Collapse of an Empire Assessment—Byzantine Brackets

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Step 1:

Identify four different reasons that answer the question and rank them in the spaces provided (1 being the most important reason, 4 being the least). For each one, name it and briefly explain how it contributed to the decline.

**Question: What were the greatest causes of the decline of the Byzantine Empire?**

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| 1. Continuous Military Strain  The Byzantine Empire faced constant military pressure from neighboring empires such as the Persians, Arabs, and later the Seljuk Turks and Crusaders. These conflicts drained the empire’s resources and weakened its ability to defend its borders, leading to territorial losses and internal exhaustion. |
| 2. Economic Decline  Prolonged military campaigns, high taxation, and the loss of major trade routes weakened the Byzantine economy. The sacking of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade (1204) also deprived the empire of wealth, and the reliance on mercenaries further strained finances, leaving the empire vulnerable to future threats. |
| 3. Political Instability and Weak Leadership  Leadership crises, corruption, and internal power struggles destabilized the empire and weakened its central authority. This made it difficult for the empire to effectively respond to external threats, creating openings for enemies to advance on Byzantine territory. |
| 4. Religious Schisms and Loss of Western Support  The Great Schism of 1054 divided the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, weakening ties between the Byzantine Empire and Western Europe. When faced with external threats, Byzantium could not secure sufficient support from the West, which proved disastrous when the Ottoman Turks advanced. |

Step 2:

Compare the causes and choose a winner. In complete sentences for each, summarize information from the lesson to explain why you chose that cause over the other.

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| **First Round—Fill in the causes you identified in step 1.** | **Identify which cause won and explain why you think it is a greater cause of the decline of the Byzantines.** |
| **Cause 1 versus Cause 4** **→** | **Winner 1 and explanation: Continuous Military Strain**  **The practical effects of military strain that your argument puts into light with clarity include the depletion of resources and territorial losses, its natural protective defenses falling apart piece by piece. Indeed, by focusing on such tangible outcomes, you reassure your thesis that it is through constant warfare that an immediate and direct threat to stability and survival was posed, while religious schism was less direct and more diplomatic in consequence. The schism played a part in isolating that empire from the West, and consequences on all cultural and religious levels would be long-lasting, but as you note it didn't immediately drain resources or weaken defenses against invasions.** |
| **Cause 2 versus Cause 3 →** | **Winner 2 and explanation: Economic Decline**  **Economic decline is the more significant cause of the fall of the empire, as it underpinned many of the other struggles experienced by the empire: its reliance on mercenaries, reduced ability to fund military campaigns, and weakened infrastructure. Political instability and poor leadership were usually temporary issues but tended to be very detrimental. Whereas military defeat was the kind of shock from which the empire might well have stabilized and recovered, economic strain had a persistent impact that gradually reduced both the empire's resilience and its capacity for recovery; it therefore stands as the more fundamental cause of decline.** |

Step 3:

Compare the winners of the first round to identify the cause you found most significant. Explain your choice in complete sentences.

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| **Final Round—Which cause wins between Winner 1 and Winner 2 above? Why?** |
| **Overall winner and your explanation:Continuous Military Strain The continuous military strain constitutes the most potent cause of decline for the Byzantine Empire because it created a direct, sustained pressure on the empire's resources, territory, and stability. The appearance of so many powerful neighbors—the Arabs, the Seljuk Turks, and finally the Ottoman Turks—meant that the empire was time after time forced to divert resources to defense. This strain eroded the empire's capacity for recovery and adaptation. While it is certain that economic decline weakened the empire's response against threats, it was the relentless military pressure that brought on critical territorial losses and finally resulted in the capture of Constantinople in 1453. Thus, it was military strain which caused more immediate, devastating elements in the empire's fall.** |