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The book review of "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500-2000" by Paul Kennedy, 1987.

On the 17th of February 2023, Foreign Affairs magazine published an article about a very intricate development China has undergone in the last year. In fact, as I am writing this book review, Russia and China are declaring enduring economic partnership agreements and pledging allegiance to one another.¹

Satellite images collected in June 2021, revealed that China was building 120 intercontinental ballistic missile silos on the edge of the Gobi Desert. A few weeks later it was revealed that another 110 missile silos were under construction in Hami, in Xinjiang Province. For decades, China maintained a relatively small nuclear force, but according to latest U.S. intelligence estimates, 2021 saw the birth of 1000 more weapons. By 2030, the arsenal of China will put China far above any other nuclear power save Russia and the United States. During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the United States were able to focus their nuclear strategies almost entirely on the other. Although the bipolar system did not eliminate the risk of nuclear war, it worked well enough to avoid Armageddon.²

¹ Hopkins, Valerie; Buckley, Chris. " Xi and Putin Bind China and Russia's Economies Further, Despite War in Ukraine." The New York Times, (March 21, 2023)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/world/europe/xi-putin-russia-china-ukraine.html>

² Andrew F. Krepinovich, Jr. "The New Nuclear Age: How China's Growing Nuclear Arsenal Threatens Deterrence." Foreign Affairs (May/Jun2022), Vol. 101, Issue 1

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-04-19/new-nuclear-age>

2023. Please welcome the new tripolar system. The future is here.

One of the first people to stress the possibility of events unfolding this way was Paul Kennedy in his book "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500-2000", that saw the light of day in 1987. In 36 years the book has accumulated more reviews than probably even Harry Potter. J.K. Rowling would be surprised. The majority reviews praise Kennedy as a historian, some even comparing him to Toynbee; however, they then proceed to offer a swift and sharp critique how wrong, or at least clouded, Paul Kennedy's judgement is. Some other are simply titled "Why 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers' Was Wrong".

However, 36 years on, and it turns out Kennedy was right. So maybe in the wake of the latest evolutionary algorithms of history it actually is worth analysing "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500-2000." Not to understand how the great powers work, but for the sake of understanding how one of those great powers – The United States – sees itself as a great power.

If history for Edward Carr was a fish on the fishmonger's slab³, then for Paul Kennedy it is a nuclear missile. Or a case of money for which you buy a nuclear missile. So, who is Paul Kennedy, really? He is a leading expert on the history of international relations, particularly on the rise and fall of great powers. In addition to his academic work, Kennedy has been a

³ Carr, Edward Hallett. "What Is History?" New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

consultant to several government agencies and international organizations, including the US Department of State and the World Bank. He is a fellow of the British Academy and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His contributions to the field of international history have been widely recognized, including being awarded the Wolfson History Prize and the American Historical Association's George Louis Beer Prize. Kennedy obtained his doctorate from St. Antony's College, Oxford, under the supervision of A. J. P. Taylor, who, in turn, was a British historian who specialised in 19th- and 20th-century European diplomacy (History Today magazine went as far as naming him the fourth most important historian of the previous 60 years); and John Andrew Gallagher, who held the Beit Professorship of Commonwealth History at the University of Oxford and from 1971 until his death was the Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge. The title of Gallagher's most influential work – "The Imperialism of Free Trade", - speaks for itself. Kennedy, as a war child himself (born in 1945) and educated by the two military inclined diplomats, both of whom fought during the Second World War, couldn't be anyone but Paul Kennedy as we know him: a realist who sees the world primarily in terms of military power and economics.

In his view, political fractalisation and anarchy, the condition that characterised Europe after 1500, spurred nations to rival one another and drove a race for military arms and ascendance. Political fragmentation and random technological change were self-perpetuating. Some nations might try to dominate others, but they would soon become over-committed and involved in too many military conflicts.

Kennedy asserts that great powers in 1500-1700 with access to significant financial resources, particularly those with a large and wealthy domestic economy, have a significant advantage in financing their military efforts. In contrast, nations that lack such resources, particularly those with a limited tax base, must rely on external sources of funding, such as borrowing or looting. No dissonance there.

In "Industrialisation and the Shifting Global Balances" chapter Kennedy explores the impact of industrialization on the balance of power among nations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He argues that industrialisation led to a significant shift in the global balance of power, as nations that were able to develop and harness new technologies and industries became increasingly dominant. Specifically, he suggests that industrialisation allowed certain nations, such as Great Britain and the United States, to develop powerful industrial economies that gave them a significant advantage in military and economic affairs.

It would be expedient to explain whom the book was written for. Kennedy's book appealed to the generally liberal media and academic communities in 1987 because it roundly condemned the policies of the then conservative Reagan administration. Reagan's policies, critics believed, exhibited all the features of military overstretch - excessive defence spending and related disinvestment in economic growth due to uncontrolled budget and current account deficits.⁴ Reagan's domestic policies aimed to promote economic growth, reduce government regulation, and promote conservative social values. His tax cuts and deregulatory policies are often cited as

⁴ Nau, Henry. "Why 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers' Was Wrong." *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), pp. 579- 592

contributing factors to the economic growth and prosperity of the 1980s. And despite the fact Mr Nau says “Kennedy's predictions have not fared well over the past decade and more” Reagan did exactly what Kennedy attributes to economic growth strategy.

In the same chapter Kennedy also notes that the benefits of industrialisation were not evenly distributed among nations. Some nations, such as Germany and Japan, were able to quickly catch up with the industrial powers and challenge their dominance, while others, such as China and Russia, struggled to keep pace and fell further behind.

In fact, Henry Nau started Kennedy’s book review with this: “In 1987, Paul Kennedy predicted in his best-selling book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, that the Pacific region, especially Japan and China, would rise in power, while the then Soviet Union, the United States and Europe would decline. Russia did indeed continue to decline, but not for the reasons Kennedy argued. The other powers that Kennedy predicted would decline did not decline at all. The United States experienced a spectacular rebirth, not only 'winning' the Cold War but becoming once again the dominant economic power in the world.” Perhaps, in 2001, when Nau crafted his review, it did indeed look doubtful. But look what’s happening in 2023.

The crown jewel of “*The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*” is “*The Coming of a Bipolar World and the Crisis of the Middle Powers*” chapter, in which Kennedy argues that the Cold War created a bipolar world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, many middle powers found themselves caught in the middle of this conflict and struggled to maintain their independence and autonomy. Kennedy suggests that middle powers faced

several challenges during this period. First, they were often forced to choose sides in the Cold War, which could limit their ability to pursue their own interests and agendas. Second, they often found themselves subject to the influence and pressure of the superpowers, who sought to use these middle powers as proxies in their larger geopolitical struggles.

Furthermore, Kennedy notes that the bipolar world order created significant economic and social pressures for middle powers. As the superpowers competed for influence around the world, they often used economic aid and other incentives to gain the support of middle powers. However, this aid often came with strings attached, and many middle powers found themselves struggling to balance their economic and political interests.

In conclusion, Kennedy argues that the Cold War created significant challenges for middle powers, who found themselves caught in the middle of a global struggle for power and influence. While some middle powers were able to navigate these challenges successfully, others struggled to maintain their independence and autonomy in the face of pressure from the superpowers. The consequences of the Cold War continue to shape the global balance of power today.

Indeed, the bipolar world order was also characterised by a significant amount of instability. The competition between the superpowers played out in various forms around the world, with the two sides supporting opposing factions and governments in various conflicts. The bipolar world order was marked by significant changes over time. The balance of power between the United

States and the Soviet Union shifted several times during the course of the Cold War, as each side pursued various strategies to gain an advantage over the other.

"To the Twenty First Century" is the concluding chapter of the book, where Kennedy discusses the key factors that have shaped the international system since the end of the Cold War and offers insights into the challenges that the world is likely to face in the twenty-first century. He argues that the global power structure has become more diffuse, with the rise of new powers such as China and India, and that the United States will need to adjust to this new reality. He also emphasises the importance of economic interdependence and the need for international cooperation to tackle issues such as climate change and terrorism.

What I couldn't understand after reading numerous "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" reviews is why everyone is taking it as a prophecy? Kennedy is not a Nostradamus of history. He chooses his facts carefully; he doesn't pluck apparent analogies from the past and considers it a point of honor to demonstrate how inappropriate they are⁵. The book is written for diplomats and policy makers by a great war strategist and a consultant to the US Department of State, so let's keep that in mind.

⁵ Howard, Michael. "Imperial Cycles: Bucks, Bullets and Bust." Late City Final Edition, Book Review Desk, Section 7; (1988) Page 1

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