

Interview - Joseph Nye

Written by E-International Relations

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Joseph S. Nye Jr., is University Distinguished Service Professor, and former Dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He received his bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Princeton University, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, and earned a PhD in political science from Harvard. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and Deputy Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, and the American Academy of Diplomacy. In a recent survey of international relations scholars, he was ranked as the most influential scholar on American foreign policy, and in 2011, Foreign Policy named him one of the top 100 Global Thinkers. His most recent book, *Is the American Century Over?* published in March 2015.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

I am particularly interested in efforts to do comparative historical case studies and I think the trend and the fashion now is for large-N studies or fancy mathematical modelling. However, I think that there's still a great deal of work that can be done on looking at history but looking at history not just from a purely historian's point of view but from the point of view of a political scientist. I try to make generalisations, so that to me is the methodological approach that I prefer.

How has the way that you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think probably the most important change in the world has been the development of the internet and particularly with the web becoming the sub-stratum for political and economic activities over the last twenty years, this has created a new interdependence and along with that a vulnerability which has given rise to a totally different role for non-state actors. In my book on 'The Future of Power' I have a chapter on cyber power and one of the most interesting things there is the diffusion of power from states to non-state actors doesn't mean equality of states and non-state actors. It means that no-less the distance between a state and a non-state actor has diminished considerably. I don't know if you associate that with any one person. I suppose if one were to look at people you could cite the traditional leaders like Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin or so forth but what I'm describing is something that's not associated with a particular person but with a trend and that really to my mind has changed the world.

In your most recent book, *Is the American Century Over?* you determine the power and influence of a nation using three metrics: economic power, military power and soft power. From these metrics, how do you define when the United States achieved pre-eminence and the American Century began?

The United States becomes the largest economy in the world at the end of the 19th century but it doesn't become the most central player in terms of the global balance of power until after 1945, after World War II, because after World War I what you find is that though the United States tipped the balance in the outcome of World War I, it didn't stay involved to the extent that it became the central player in the global balance of power. Just being the largest economy is not in and of itself the measure of being the most powerful country. The period of the 1920s and 1930s, in which the United States followed a policy of isolationism from European balance of power, allowed Hitler in Europe to

Interview - Joseph Nye

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accumulate military power in Japan, to accumulate military power in the Far East and it wasn't until the United States entered World War II that we really became central to the global balance of power. This is why I take the American era not from when the United States became the largest economy but from when it became the central player in the global balance of power and that really is World War II.

What prompted you to write this book?

There's become a conventional wisdom that the 21st century has become the Chinese century or that China has surpassed the United States in power. For example, the Financial Times had a headline in 2014 saying that measured in purchasing power parity China was now the largest country and many people were writing books with titles like 'When China rules the world'. I thought this was mistaken. Martin Wolf of the Financial Times once said in a column that China was a premature superpower; people were reading forward what they assumed would eventually be China's position later in the century and so I thought it was useful to look more carefully at power in all its dimensions, hard power – military and economic capabilities – and the soft power of attraction and persuasion and ask which country has more power now and how long it could be expected to last and I try to argue in the book with facts and figures that this is the United States and it's likely to stay that way for the first half of the century at least.

You quote Niall Ferguson who indeed argues that “the 21st century will belong to China”. What is the rationale behind his argument and why do you take a counter-view?

He and I are colleagues and friends and we've often argued about it. I think he is projecting forward based on current growth rates. If you think that at the time that he said that, Chinese growth was clocked at about 10% a year. Now the official figure is 7% but most people in the financial world think it's closer to 5% and Larry Summers' study with Lant Pritchett of regression to the mean among countries that have had over 10% growth expects it may go down to 3.9%. Depending on which percentages you plug in, you can have an earlier or later date when you think China will be a larger economic power than the United States. At that 10% rate, people were expecting this to happen in 2020, at the 7% rate they think it might happen in the 2030s, at the 3.9% rate we're talking about the 2040s and 2050s. So I felt there was a tendency of people who take that view to do linear extrapolations of current trends and not to think through some of the problems that would come if you looked at it from a more nuanced perspective. We've argued about this, and I would argue that the numbers are probably moving in the direction of my side of the argument.

Should the United States' policy toward China be one of treating China as a strategic partner or as an adversary?

I think it's a mistake to be too adversarial. There is a tendency to say that well just as World War I was created by the rise and power of Germany and the fear that it created for Britain echoed Thucydides statement on the Peloponnesian War, therefore World War III or some major conflict would be the rise of the power of China and the fear it creates for the U.S. I think that's a mistake of a use of an analogy. For one thing, it's worth noticing that Germany had surpassed Britain in industrial production by the year 1900, almost two decades before World War I, and if my projections are correct, China has not yet passed the United States and is not about to pass the United States. What that means is rather than having too much fear about the rise of China, we have time to manage the relationship, so while there will be competition between the two countries, there are also large areas of cooperation dealing with transnational issues like climate change, financial stability, anti-terrorism and so forth. There is no need for the U.S. and China to become active adversaries. China doesn't pose an existential threat to the United States the way Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia did. With that said, it doesn't mean war between the United States and China is impossible because humans are always capable of miscalculation.

How does China's authoritarianism and lack of political freedom, particularly internet freedom, affect its development as a world power and affect American dominance?

I think China's authoritarian structure hurts China in terms of its soft power. China has placed a great deal of emphasis on increasing its soft power. In 2007, Hu Jintao told the 17th Communist Party Congress that China should increase its soft power and that makes sense because if you're only a rising hard power, where solely your military

Interview - Joseph Nye

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and economic strength is rising, you're going to frighten your neighbours into coalitions against you. But if you increase your soft power, your attractiveness, those coalitions are less likely to be effective. So China was smart to approach it that way but it's the Communist Party's control of the intensity of it that makes it hard to accomplish soft power. A good example of this is after the Shanghai Exposition, which was a brilliant exposition extolling the virtues of traditional Chinese culture, China locked up Liu Xiaobo and prevented him from attending the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. As a result, the world's TV stations were showing pictures of a platform in Oslo with an empty chair and that was very damaging to China's soft power. Advertisers call that stepping on your own message. I think the intensity of Chinese control by the Communist Party prevents China from unleashing the full talents of its civil society.

You mention military power and how the United States is undeniably the dominant military power in the world. China has increased its defence spending significantly in recent decades as its economy has simultaneously increased. With an expanding military, do you see a strategic shift on behalf of China away from a country solely focussed on economic growth and military isolationism?

China is beginning to see itself in world terms. It is focussed very heavily on internal development and to its great credit has raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty through its development model but it now is reaching the exhaustion of that model that has worked so well for them. It needs to both grow its internal consumption and have a more sophisticated approach to technology, of developing more of its own than importing honestly or dishonestly. So China is beginning to understand that it needs to change its model. In addition to that, it's beginning to try to reach out more with Chinese companies like Alibaba beginning to try to play a role in the information world, as opposed to hiding behind China's great firewall that blocks the internet. You also have the efforts that Xi Jinping has made to expand infrastructure in neighbouring states, where there has been talk of a new silk road.

Rather than absolute decline, you mention relative decline. With relative decline, can the United States, a country which frequently references its exceptionality, still be the United States in a world order that can be deemed more multipolar?

I'm not a believer in multipolarity. I think it's a term that often confuses us and similarly the term 'relative decline' while its useful to some extent, is probably less useful than calling it the rise of the rest. Let me give you an example from the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States' share of world product was about 25%. After World War II, because World War II strengthened the U.S. and weakened others, the U.S. share of world product was probably nearly 50%. From 1945-1970, the U.S. share of world product returned to where it had been before to about 25% and that's where the century ended. But if you looked at how the world looked in 1970, it looked like a.) the United States was in decline and b.) that the world was becoming multipolar; and that indeed was what Nixon and Kissinger wrote about. But in fact they were both wrong. These are two of the more sophisticated statesmen we've had. However, if you think of it more and more as the rise of the rest, then you are led to a diagnosis which says that, will the largest countries still be large enough to be capable of organising collective public goods and I argue that yes the United States will still be large enough to play that role. That, seems to me a more useful way of thinking about it than the polarities that misled Nixon and Kissinger.

What are the main factors determining why countries such as India, which will overtake China in terms of population, and Russia which relies on its vast natural resources and military strength and could signal a recovery in the future, won't bring an end to the American Century?

Well they're quite different. Russia, as I argue in the book, is in decline. If you look at Russia, a quarter of its GDP is based on energy industries and 2/3 of its exports, and it's proven incapable of diversifying in an effective way. In addition to that, it faces demographic decline. There's going to be fewer Russians in the future and Putin, although a brilliant tactician, hasn't been following a strategy which addresses the long-term Russian needs and concerns. So this is not necessarily a good thing; declining powers can be more risk-accepted and dangerous, but its not going to be a challenger. It could presumably precipitate some miscalculation which could provoke a war but I don't see it as a challenger to dominance.

India is very different. It's not likely that India will be a threat to the United States. India is an economy of about \$2

Interview - Joseph Nye

Written by E-International Relations

trillion and the United States is an economy of about nearly \$18 trillion. It's going to take a long time, even after 7.5-10% growth for India to catch up with the United States' overall size, much less in per capita income, which is a better measure of the sophistication of an economy. So India doesn't pose a threat or challenge to the U.S. It does pose a major opportunity in the sense that India's interests and America's interests are likely to be quite similar in the years ahead, though I don't expect it to lead to an alliance. So, India rising yes but not a threat, Russia declining yes and perhaps a threat.

What primary policy prescriptions would you advocate for the United States in order for the American Century to last?

I don't know how long the American Century will last; nothing lasts forever. It's a bit arbitrary for us to think of century's as belonging to one country or another; they don't. There's too much else going on. But to the extent to which you have a global balance of power, to which you have international financial stability, and coalitions that deal with non state actors whether they be terrorists or cyber terrorists, it does require one state that's the larger state organising coalitions to deal with this and I once titled a book 'The Paradox of American Power' and the subtitle was 'Why the worlds only superpower can't go it alone.' That I think is the key to what the major problem is that the United States faces. It will develop the attitudes it needs to work in those types of coalitions and networks effectively but the United States can exempt itself and undercut this ability to lead in the creation of global public goods. One example of this is the fact that the U.S. Senate has not ratified the Law of the Sea Treaty which is going to be central to avoiding conflict in an area like the South China Sea, and it's just a minority of senators who are essentially blocking this or the fact that the United States Congress has not ratified the agreements for adjusting quotas within the Bretton Woods institutions. These are examples in which the Americans undercut their leadership but what I would call self-imposed wounds. Hence, I am less worried about American exceptionalism than American exemptionalism. This tendency to say 'okay, you all do it but not us'.

What would you say is the most important advice for a young scholar in IR?

Follow your curiosity and look for anomalies, don't be taught as a prisoner of any one theory and I sometimes call myself a liberal realist as a deliberate effort to show that you can't pigeonhole people into either liberalism or realism or constructivism. The important thing is to be able to use an eclectic mix theoretically. The puzzles should not be set by methods, the puzzles should be set by why aren't we able to explain something and then how can we better explain it and that I think is the best way to approach work. As my colleague Robert Putnam first put it, one of the dangers we see in the field is more and more work being done on things of less and less significance. I think instead of that or, sometimes its called embroidering the sleeve of a naked emperor, I think instead of that the important thing is to ask what are the things we can't quite cope with or that are anomalies that are difficult and then use whatever mix of theories and methods.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.