

Question: What is America's biggest challenge in the world?

Great powers are often unable to foresee their own declines. In 1918, despite the British Empire's formidable strength, its leaders were unable to prevent the United States from eclipsing its power. Britain was faced with an upstart rival that had successfully adapted British economic and political models to power its own success. As the power center of the world slowly shifted away from London towards New York and Washington over the next few decades, the British came to terms with their decline and allowed the mantle of global responsibility to shift westward without objection. At the helm of the global order, a postwar United States steered the world towards the end-goal of liberal democratic capitalism with purpose and vigor.

Flash forward to 2018, and it is not inconceivable to imagine the United States on the cliff-edge of the great power precipice compared to 1918. With dilapidating infrastructure, an erratic President, and a rapidly aging population, America teeters on the brink of tumbling from its unipolar perch at the top of the global pecking order. Once again, a hungrier and more cohesive rival in the form of neo-authoritarian China is positioned to overtake the global superpower militarily and economically. The specific challenge that China poses to the U.S. and the global order, however, is different from the U.K. to U.S. power transition a century prior. China's challenge to the United States comes at a time where much of the world longs for an alternative to the liberal democratic capitalist model defended by the U.S. for so long. The United States' ability to preserve that model from internal doubts and Chinese pressures will define the structure of global politics in the coming century, and is the most striking challenge faced by America in the world today.

From where I stand, the conflict is apparent. Although born in China to Chinese parents, I have lived most of my life outside its confines. As a Western-educated, 1.5-generation immigrant, I understand both the lure of American ideals and the powerful objections to American reality. Political gridlock in Washington hurts more than the individual citizens of the United States: it hurts the

credibility of the entire global order that the U.S. and its allies have worked tirelessly to build. I myself have seesawed between passionate support of American ideals and the desperate search for better alternatives. Mirroring most youth, I've dabbled in socialism as often as I've explored the scriptures of free market capitalism and liberal democracy.

Youth around the world are similarly inclined to question the American model of governance; Yascha Mounk's research suggests that global beliefs in the "essentialness" of democracy have declined precipitously over the past few decades¹, while millennial attitudes towards capitalism are lukewarm at best.² As the U.S.'s popularity numbers have gone down, China's have gone up. A 2014 Pew Survey suggests that a 49% plurality of respondents believe that China will replace or has already replaced the U.S. as the world's leading superpower.³ The Chinese government, seizing upon this development, has made it a national objective to build up their soft power and position China as a credible alternative to the U.S. with regards to global leadership.⁴ With doubters within and opponents without, the United States' carefully wrought *Pax Americana* is cracking at the seams.

The United States must make the choice between defending its institutions and practices to the end, or caving and adapting its ways to keep up with its rapidly developing rivals. The global structures built by the United States are fundamentally strong and just. Poverty levels have declined significantly since the 1900s, more people are living longer than ever before, and global education

¹ Amanda Taub, "How Stable Are Democracies? 'Warning Signs Are Flashing Red,'" *The New York Times*, November 29, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html?_r=0.

² Max Ehrenfreund, "A Majority of Millennials Now Reject Capitalism," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/26/a-majority-of-millennials-now-reject-capitalism-poll-shows/?utm_term=.8307225dd75f.

³ Pew Research Center, July 2014, "Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America's Image".

⁴ Financial Times Series: "China: The Soft Superpower", December 19, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/china-soft-superpower>.

levels are at their peak.⁵ Any challenge the U.S.-led global order must show itself capable of transcending these tremendous historical advances. If the United States wishes to stay abreast of these developments, it must either redouble the fight and vehemently defend its legacy, or adapt to a newer, better system of governance.

⁵ Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Global Extreme Poverty”, *Our World in Data*, University of Oxford. <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/>.