November 20, 2020.

³⁹ Shen Yi, “2020 Election Reflects US Political Decay and Decline,” *Global Times*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1205527.shtml>, Shen is director of the Research Center for Cyberspace Governance of Fudan University; Wang Wen, “COVID-19 Blunders Signal End of ‘American Century,’” *Global Times*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1184201.shtml>; “A New Page in the World’s Righteousness (Q&A on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ④).”

⁴⁰ “A New Page in the World’s Righteousness (Q&A on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ④)”

More recently, some also point to specific domestic events, such as the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol building or the loss of electric power in Texas, as emblematic of a broader societal problem.⁴¹

In the international arena, as with several semi-authoritative sources, many non-authoritative sources see the U.S. decline in the larger context of a rising East and a declining West.

This term first appeared among non-authoritative sources in the *People's Daily* in 2012. Until about 2016, it was largely limited to a discussion among these sources of relative shifts in economic power between developing and developed countries.⁴²

But non-authoritative scholars began to describe the term more broadly in late 2016 and early 2017, in reference to an overall shift in the power distribution among the great powers.⁴³

⁴¹ Lu Desheng [吕德胜], "Understand American Political Chaos Through the Case of the Capitol Hill Riot" [从国会遭冲击看美政治乱象], *PLA Daily*, January 8, 2021, http://appapi.81.cn/v3/public/jfjbshare/?itemid=284_339419&type=3.

Zhu Feng [朱锋], "Obsession With 'Extreme Competition' With China Would Only Backfire on the US" [沉迷对华“极度竞争”只会反噬美国], *Global Times*, March 4, 2021; Qi Kai [戚凯], "What Is Behind the Power Crisis in Texas Is Not Simple, Expert: A Reflection of the US Societal Chaos" [美国得州电力危机背后“不简单”，专家：反映美国“社会之乱”], February 24, 2021, <https://kknews.cc/zh-cn/world/6rj9kbv.html>.

⁴² Chen Zhixin [陈志新] and Lin Xuedan [林雪丹], "International Echo (Authoritative Forum)," *People's Daily*, June 5, 2012; Gao Cheng [高程], "Financial Crisis Made the World Politics and Economy 'Change Face' (International Vantage)" [金融危机让世界政治经济“变脸”（国际视野）], *People's Daily*, September 17, 2013; Chen Deming, "Trends in the Contemporary World's Economic Development and Ways to Respond (Six); He Minjie [何民捷], "Ceaselessly Move Forward the Noble Cause of Human Peace and Development (Deepen Studies and Implementation of the Spirit of Comrade Xi Jinping's Series of Important Speeches)" [不断把人类和平与发展的崇高事业推向前进（深入学习贯彻习近平同志系列重要讲话精神）], *People's Daily*, November 15, 2016.

⁴³ Su Ge [苏格], "Profound Changes in the Structure Give Rise to Both Challenges and Opportunities (Viewpoints)" [格局深刻调整 挑战机遇凸显(观点)], January 26, 2017, Su is president of the MFA-affiliated China Institute of International Studies (CIIS); Chen Xulong [陈须隆], "Military Expenditures Avoid 'Thucydides Trap' (Viewpoints)" [军费增长避免陷入“修昔底德陷阱”（观点）], April 12, 2017. Chen is head of the International Strategic Studies Institute Under CIIS; Li Yingqi [李应齐], et al., "Great Development, Great Revolution, and Great Changes Call for Rationality and Willingness to Shoulder Responsibilities" [大发展大变革大调整呼唤理性和担当], *People's Daily*, December 22, 2017.

The 东升西降 term is linked by many non-authoritative sources to the term now commonly used by Xi Jinping and other leaders of “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有之大变局), noted above.⁴⁴

Although some Western observers regard the term “great changes unseen in a century” as simply a Chinese euphemism for American decline,⁴⁵ many Chinese define and interpret it more broadly to include not only a redistribution of the global power balance in China’s favor but also a host of other fundamental changes, such as increasing globalization and interdependence, decoupling and intensifying reliance on technological innovation, and transnational security threats, such as climate change.⁴⁶

Taking its meaning as a whole, for some non-authoritative observers, the phrase poses both opportunities and dangers for China. In the latter category, as seen with authoritative and (to a greater extent) semi-authoritative sources, many non-authoritative observers refer to the dangers supposedly resulting from an anxious, politically divided, and less confident U.S. in disrupting the global order and provoking confrontations with China and Russia as Washington attempts to strengthen domestic unity and slow or reverse its relative decline.⁴⁷

But despite all these statements, to some extent the issue of U.S. decline, and the role of the pandemic in supposedly fostering it, remain under debate within China, at least among non-authoritative observers. One overview of Chinese scholarly views states:

Although the Chinese academic community has different *or even fundamentally opposite* (author’s emphasis) views on the “U.S. decline” thesis, America’s hard power is still far from reaching its dusk. It needs more observation as to whether

⁴⁴ He Yiting [何毅亭], “Scientifically Comprehend and Utilize Systemic Concepts (Study and Implement the Spirit of the 5th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee)” [科学把握和运用系统观念（深入学习贯彻党的十九届五中全会精神）], *People’s Daily*, February 3, 2021; Zhang Yunling, Yang Guangbin, et al., “Experts’ Perspective on Changes Unseen in a Century” [如何认识和理解百年大变局], *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs* [亚太安全与海洋研究], No. 2 (2019); Zhu Feng [朱锋], “Review of Recent Research on the ‘Great Change Unseen in a Century’” [近期学界关于‘百年未有之大变局’研究综述], *People’s Forum: Academic Frontier* [人民论坛：学术前沿], April 2019.

⁴⁵ Doshi, *The Long Game*, p. 266.

⁴⁶ Fravel, Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

⁴⁷ Zhang Shuhua [张树华], “The American Root of the World’s Political Chaos” [世界政治乱象的美国“病源”], *Global Times*, June 14, 2019. Zhang is director of the Institute of Political Science under the China Academy of Social Sciences; He Yafei, “The Crisis of Capitalism and the Evolution of China-US Relations,” *China US Focus*, January 16, 2019, [https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/the-crisis-of-capitalism-and-the-evolution-of-china-us-relations](https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/the-crisis-of-capitalism-and-the-evolution-of-china-us-relations;); Zhu Feng, “Obsession with ‘Extreme Competition’ With China Would Only Backfire on the US.”

the pandemic will be the watershed that puts an end to the debate on U.S. decline. In the short term, the international power structure comprised of major countries is unlikely to undergo changes tantamount to an inflection point.⁴⁸

One analyst asserts that, while "...[t]he rise of the East and the decline of the West is a broad trend...the status of a strong West and a weak East will remain unchanged for a long period in the future."⁴⁹

In fact, a few non-authoritative observers still argue that it would be premature to assert that America is actually in permanent decline, given its strengths and resiliency. One scholar states:

...currently there is no substitution for the liberal international order. "Brain death of NATO," "decline of the West," and the "end of the American century" are more warnings than prophecies.⁵⁰

Another researcher even states:

...as a responsible major power, China needs to actively participate in global governance, for which we need support and cooperation from our Western partners.... Just as is the case of the "China collapse" theory, the "West decline" theory is an oversimplistic way of considering and perceiving changes in national power.⁵¹

As with some semi-authoritative sources, a few non-authoritative observers also point to the dangers of China underestimating the strength and importance of the U.S. to the global system and responding in an excessive, zero-sum manner to any aggressive U.S. actions associated with its decline.⁵²

⁴⁸ Fu Mengzi [傅梦孜], "Future Development of Sino-US Relations and the World Landscape (Experts' Commentaries)" [中美关系走向与国际格局之便 (名家笔谈)], *Journal of International Security Studies*, No. 6, 2020. Fu is vice president of China's State Security Ministry-affiliated China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

⁴⁹ Liu Weidong, "Amid Unseen Changes There's a Greater Need To Accurately Assess America's Power."

⁵⁰ Niu Xinchun [牛新春], "Watch Out That the US Might Build a New 'Berlin Wall'" [警惕美国新建一堵“柏林墙”], *Global Times*, June 13, 2020. Niu is director of the Middle East Studies Institute at CICIR.

⁵¹ Sun Chenghao [孙成昊], "'Decline' Is Not the Whole Truth About the West" ["衰落"不是西方的全部真相], *Global Times*, January 8, 2019, Sun is a CICIR researcher.

⁵² Zhu Feng, "Obsession with 'Extreme Competition' with China Would Only Backfire on the US;" Sun Zhe [孙哲], "China's Strategic Evolution Toward the United States: Model and Challenge" [中国对美战略的演进: 模式及挑战], *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*, no. 1, 2021; Niu Xinchun, "Watch Out that the US Might Build a New 'Berlin Wall.'"

One non-authoritative source states that China needs to:

...avoid being bogged down in a “protracted struggle” with the U.S. ... In this globalized and multi-polarized world, America is not our sole point of reference, or the target that China’s development needs to defeat or overturn. China needs to go beyond such a singular, linear, black-or-white, zero-sum, dichotomous American mentality. ...⁵³

Another observer (the former vice dean of China Foreign Affairs University) even argues that:

America’s decline is unlikely to benefit China. Based on the need for stability and shared interests, China does not want to see America’s decline.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The preceding analysis indicates that many, but not all, Chinese observers believe that the global order is evolving in a direction that favors the East (and hence China) over the West (and hence the United States). This is most clearly indicated by the common Chinese view that the term “great changes unseen in a century,” frequently employed by Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders (as well as by both semi-authoritative and non-authoritative sources) includes the idea of a rising East and a declining West (东升西降), even though no authoritative Chinese source has used the term.

However, what is less clear is how those many Chinese who see the U.S. as being in decline view the specific origins, nature, and extent of that decline and the implications for China. Many non-authoritative Chinese observers explicitly assert that the U.S., and the West in general, are in some kind of steady decline, resulting not only from China’s rising power but also, for some, from America’s supposedly growing domestic problems. Yet other Chinese sources of all types question whether the U.S. is actually in an irreversible, structural decline. Some authoritative and non-authoritative sources even reject the idea that the U.S. is in any kind of decline at all, reversible or not.

Moreover, many Chinese observers view any kind of U.S. decline as likely to be very gradual in nature, possibly nonlinear, and resulting more from Washington’s misguided efforts to uphold its hegemonic global position against the general trend toward multipolarity rather than as a result of any permanent, inherent weaknesses. Some see the U.S. decline as only occurring relative to China’s rise, while others believe that the U.S. might reverse its decline. Equally notable, even though Xi Jinping asserts that the ongoing “great changes unseen in a century” (and hence presumably the U.S. decline) on balance benefit China, many Chinese observers point to various

⁵³ Zhang Shuhua, “The American Root of the World’s Political Chaos.”

⁵⁴ Wang Fan [王帆], “An Overall Stable World Benefits Both China and the US” [世界总体稳定对中美都有利], *Global Times*, April 16, 2020.

dangers for China that could result from an ongoing American decline. In fact, at least one non-authoritative observer explicitly asserts that a declining U.S. is actually not in China's interest.

Some might argue that none of these variations in Chinese views about U.S. decline matter, since Xi Jinping has publicly endorsed a term that, while not explicitly conveying the idea of such a decline, is nonetheless taken by many Chinese to include it. That might well be the case, i.e., Xi probably does believe that the U.S. is in some kind of decline. But whether he believes that such a decline is permanent or potentially reversible, structural, or attitudinal poses no or few dangers to China is less clear. In addition, the fact that many views in China exist on this issue and that a wide variety of observers are allowed to state their various views openly, at the very least suggests that there is no clear Chinese consensus on the matter and on what to do about it, as some might claim. Indeed, some Chinese refer to a "debate" on the issue.

All this indicates that one should approach with caution the idea that the Chinese government is basing its policies on the sure conviction that the U.S. is in an irreversible, structural decline benefiting China, and that Beijing is therefore committed irrevocably to a policy of taking advantage of this decline, perhaps with the ultimate objective of replacing the U.S. as global hegemon. There is thus far no conclusive evidence for such a notion.

Hence, it would be a mistake for the U.S. government to adopt policies based on that viewpoint. Such an approach would almost certainly close off many options that might exist for moderation and mutual accommodation between the two powers, and simply reinforce the existing Sino-U.S. security competition, most likely in hostile, zero-sum ways.

Instead, a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese discourse on U.S. decline and its implications for the United States is in order, one that allows for the possibility that Chinese views on this topic, including among the senior Chinese leadership, are still in some flux and hence malleable. Such an approach would permit U.S. policies designed not only to deter Beijing if it were to act with overconfidence on the basis of extreme assumptions about a U.S. decline but also reassure Beijing in positive directions if in fact the Chinese debate over U.S. decline reflects considerable insecurity and uncertainty.

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