

In These Pages

by MacKubin T. Owens

This issue of *Orbis* begins with a timely examination of the impact of the debt problem on U.S. national security. Kori Schake, a member of both the FPRI board of advisors and *Orbis'* editorial board, contends that this debt problem is America's main strategic vulnerability and that the country's capacity to solve it will likely be the crucial test of whether American hegemony will be perpetuated through the 21st century or the United States will enter into a period of decline.

The first of this issue's two regional clusters focuses on China. Felix Chang examines the naval rise of China and its implications for South and Southeast Asia. James Kurth discusses what it means for the United States to confront a rising China with "Western characteristics." And Deborah Brown and Tun-jen Cheng investigate religious relations—Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian—across the Taiwan Strait.

Our second cluster looks at the "Arab Spring." Tally and Sam Helfont observe that the uprisings in the Arab world have not only upended domestic politics in individual states where protests have taken place, but they have also served as a catalyst for transforming international relations in the Middle East. They contend that

Egypt and Tunisia were pillars of a moderate Sunni bloc that also includes Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States that have allied with the United States to counter both Iran's bid for regional hegemony, as well as domestic Islamist and/or democratic reform movements. Mehran Kamrava concurs, focusing on the implications of a likely Saudi-led counterrevolution.

Harsh Pant examines relations between India and Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan's response to the growing relationship. Thomas Fingar argues persuasively that none of the strategies articulated since 1990 meets the minimal requirements for a new grand strategy to replace that which guided U.S. policy during the Cold War. And Joan Johnson-Freese examines the state of professional military education (PME), 25 years after the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, arguing that PME is necessary but that it needs to be reformed.

Impromptu and Asides

As Kori Schake notes in her article in this edition of *Orbis*, the current budgetary problems that the United States faces today constitute in and of themselves a major strategic vulnerability, threatening the very

security of the country. One way that it does so is by threatening the role of the United States as the “underwriter” of global security.

Since World War II, the United States has pursued a grand strategy of primacy. Primacy is based on an international relations theory called hegemonic stability, which holds that a liberal world order of trade and prosperity does not arise as the result of a global “invisible hand.” On the contrary, such a liberal system only comes about because of the presence of a hegemonic power, a state willing and able to provide the world with the collective goods of economic stability and international security.

A state will only adopt the leadership role of hegemon when it is in its national interest to do so. According to the theory of hegemonic stability, a decline in relative U.S. power could create a more disorderly, less peaceful world.

A world without U.S. primacy is likely to be more violent and disorderly and less liberal in terms of both economics and politics. The sustained international primacy of the United States has been central to the welfare and security not only of Americans but also to those throughout the globe who favor freedom, democracy, open economies, and a liberal international order.

The precedent for the United States is the decay of *Pax Britannica*, which, many believe, created the necessary, if not sufficient conditions for the two world wars of the twentieth

century. As British hegemony declined, smaller states that previously had incentives to cooperate with Britain “defected” to other powers, causing the international system to fragment. The outcome was depression and war. The decline of American power could lead to a similar outcome.

Some years ago, Paul Kennedy argued that Great Britain’s decline was the result of “imperial overstretch.” But it seems more likely that it was not expenditures on the Empire that doomed the British Empire, but the combination of two wars Britain could not prevent and the vast expenditures on social welfare that it chose to make.

The United States now finds itself in the situation that led to the decline of Great Britain: a sclerotic economy overburdened by productivity-killing regulations and taxation and vast expenditures on social welfare programs that dwarf spending on defense. With regard to the latter, the United States has, with the best of intentions, made promises to its citizens that it cannot keep because the government is running out of the taxpayers’ money necessary to fund social welfare programs.

Fortunately, some have recognized this reality and have begun the debate necessary to engender reform. Such reforms are required if the United States is to avoid the “margin call” about which Dr. Schake warns.

