Interdisciplinary Political Studies
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps
ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 7(1) 2021: 249-252
DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v7n1p249
Published: July 10, 2021

BOOK REVIEWS

Unrivaled: Why America will Remain the World's Sole Superpower, by Michael Beckley. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018, pp. 231.

Carlo Catapano
University of Roma Tre

Despite the many contrasting opinions on the trajectory of US power and the forthcoming structure of the international system, a conventional wisdom seems to have emerged in the literature, which suggests that the era of US unipolarity is fading and China is ready to step up as a superpower able to equal – or even substitute – US primacy in terms of material capabilities. Michael Beckley's work counters this widespread interpretation and tackles the empirical observations on which it rests. It does so by pursuing an accurate criticism of the gross indicators (like GDP or military spending) conventionally employed to measure state power, and by proposing an alternative methodology to evaluate states' capabilities in net terms.

Without considering the costs that countries face for protecting their territories and populations, he argues, gross indicators tend to overstate the capabilities of large and populous countries. Accordingly, Beckley proposes (Chapter 2) to deduct three types of costs (production, welfare and security costs) to the gross indicators of states' economic and military resources. From this operation, it derives a net measurement of one country's power that – Beckley maintains – is more accurate and revealing than classic indices. To prove this point, he offers a recalculation of the capabilities of the great powers involved in prolonged, militarized rivalries over the last two centuries and shows that – when their resources are measured in net terms – the power asymmetry between them is an effective means to predict their failure or success. The best examples are the major conflicts involving China and Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as the two Opium Wars between China and Britain or the Russian-German rivalry culminated in WWI, to name but a few. In terms of gross indicators, China and Russia represented the strongest side in all the conflicts considered; nevertheless, they have always been defeated. By counting state capabilities differently, in fact, however, those countries' net power position compared to their rivals (either Britain, Japan, or the US) was considerably weaker; it is exactly this gap in net resources – Beckley argues – that explains their defeats.

Moving on to the emerging rivalry between China and the United States, Beckley acknowledges that the Asian giant is its most likely challenger. However, his detailed evaluation of Beijing's economic and military resources leaves no room for doubts: China lags behind the US on almost every net indicator, and the gap between the two is unlikely to vanish any time soon. This conclusion is surprising if one considers the constant references – in academia and the media – to China's rise and the Asian century. Beckley points out the weaknesses of the Chinese economy (Chapter 3), the hidden costs for a large, populous and developing country that are not included in gross estimates, and the various advantages that the US economic system still owns despite the limited growth of the post-2008 period.

Similarly, he compares (Chapter 4) the net military capabilities of the two powers by subtracting, for example, the costs to maintain security at home from their overall military assets. Also, he addresses the geopolitical factors that separate the US and Chinese ability to project their military power abroad. From this analysis, it emerges that China's position is severely constrained by the high costs paid to assure its internal security and the defense of its national borders as well as by the welfare costs associated to the large number of troops composing the People's Liberation Army. Beckley argues that China's rising military capabilities are also constrained by the continued presence of US outposts in the region and the improvements made by China's neighbors to their own military forces. Overall, this assessment leaves few chances for Beijing to obtain the regional hegemony that it would need to challenge the US on a global scale.

Beckley's analysis also indicates the path forward (Chapter 5), starting from the rejection of the theories usually employed to predict the fate of US power (balance-of-power theory and "convergence" theory). All indicators suggest that the US will retain its role of leading global power in the coming years, notwithstanding China's uninterrupted rise. Beckley is eager to point out, however, that this conclusion should not be confused with the praise of American superiority or invincibility. At no point, does his analysis suggest that Washington's primacy is uncontestable or destined to last forever. Instability with weaker countries, unnecessary wars, internal polarization and disunity, can all produce unpredicted losses and undermine the position of the most powerful country in the world (Chapter 6). Beckley's argument, therefore, consists in a re-evaluation of the sources of power that have guaranteed the US primacy since the end of the Cold War. Those same sources still place the United States in a category of its own, apart from the other great powers of the system. This book's claim, in the end, is about the duration of the unipolar era, which it predicts will last more than usually expected, not about the infallibility or moral virtues of US power.

A few years later on the publication of this book, its central tenets are even more relevant. Events such as Trump's nationalist policies, the trade war with China, the COVID-19 outbreak seem to have accelerated history and the shift away from the post-Cold War unipolar configuration. Beckley's work, however, invites to reject simplistic predictions about the dismissal of US primacy. The decline in Washington's global influence as well as the retrenchment from its international responsibilities do not necessarily mean that its net position in terms of material capabilities has collapsed or that a condition of power parity with China has finally emerged. Even if outcomes are not favorable to US interests, it does not mean that US power has vanished. This is a relevant reminder for policymakers in both Washington and Beijing.

At the same time, Beckley's contribution warns us not to take the perpetuation of unipolarity for granted. Over the long period, erratic strategies and idiosyncratic choices risk damaging irreversibly US capabilities and its role as a global leader. Washington, in other words, will likely remain the most powerful actor in the system, but it has few guarantees other than sharp and efficient policies to keep this condition in place.

Carlo Catapano