

BOOK REVIEW

Is the American Century Over? by Joseph N. Nye, Jr.

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The author, a distinguished service professor, a former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a prominent foreign policy analyst of liberal realism, has written many provocative and extensive books related power politics. In his new book, *Is the American Century Over?*¹ he persuasively analyses the question raised by many commentators and authors about the decline of the United States. With provocative and persuasive arguments, he denies those assumptions.

Starting with the Pew poll which showed that the public in 15 of 22 countries said that China will replace or has already replaced the United States as the world's leading power, Nye responds with a clear-eyed analysis that the United States century is far from over despite the fact that China has surpassed the United States in terms of economics (purchasing power parity: PPP). He critically argues that the United States is still a leading power country on earth in terms of power in global politics. He defines power as the ability to affect others to get the desired outcomes one wants, and there are three aspects of power: soft power through attraction, persuasion and cooption; hard power by coercion, force, threat and intimidation (sticks) and payments or rewards (carrots); and smart power from a combination of soft and hard power. Therefore, based on these notions, the United States is still a leading power.

He argues that these three dimensions of power are vital strategies and tactics for the United States to remain a superpower in the end of the century, and that is why the economic power alone should not be used to state the United States is in decline. He explains that power as resources is not only the effective tool to guarantee one to prevail in war but the ways in

¹ Nye, J.N. (2015) *Is the American Century Over?* Cambridge: Polity Press Polity Press. Pp. 152.
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which the country converts those resources to behavior outcomes to get the preferred outcomes.

According to Nye, the United States is in a relative decline but not in absolute decline. For him, the former is due to the domestic deterioration or political decay or political gridlock, and the latter is due to the rise of other external powers: Europe, Japan, Russia, India, Brazil and China. In the chapter on Challengers and Relative Decline, Nye assumes that “no one country may surpass the United States, but alliances among other states may put an end to American preeminence and its ability to maintain an international order” (p. 23). Despite the fact that these rising powers can challenge the United States in some important parts, these countries do not have enough capability in overall power to overtake it.

Nye notes that “in terms of human capital, technology, and exports, Europe is very much as an economic competitor for the United States, but in terms of soft power Europe is still far behind the United States, and its degree of unity is still limited due to the fact that “national identities remain stronger than a common European identity.” He argues that Europe and the United States are in an alliance and their power resources could reinforce each other due to the fact that they share “values of democracy and human rights more with each other than with any other regions of the world” (p. 28). Despite the fact that the United States’ foreign policy under Trump’s ‘America First’ system seems different from the EU’s role in world affairs, the EU still depends on the United States in spreading liberal democracy and maintaining the liberal world order to avoid Thucydides and Kindleberger traps.

Some scholars predicted that Japan would become a ‘nuclear superpower’ and would form a Japanese-led Pacific bloc that would not include the United States, but the prediction was based on past Japanese economic growth. Nye argues that Japanese success in “modernization and democracy and its popular culture provide Japan with soft power, but ethnocentric attitudes and policies undercut it” (p.30). Nye worries that, if Japan were to ally with China, the combination of resources of these two giants would reduce American power. However, Nye argues that “in terms of traditional balance of power resources, Japan is more likely to seek American support to preserve its interdependence from China and this enhances the American position” (p. 31). Even Japanese people are not likely to support Prime Minister Abe’s assertive foreign policy to counter China’s rise, and the United States-Japan alliance is crucial for East Asian stability.

Joseph Nye views Russia as a declined revisionist state under Putin's leadership. In terms of power resources, Nye argues that Russia prefers hard power of coercion but lacks the power of attraction and persuasion. With the former, Russia could use force effectively against its near abroad, as seen in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The latter is that "few foreigners watch Russian films, and only one Russian University is ranked in the top global 100, [compared to] 52 for the United States [and] 27 for Europe." Alternatively, Russia has an advantageous geopolitical position to affect America's interests in the Middle-East and Central Asia, though not on a global scale. Ranging from a corrupt and inefficient institutional and legal structure to the unhealthy of economic growth depending on natural resources and gas revenues, Russia would not challenge and surpass the United States in world power politics.

The author argues that China is decades behind and not qualified enough to replace the United States' role in the world in terms of military power, economic might and soft power. Chinese countryside is still underdeveloped and its system of trade is less composed and sophisticated compared to the United States' advanced innovation and technology. As Nye wrote, "China has important technological achievements, but it also has relied heavily on a strategy of copying foreign technologies more than domestic innovation" (p. 51). China's military equipment is smaller and older than the United States', and its global military expenditures account for 11% compared to 39% for the United States. Chinese soft power resources are derived from the government, not from the international institutions, civil society organizations, individuals and private businesses. Nye writes that "China makes the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power." He predicts that the next century will not be a Chinese one, quoting Jonathan Fenby's judgment that China "will not have the economic, political and human resources to dominate the world, even if it wished to do so" (p. 48). For more than a century, the United States has been the world's biggest economy, accounting for over 24.7% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016. However, the United States is the largest economy on nominal basis whereas China is the largest economy on a PPP basis. The U.S. was ahead of China by US\$7170 billion in 2016. This margin may come down to US\$5469 billion in 2020 and, in 2029, China may overtake United States as world's largest economy according to both criteria. China will remain the world's largest economy on PPP basis after overtaking the United States' economy in 2014. Still, China won't be equal in tangible and intangible power even in coming decades.

More interestingly, Nye impressively argues that we live in a controversial, complex and interconnected world with a globalized information revolution due to the two shifts of power, meaning the “power transition” from Western to Eastern countries and “power diffusion” from state actors to non-state actors (MNCs, IOs, NGOs, International Terrorist Networks...) that play a more increasingly important role in international politics. According to him, power in the global information age resembles a complex three-dimensional chess game in which on the top chessboard military power is largely unipolar and the United States is likely to retain primacy; at the middle economic power among states has been multipolar for more than a decade, with the United States, Europe, Japan and China as the major players; and the bottom chessboard is the realm of non-state actors in which states need close cooperation to deal with.

One of Nye’s loose holes is that he has not had a substantive dialogue with other scholars on American grand strategy. Nye prefers multilateralism led by the United States with other countries – even nondemocratic ones – a strategy which is substantially different from that of Paul D. Miller (*American Power & Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy*) and Robert Kagan (*The World America Made*). Miller argues that America has adopted a policy to balance against the autocratic great-powers, such as Russia and China, and not emerging democratic ones including Brazil and India, and he champions liberalism. Kagan, a neo-conservative, prefers an aggressive U.S. foreign policy, if necessary unilateralism, to spread and to defend liberal international order in the favor of U.S. national vital interests. It would be applaudable and meaningful for the three of them to engage and discuss on the issue of U.S. grand strategy of cooperation or multilateralism featured prominently in *American Century*.

At its essence, *Is the American Century Over?* is an interesting, useful and accessible book to read for policy makers, politicians, scholars and especially general readers to adapt in a changing, complex and cooperative world.. Nye reminds us that the hard power alone is not good enough for the United States of America to maintain its world order; only the smart power of a combination of hard power and soft power going along with power conversion with a clear strategy and tactics would work. Therefore, Nye prefers a ‘bound to lead’ approach rather than a hegemony in a globalized world because he believes that the United States has never been a true hegemon. With multilateralism, Nye argues that the United States has enough power resources in terms military power, economic power, political power, especially soft power and is equipped to lead the world for many decades ahead.