

Joseph S. Nye Jr.

Is the American Century over?

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In his latest book Joseph Nye answers a question that has been making the rounds in the world of Geopolitics for quite some time now: 'Is the American Century over?' His answer is pretty unequivocal – No. However, he does assert that the continuation of America's legacy will not look the same as it has in the last five decades.

"Americans have a long history of worrying about their decline", says Nye. Staying true to the neo-liberal principles and traditions he co-founded with Robert Keohane, political scientist Joseph Nye, evaluates both the absolute decline of America and the relative decline of the U.S.A with respect to other countries.

Nye maintains that the end is not nigh for the American Empire since there is no competitor that could balance American power on all three fronts – Military, Economic and Soft Power resources. Nye performs a systematic analysis of all of America's supposed challengers as well as their prospects for primacy — The European Union, Japan, Russia, India, Brazil and most extensively, China. Nye also explores all permutations and combinations of alliances that could be built along with their likelihood of emerging.

"Hegemony ain't what it used to be, but then it never was". One of the most important details of Nye's argument is that he asserts that American Hegemony is a myth. He denies the fact that America was ever the all-powerful global hegemon that it is made out to be. So even if America does not seem to be that hegemon anymore, the American century is not over. This contention is made, as there is no consensus on the definition of hegemony; it can mean either getting the outcomes one prefers or setting rules for others or even simply having a preponderance of power resources. Nye argues that in such a situation, no global hegemon has ever existed. This is emphasized by the fact that even though 19th century Britain is widely considered hegemonic, it never had a preponderance of power resources. Even at the height of its reign, it only ranked third in

GDP and third in military expenditure. The point is further emphasized by the fact that right after 1945, what is widely considered as the period of American hegemony, even though America controlled half of the world's economy, it's political and military actions were still constrained by the Soviet Union. Thus, he asserts that America will persist. Not as the perceived omnipotent hegemon, but as one of pre-eminence in terms of a country's disproportionate, measurable, share of all three types of power resources.

Nye unambiguously states that China is the only credible threat to America's pre-eminence, as all the other challengers have serious structural problems, in terms of both soft and hard power, which prevent them from challenging America in any significant way. Even though Europe matches America culturally and militarily, the Greek debt crisis and refugee crisis have tied their hands. Nye insists that Russia stands on an economic house of cards and that Japan has serious demographic problems stemming from stigma against immigrants. India and Brazil cannot be serious contenders due to the great degrees of economic disparity. Thus, none of these five will dethrone America.

China has the power to bring "America to its knees, but at the cost of bringing itself to its ankles." Joseph Nye argues that even though China may be the only serious contender in terms of economic power, it still cannot hope to rival America in preponderance of power resources, even with strategic alliances. There exists a vast disparity between the military prowess of America and China, and attaining enough soft power to challenge America is still a far-away dream. While the heavy-handed methods of the Chinese government do have some effect, Nye points out that they do not realize that American soft power comes from civilians and not the state.

True to his neo-liberal ideals, Joseph Nye chooses to talk about the absolute decline of the American empire, as well as the relative decline. Nye argues that while America does have the edge over most when it comes to soft power, and that American society is not in decline because of a relatively strong economy, the political system has been subject to considerable decay, with political gridlock bringing the entire country to a standstill, leading to the absolute decline of America.

Joseph Nye thus argues that the American century is the extraordinary period of American pre-eminence in military, economic and soft power resources that have made the United States central to the workings of the global balance of power and the provision of global public goods. Even with the relative and absolute decline of the American empire, America will persist in this form, retaining its primacy. Joseph Nye claims that this will be a period of Leadership and not Domination. The American century is not over.

Joseph Nye has been defending the American Empire against naysayers for the past two decades, and it is clear that in this book too was Nye's knight-in-shining-armor routine, rushing to the rescue of the faltering American faith in their country's supremacy. However, as opposed to a biased or one-sided argument exalting his nation, Joseph Nye, true to his duty as an academic and political scientist treated the book like a thesis paper. He outlined the question to the readers, broke up the issue into seven sub-issues. He was very analytical with his approach to the question, made each contention and then substantiated it clearly and in simple language. His methodology is not beyond reproach. There are many loose ends left untied, which are inevitable considering the brevity of the book. His ability to breakdown and encapsulate complex issues into simple terms and logical arguments without using sweeping generalizations, is one that must be commended. The author has excellent conceptual clarity, and all concepts defined clearly without being tedious.

Joseph Nye's worldviews are abundantly clear; he was the co-founder of Neoliberalism. This worldview is reflected in Nye's choices to examine the absolute as well as relative decline of America, when most others would choose to study only the relative decline. However, Nye is not afraid to differ from this worldview. Nye denounces the liberal notion that America is an "empire by invitation". He contends that US hegemony was never global, as some of the largest countries in the world – the Soviet Bloc, China, India – were not part of the American world order. American hegemony was always partial, despite the fact that never before had the world seen such a concentration of military and economic power. American leadership did create liberal institutions, rules and practices that governed the economy, but only for half of the world, leading to the more accurate term of 'half-hegemony'.

The winning feature of this book would have to be the unique concept of “half-hegemony”. Nye boldly asserts that hegemony is a myth, and the world has yet to produce a global hegemon, which is a novel idea. The fact that since 1941, America has retained primacy and not hegemony is a completely new perspective to look at the international world, but has strong logic and evidence to substantiate it. Nye also succeeds in adding the element of humour to his writing, seeing as how he quotes Mark Twain and comedians in order to subtly drive home the point.

However, the book has some glaring drawbacks as well. Nye often slips into economic jargon in order to explain the relative economic power resources of the countries. His language is dry and often leaves you flummoxed at first glance, requiring greater concentration to decipher the implications of the econobabble thrown at the reader. Nye also judiciously borrows from other authors without a clear distinction of which points are in assent or dissent of his previous assertion. There are also many trailing points where the conclusion is unclear and up to the reader’s interpretation. This does not flow with the general theme followed by the book, and causes unnecessary confusion. While Nye chooses to mention that power will shift from the west to the east and be diffused from the state to non-state actors, he does not clearly explain how this power shift would affect the world order. Also, when referring the situation within other countries, China especially, Nye makes sweeping generalizations, as opposed to citing sources that weaken the credibility of his arguments. For example, “Chinese often complain that they produce iPhone jobs, but not Steve Jobs”. One of the most noticeable arguments that was missing from the book was that expanding on Japanese soft power. There is no mention of the proliferation of Japanese media – literature, anime, manga, and video games, which are sold worldwide with large acclaim, or the rapid increase in people speaking the Japanese language in Scandinavia, Western Europe and USA.

‘Is the American Century over’ is a book for the masses, it is a simple read with clearly defined concepts, which will give you a holistic insight into the international situation regarding America and its competitors in the field of international politics.

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