



Review of Joseph S. Nye's *Is the American Century Over?*



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Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2015. *Is the American Century Over?* Cambridge: Policy Press. 152 pages, ISBN 978-0745690063 Hardback (\$45.00); ISBN 978-0745690070 Paper (\$12.95).

Is the American century over? Joseph Nye's unambiguous answer is: No. Though he attempts to problematize the question for rhetorical reasons and he attempts to complicate the answer for intellectual reasons, no one reading this book will be left in any doubt as to where Nye stands: “describing the twenty-first century as one of American decline is likely to be inaccurate and misleading...America has many problems, but it is not in absolute decline, and even in relative terms it is likely to remain more powerful than any single state” (116)—and this is when he is hedging. In his conclusion, Nye states unambiguously that “the American century is not over...we have not entered a post-American world” (125). Each of the four main substantive chapters of the book is an empirical nail in the coffin of theories of American decline.

Although Nye goes to great lengths to promote a nuanced view of American power, he goes well beyond conventional accounts of American hegemony (a term he dislikes) to suggest that the United States has much greater influence in the world today than it did during what is typically seen as the mid-twentieth century heyday of American power. Nye correctly points out that the 1950s economic preponderance of the United States was an historical anomaly and that the U.S.-sponsored economic governance institutions of the post-war era involved countries that accounted for less than half of the world's population. In a word, the U.S. economic dominance of the post-war period has been oversold. American economic leadership is still very strong and perhaps stronger now than it was in the middle of the twentieth century.

And global leadership (Nye's preferred term) is based on much more than just economic size. Nye takes a multidimensional approach to leadership, paying similar levels of attention to economic, political, military, and cultural realms. He especially emphasizes the increasing complexity of global challenges and the need for globally networked solutions to these challenges. In the twenty-first century "American leadership will be important...[but] success will require the cooperation of others" (112). Thus although the "American century will continue...it will look different from how it did in the latter half of the last century" (112). This transition emphasizes the exercise of power "with" others rather than power "over" other countries.

In an intellectual climate of American declinism, Nye stands out as a hard-nosed, empirically-minded realist who is focused on the detailed mechanisms of global leadership. He eschews generic models of hegemony in favor of specific scenarios of practical real-world leadership. In this vein Nye contrasts two meanings of leadership (and decline) in the contemporary international system: relative and absolute. He fully accepts that the relative decline of the preponderance of power of the United States over other countries from its economic pinnacle in the middle of the twentieth century and its military pinnacle at the end of the twentieth century is inevitable. He then goes on to examine the case for absolute decline.

Relative decline may be a prerequisite for a fall from leadership, but Nye is adamant that it does not automatically lead to the replacement of global leaders in some kind of mechanical sequence of hegemony. In a chapter on challengers to American leadership he first discusses the (sometime) European dream of replacing the United States, but concludes that even if the European Union were to overcome its political fragmentation, it would still be a demographically declining area with low military spending and poor investment in basic research. He then reviews and dismisses the cases of individual countries that might in the future displace American leadership (Japan, Russia, India, Brazil) before settling on the one obvious candidate: China.

As everyone acknowledges, China has come a long way since 1978, for good and for bad. China's economy has grown dramatically but China is still on average much poorer than Mexico. Its rate of growth is now slowing, and China is clearly converging to middle income status, not to rich-country status. China's military is modernizing and internationalizing, but nearly all informed commentary focuses on the possibility that China may soon be able to challenge the United States for control of China's own coastal waters. Any dreams (good and/or bad) of Chinese global military preponderance are dreams for the next century, not for this one. And in the wake of increasing militarism, threats to nearly all its neighbors, and severe repression of its own population, China's soft power is practically non-existent.

Nye is no doomsayer on China. He sees China for what it is: a maturing middle-income country that is developing as a political and military power. He sees conflict between China and America as “far from inevitable” (69) and argues that “China has incentives for restraint” (69). Overall the rise of China is “a long process that is far from signaling the end of the American century” (70). In short, China’s active participation may become indispensable to the smooth functioning of the global system, but there are good reasons to believe that this participation will continue to be forthcoming. China’s record to date gives no indication that China will seek to destroy the international system under which it has so far flourished.

I would go further than Nye does: the record of China’s elites to date gives no indication that they will seek to destroy the international system under which *they* have so far flourished. If Nye’s analyses have one shortcoming, it is that he views the world primarily through the state-as-billiard-ball lens that is typical of international relations scholarship. Seen from a more sociological standpoint, states are socially embedded institutions, not ideal-type bureaucratic organizations at the command of their leaders. But this sociological perspective only reinforces Nye’s basic conclusion that there is no prospective challenger to American global leadership. Even if a state were in a position to challenge America, its politically influential citizens would have strong incentives not to.

After dismissing the possibility that relative decline will turn into displacement, Nye asks whether or not America might decline in absolute terms, simply sinking under the weight of its own problems like the (western) Roman Empire did in the fifth century. Here Nye correctly perceives that current crises of partisan deadlock, lack of confidence in government, failing education, and rising inequality are the typical challenges of day-to-day politics. In his view, American political institutions were always designed to promote deadlock and have always limited effective “power conversion”: the transformation of potential leadership into realized leadership. But if Nye is right that global leadership is much more about the ability to form alliances than about the ability to dominate others, self-imposed restraints on power conversion might actually tend to promote rather than retard American leadership in the twenty-first century.

Nye gives a nod to world-systems analysis early in the book, devoting a paragraph to Wallerstein (17-18), but contemporary world-systems sociology is entirely absent. Even when discussing forecasts of slower growth in China, he cites an obscure conference paper from a private sector consultant instead of my own cover article in *Foreign Affairs*. World-systems scholars are also absent from his recommended readings on American decline. Incidentally, the inclusion of six pages of recommended readings is a nice touch, but given that most or all of these sources are already mentioned in the main text, an index would have been much more useful. Most of the new “short” format books like this exclude indexes to save money, but to my mind this is a grave mistake that vastly reduces the value of a book.

The value of this book, however, is beyond doubt. It is obviously intended for use by international relations experts and for assignment in international relations classes, but world-systems sociologists will benefit immensely from reading it. Right or wrong, it is a necessary corrective to the current debate. No serious analysis of hegemony can ignore this book, and no serious global intellectual can be ignorant of its contents. It is bound to be read widely in international relations circles and among the educated public. It should be read by global sociologists as well. Whatever your perspective on understanding the contemporary global scene, Joseph Nye's *Is the American Century Over?* is indispensable. It demands a response from anyone who claims authority in the field.

Salvatore Babones

Department of Sociology & Social Policy

The University of Sydney

sbabones@sydney.edu.au