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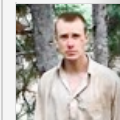
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OPINION | JULY 2, 2011

The Future Still Belongs to America

This century will throw challenges at everyone. The U.S. is better positioned to adapt than China, Europe or the Arab world.

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By **WALTER RUSSELL MEAD**

It is, the pundits keep telling us, a time of American decline, of a post-American world. The 21st century will belong to someone else. Crippled by debt at home, hammered by the aftermath of a financial crisis, bloodied by long wars in the Middle East, the American Atlas can no longer hold up the sky. Like Britain before us, America is headed into an assisted-living facility for retired global powers.

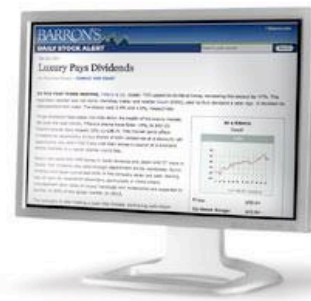
This fashionable chatter could not be more wrong. Sure, America has big problems. Trillions of dollars in national debt and uncounted trillions more in off-the-books liabilities will give anyone pause. Rising powers are also challenging the international order even as our key Cold War allies sink deeper into decline.

But what is unique about the United States is not our problems. Every major country in the world today faces extraordinary challenges—and the 21st century will throw more at us. Yet looking toward the tumultuous century ahead, no country is better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities or manage the dangers than the United States.

Geopolitically, the doomsayers tell us, China will soon challenge American leadership throughout the world. Perhaps. But to focus exclusively on China is to miss how U.S. interests intersect with Asian realities in ways that cement rather than challenge the U.S. position in world affairs.

China is not Germany, the U.S. is not Great Britain, and 2011 is not 1910. In 1910 Germany was a rising power surrounded by decline: France, Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary were all growing weaker every year even as Germany went from strength to strength. The European power system grew less stable every year.

In Asia today China is rising—but so is India, another emerging nuclear superpower with a population on course to pass China's. Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and Australia are all vibrant, growing powers that have no intention of falling under China's sway. Japan remains a formidable presence. Unlike Europe in 1910, Asia today looks like an emerging



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multipolar region that no single country, however large and dynamic, can hope to control.



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This fits American interests precisely. The U.S. has no interest in controlling Asia or in blocking economic prosperity that will benefit the entire Pacific basin, including our part of it. U.S. policy in Asia is not fighting the tide of China's inexorable rise. Rather, our interests harmonize with the natural course of events. Life rarely moves smoothly and it is likely that Asia will see great political disturbances. But through it all, it appears that the U.S. will be swimming with, rather than against, the tides of history.

Around the world we have no other real rivals. Even the Europeans have stopped talking about a rising EU superpower. The specter of a clash of civilizations between the West and an Islamic world united behind fanatics like the unlamented Osama bin Laden is less likely than ever. Russia's demographic decline and poor economic prospects (not to mention its concerns about Islamic radicalism and a rising China) make it a poor prospect as a rival superpower.

When it comes to the world of ideas, the American agenda will also be the global agenda in the 21st century. Ninety years after the formation of the Communist Party of China, 50 years after the death of the philosopher of modern militant Islam Sayyid Qutb, liberal capitalist democracy remains the wave of the future.

Fascism, like Franco, is still dead. Communism lingers on life support in Pyongyang and a handful of other redoubts but shows no signs of regaining the power it has lost since 1989 and the Soviet collapse. "Islamic" fanaticism failed in Iraq, can only cling to power by torture and repression in Iran, and has been marginalized (so far) in the Arab Spring. Nowhere have the fanatics been able to demonstrate that their approach can protect the dignity and enhance the prosperity of people better than liberal capitalism. The heirs of Qutb are further from power than they were during the first Egyptian Revolution in 1953.

Closer to home, Hugo Chavez and his Axis of Anklebiters are descending towards farce. The economic success of Chile and Brazil cuts the ground out from under the "Bolivarian" caudillos. They may strut and prance on the stage, appear with Fidel on TV and draw a crowd by attacking the Yanquis, but the dream of uniting South America into a great anticapitalist, anti-U.S. bloc is as dead as Che Guevara.

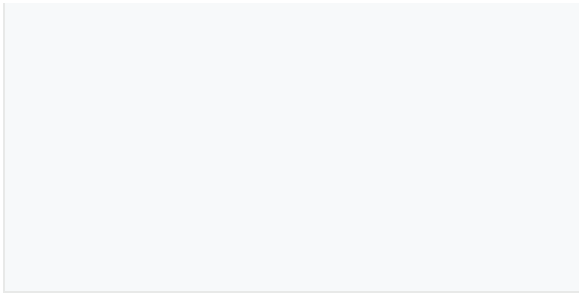
So the geopolitics are favorable and the ideological climate is warming. But on a still-deeper level this is shaping up to be an even more American century than the last. The global game is moving towards America's home court.

The great trend of this century is the accelerating and deepening wave of change sweeping through every element of human life. Each year sees more scientists with better funding, better instruments and faster, smarter computers probing deeper and seeing further into the mysteries of the physical world. Each year more entrepreneurs are seeking to convert those discoveries and insights into ways to produce new things, or to make old things better and more cheaply. Each year the world's financial markets are more eager and better prepared to fund new startups, underwrite new investments, and otherwise help entrepreneurs and firms deploy new knowledge and insight more rapidly.

Scientific and technological revolutions trigger economic, social and political upheavals. Industry migrates around the world at a breathtaking—and accelerating—rate. Hundreds of millions of people migrate to cities at an unprecedented pace. Each year the price of communication goes down and the means of communication increase.

New ideas disturb the peace of once-stable cultures. Young people grasp the possibilities of change and revolt at the conservatism of their elders. Sacred taboos and ancient hierarchies totter; women demand equality; citizens rise against monarchs. All over the world more tea is thrown into more harbors as more and more people decide that the times demand change.

This tsunami of change affects every society—and turbulent politics in so many countries



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make for a turbulent international environment. Managing, mastering and surviving change: These are the primary tasks of every ruler and polity. Increasingly these are also the primary tasks of every firm and household.

This challenge will not go away. On the contrary: It has increased, and it will go on increasing through the rest of our time. The 19th century was more tumultuous than its predecessor; the 20th was more tumultuous still, and the 21st will be the fastest, most exhilarating and most dangerous ride the world has ever seen.

Everybody is going to feel the stress, but the United States of America is better placed to surf this transformation than any other country. Change is our home field. It is who we are and what we do. Brazil may be the country of the future, but America is its hometown.

Happy Fourth of July.

Mr. Mead is a professor of foreign affairs and humanities at Bard College and editor-at-large of the American Interest.

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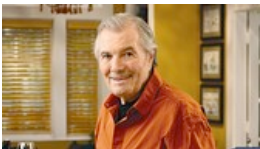
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