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## The Great Superpower Meltdown

Posted By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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Think of us as just having passed through the failed era of “must” in Washington. For almost eight years, George W. Bush made speeches and appearances in which he hectored this or that country, or enemy, or people about what they “must” do. Never, I suspect, has an American president lectured more people out there on their responsibilities to us. Looking back, what’s surprising is how few paid much attention. The Iraqis didn’t listen, nor did the Afghans, nor the Iranians, nor, it seems, the Pakistanis, nor the Russians, nor the Chinese... and so on. It’s been a remarkably ignominious lesson in bluster and bust – and a reasonable measure of the actual power of a country that, not so many years ago, Washington pundits were happily (and favorably) comparing to the Roman and British empires in its reach and ambition.

In Washington, recently, those “musts” have been on the wane, which is hardly surprising. In the wake of a series of failed wars and a near economic collapse, a lot of “musts” now seem increasingly aimed in Washington’s direction. Michael Klare, author of [\*Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy\*](#), has turned to another unusual but striking measure of waning American power in the world, an official report on the relatively distant future issued by the U.S. intelligence community late last year. The distant future was [once](#), of course, the province of utopian or dystopian thinkers, pulp fiction writers, oddballs, visionaries, even outright nuts, not government intelligence services. Regularly analyzing that future has, however, become almost as much a duty of the 18 agencies of the U.S. intelligence community as doing National Intelligence Estimates on Iran. Consider that a measure of national security sprawl. Maybe, given Klare’s analysis below, the IC should leave the future to the screenwriters for *Star Trek* and stick to our present world. *Tom*

**Welcome to 2025**

**American preeminence is disappearing fifteen years early**

by Michael T. Klare

Memo to the CIA: You may not be prepared for time-travel, but welcome to 2025 anyway! Your rooms may be a little small, your ability to demand better accommodations may have gone out the window, and the amenities may not be to your taste, but get used to it. It's going to be your reality from now on.

Okay, now for the serious version of the above: In November 2008, the National Intelligence Council (NIC), an affiliate of the Central Intelligence Agency, issued the latest in a series of futuristic publications intended to guide the incoming Obama administration. Peering into its analytic crystal ball in a report titled "[Global Trends 2025](#)," it predicted that America's global preeminence would gradually disappear over the next 15 years – in conjunction with the rise of new global powerhouses, especially China and India. The report examined many facets of the future strategic environment, but its most startling, and news-making, finding concerned the projected long-term erosion of American dominance and the emergence of new global competitors. "Although the United States is likely to remain the single most powerful actor [in 2025]," it stated definitively, the country's "relative strength – even in the military realm – will decline and U.S. leverage will become more constrained."

That, of course, was then; this – some 11 months into the future – is now, and how things have changed. Futuristic predictions will just have to catch up to the fast-shifting realities of the present moment. Although published after the onset of the global economic meltdown was underway, the report was written before the crisis reached its full proportions and so emphasized that the decline of American power would be *gradual*, extending over the assessment's 15-year time horizon. But the economic crisis and attendant events have radically upset that timetable. As a result of the mammoth economic losses suffered by the United States over the past year and China's stunning economic recovery, the global power shift the report predicted has accelerated. For all practical purposes, 2025 is here already.

Many of the broad, down-the-road predictions made in "Global Trends 2025" have, in fact, already come to pass. Brazil, Russia, India, and China – collectively known as the BRIC countries – are already playing far more assertive roles in global economic affairs, as the report predicted would happen in perhaps a decade or so. At the same time, the dominant global role once monopolized by the United States with a helping hand from the major Western industrial powers – collectively known as the Group of 7 (G-7) – has already faded away at a remarkable pace. Countries that once looked to the United States for guidance on major international issues are ignoring Washington's counsel and instead creating their own autonomous policy networks. The United States is becoming less inclined to deploy its military forces abroad as rival powers increase their own capabilities and non-state actors rely on "asymmetrical" means of attack to overcome the U.S. advantage in conventional firepower.

No one seems to be saying this out loud – *yet* – but let's put it bluntly: less than a year into the 15-year span of "Global Trends 2025," the days of America's unquestioned global dominance have come to an end. It may take a decade or two (or three) before historians will be able to look back and say with assurance, "*That* was the moment when the United States ceased to be the planet's preeminent power and was forced to behave like another major

player in a world of many competing great powers.” The indications of this great transition, however, are there for those who care to look.

### **Six Way Stations on the Road to Ordinary Nationhood**

Here is my list of six recent developments that indicate we are entering “2025” today. All six were in the news in the last few weeks, even if never collected in a single place. They (and other events like them) represent a pattern: the shape, in fact, of a new age in formation.

1. At the global economic summit in Pittsburgh on Sept. 24 and 25, the leaders of the major industrial powers, the G-7 (G-8 if you include Russia) [agreed](#) to turn over responsibility for oversight of the world economy to a larger, more inclusive Group of 20 (G-20), adding in China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and other developing nations. Although doubts have been raised about the ability of this larger group to exercise effective global leadership, there is no doubt that the move itself signaled a shift in the locus of world economic power from the West to the global East and South – and with this shift, a seismic decline in America’s economic preeminence has been registered.

“The G-20’s true significance is not in the passing of a baton from the G-7/G-8 but from the G-1, the U.S.,” Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University [wrote](#) in the *Financial Times*. “Even during the 33 years of the G-7 economic forum, the U.S. called the important economic shots.” Declining American leadership over these last decades was obscured by the collapse of the Soviet Union and an early American lead in information technology, Sachs also noted, but there is now no mistaking the shifting of economic power from the United States to China and other rising economic dynamos.

2. According to news reports, America’s economic rivals are [conducting](#) secret (and not-so-secret) meetings to explore a diminished role for the U.S. dollar – fast losing its value – in international trade. Until now, the use of the dollar as the international medium of exchange has given the United States a significant economic advantage: it can simply print dollars to meet its international obligations while other nations must convert their own currencies into dollars, often incurring significant added costs. Now, however, many major trading countries – among them China, Russia, Japan, Brazil, and the Persian Gulf oil countries – are considering the use of the Euro, or a “basket” of currencies, as a new medium of exchange. If adopted, such a plan would accelerate the dollar’s precipitous fall in value and further erode American clout in international economic affairs.

One such discussion reportedly took place this summer at a summit meeting of the BRIC countries. Just a concept a year ago, when the very idea of BRIC was concocted by the chief economist at Goldman Sachs, the BRIC consortium became a flesh-and-blood reality this June when the leaders of the four countries held an [inaugural meeting](#) in Yekaterinburg, Russia.

The very fact that Brazil, Russia, India, and China chose to meet as a group was considered significant, as they jointly possess about 43 percent of the world’s population and are expected to account for 33 percent of the world’s gross domestic product by 2030 – about as much as the United States and Western Europe will claim at that time. Although the BRIC leaders decided not to form a permanent body like the G-7 at this stage, they did [agree](#) to coordinate efforts to develop alternatives to the dollar and to reform the International Monetary Fund in such a way as to give non-Western countries a greater voice.

**3.** On the diplomatic front, Washington has been rebuffed by both Russia and China in its drive to line up support for increased international pressure on Iran to cease its nuclear enrichment program. One month after President Obama [canceled](#) plans to deploy an anti-ballistic missile system in Eastern Europe in an apparent bid to secure Russian backing for a tougher stance toward Tehran, top Russian leaders are clearly indicating that they have no intention of endorsing strong new sanctions on Iran. “Threats, sanctions, and threats of pressure in the current situation, we are convinced, would be counterproductive,” [declared](#) the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, following a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Moscow on Oct. 13. The following day, Russian Prime Minister [Vladimir Putin](#) said that the threat of sanctions was “premature.” Given the political risks Obama took in canceling the missile program – a step widely condemned by Republicans in Washington – Moscow’s quick dismissal of U.S. pleas for cooperation on the Iranian enrichment matter can only be interpreted as a further sign of waning American influence.

**4.** Exactly the same inference can be drawn from a high-level meeting in Beijing on Oct. 15 between Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and Iran’s first vice president, Mohammed Reza Rahimi. “The Sino-Iran relationship has witnessed rapid development as the two countries’ leaders have had frequent exchanges, and cooperation in trade and energy has widened and deepened,” Wen [said](#) at the Great Hall of the People. Coming at a time when the United States is engaged in a vigorous diplomatic drive to persuade China and Russia, among others, to reduce their trade ties with Iran as a prelude to toughened sanctions, the Chinese statement can only be considered a pointed rebuff of Washington.

**5.** From Washington’s point of view, efforts to secure international support for the allied war effort in Afghanistan have also met with a strikingly disappointing response. In what can only be considered a trivial and begrudging vote of support for the U.S.-led war effort, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown [announced](#) on Oct. 14 that Britain would add more troops to the British contingent in that country – but only 500 more, and only if other European nations increase their own military involvement, something he undoubtedly knows is highly unlikely. So far, this tiny, provisional contingent represents the sum total of additional troops the Obama administration has been able to pry out of America’s European allies, despite a sustained diplomatic drive to bolster the combined NATO force in Afghanistan. In other words, even America’s most loyal and obsequious ally in Europe no longer appears willing to carry the burden for what is widely seen as yet another costly and debilitating American military adventure in the Greater Middle East.

**6.** Finally, in a move of striking symbolic significance, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) passed over Chicago (as well as Madrid and Tokyo) to [pick](#) Rio de Janeiro to be the host of the 2016 summer Olympics, the first time a South American nation was selected for the honor. Until the Olympic vote took place, Chicago was considered a strong contender, especially since former Chicago resident Barack Obama personally appeared in Copenhagen to lobby the IOC. Nonetheless, in a development that shocked the world, Chicago not only lost out, but was the city eliminated in the very first round of voting.

“Brazil went from a second-class country to a first-class country, and today we began to receive the respect we deserve,” [said](#) Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva at a victory celebration in Copenhagen after the vote. “I could die now and it already would have been worth it.” Few said so, but in the course of the Olympic decision-making process the U.S. was summarily and pointedly demoted from sole superpower to instant also-ran, a symbolic moment on a planet entering a new age.

## On Being an Ordinary Country

These are only a few examples of recent developments which indicate, to this author, that the day of America's global preeminence has already come to an end, years before the American intelligence community expected. It's increasingly clear that other powers – even our closest allies – are increasingly pursuing independent foreign policies, no matter what pressure Washington tries to bring to bear.

Of course, none of this means that, for some time to come, the U.S. won't retain the world's largest economy and, in terms of sheer destructiveness, its most potent military force. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the strategic environment in which American leaders must make critical decisions, when it comes to the nation's vital national interests, has changed dramatically since the onset of the global economic crisis.

Even more important, President Obama and his senior advisers are, it seems, reluctantly beginning to reshape U.S. foreign policy with the new global reality in mind. This appears evident, for example, in the administration's decision to revisit U.S. strategy on Afghanistan.

It was only in March, after all, that the president [embraced](#) a new counterinsurgency-oriented strategy in that country, involving a buildup of U.S. boots on the ground and a commitment to protracted efforts to win hearts and minds in Afghan villages where the Taliban was resurgent. It was on this basis that he [fired](#) the incumbent Afghan War commander, Gen. David D. McKiernan, replacing him with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, considered a more vigorous proponent of counterinsurgency. When, however, McChrystal presented Obama with the price tag for the implementation of this strategy – [40,000 to 80,000](#) additional troops (over and above the 20,000-odd extra troops only recently committed to the fight) – many in the president's inner circle evidently blanched.

Not only will such a large deployment cost the U.S. Treasury hundreds of billions of dollars it can ill afford, but the strains it is likely to place on the Army and Marine Corps are likely to be little short of unbearable after years of multiple tours and stress in Iraq. This price would be more tolerable, of course, if America's allies would take up more of the burden, but they are ever less willing to do so.

Undoubtedly, the leaders of Russia and China are not entirely unhappy to see the United States exhaust its financial and military resources in Afghanistan. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Vice President Joe Biden, among others, is [calling](#) for a new turn in U.S. policy, foregoing a counterinsurgency approach and opting instead for a less costly "counter-terrorism" strategy aimed, in part, at crushing al-Qaeda in Pakistan – using drone aircraft and Special Forces, rather than large numbers of U.S. troops (while leaving troop levels in Afghanistan relatively unchanged).

It is too early to predict how the president's review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan will play out, but the fact that he did not immediately embrace the McChrystal plan and has allowed Biden such free rein to argue his case suggests that he may be coming to recognize the folly of expanding America's military commitments abroad at a time when its global preeminence is waning.

One senses Obama's caution in other recent moves. Although he continues to insist that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran is impermissible and that the use of force to prevent

this remains an option, he has clearly moved to minimize the likelihood that this option – which would also be plagued by recalcitrant “allies” – will ever be employed.

On the other side of the coin, he has given fresh life to American diplomacy, seeking improved ties with Moscow and approving renewed diplomatic contact with such previously pariah states as Burma, Sudan, and Syria. This, too, reflects a reality of our changing world: that the holier-than-thou, bullying stance adopted by the Bush administration toward these and other countries for almost eight years rarely achieved anything. Think of it as an implicit acknowledgment that the U.S. is now descending from its status as the globe’s “sole superpower” to that of an ordinary country. This, after all, is what ordinary countries *do*; they engage other countries in diplomatic discourse, whether they like their current governments or not.

So, welcome to the world of 2025. It doesn’t look like the world of our recent past, when the United States stood head and shoulders above all other nations in stature, and it doesn’t comport well with Washington’s fantasies of global power since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. But it is reality.

For many Americans, the loss of that preeminence may be a source of discomfort, or even despair. On the other hand, don’t forget the advantages to being an ordinary country like any other country: Nobody expects Canada, or France, or Italy to send another 40,000 troops to Afghanistan, on top of the 68,000 already there and the 120,000 still in Iraq. Nor does anyone expect those countries to spend \$925 billion in taxpayer money to do so – the current estimated cost of both wars, according to the [National Priorities Project](#).

The question remains: How much longer will Washington feel that Americans can afford to subsidize a global role that includes garrisoning much of the planet and fighting distant wars in the name of global security, when the American economy is losing so much ground to its competitors? This is the dilemma President Obama and his advisers must confront in the altered world of 2025.