

Mandarin for the Warlords: The Harvard School of Empire Building

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*Harvard professor Joseph Nye, a former senior Pentagon functionary, is one of the longest serving and most influential advisers to US empire building officials. Nye has recently re-affirmed the primacy of the US as a world power in his latest book, *Is the American Century Over?* And his article, 'The American Century will survive the Rise of China' (*Financial Times*, 3/26/15, p. 7). These publications are in line with his earlier book, *Bound to Lead*, and his longstanding view that the US is not a declining world power, that it retains 'supremacy' even in the face of China's rise to global power.*

Nye's views of US world supremacy have served to encourage Washington to wage multiple wars ; his view of US economic power has allowed policy-makers to ignore fundamental weaknesses in the US economy and to overestimate US power, based on what he dubs, 'soft' and 'military' power.

In tackling Professor Nye's work, we are not dealing with a 'detached academic in the ivory tower' – we are taking on a high level political influential, a hardline military hawk, whose views are reflected in the forging of strategic decisions and whose arguments serve to justify major government policies.

First, we will proceed through a critical analysis of his theoretical assumptions, historical arguments and conceptual framework. In the second part of this essay, we will consider the political consequences, which have flowed from his analysis and prescriptions. In the conclusion, we shall propose an alternative, more realistic, analysis of US global power, one more attuned to the real international position of the US in the world today.

Nye's Analysis is Ossified in His Distorted Time Warp

Nye's segmentation of power into three spheres – economic, military (hard), and diplomatic/cultural (soft), overlooks the inter-relation between them. What he dubs as 'soft power' usually relies on 'hard power', either before, during or after the application of 'soft power'. Moreover, the capacity to influence by 'soft power' depends on economic promise or military coercion to enforce 'persuasion'. Where economic resources or military threats are not present, soft power is ineffective.

Nye's argument that military power is co-equal with economic power is a very dubious proposition. Over the medium run, economic power buys, expands and increases military power. In other words, economic resources are convertible into military as well as 'soft power'. It can influence politicians, parties and regimes via trade, investments and credit in many ways which military power cannot. Over time, economic power translates into military

power. Nye's claims of persistent US military superiority in the face of its admitted economic decline is ephemeral or time bound.

Nye's argument about the continued ascendancy of US global power '*for the next few decades*' is a dubious, static view – ignoring a long-term, large-scale, historical trajectory. Lifelong shibboleths never die! By all empirical indicators – economic, political and even militarily, the US is a declining power. Moreover, what is important is not where the US is at any given moment but the where it is moving. Its declining shares of Latin American, African and Asian markets clearly points to a downward trajectory.

Power is a relationship. By definition it means a country's capacity to make other countries or political entities do what they otherwise would not do. To consider the US as the dominant world power, we cannot, as Nye proposes, look at its 'reputation' as a world power or cite its 'military capacity' or willingness to project military force. We need to look at military and political outcomes in multiple key issue areas in which US policymakers have sought to establish regional or local dominance.

Nye's discussion fails to look at the negative cumulative effects of US policy failures in multiple regions over time to determine whether the US retains its global supremacy or is a declining power.

To simply preach that '*the American century is not over*', because some critics in the past mistakenly thought that the USSR in the 1970s or Japan in the 1980's would displace the US as the global power, is to overlook the foundational weakness and repeated failures of US policymakers to impose or persuade other nations to accept US supremacy over the past decade and a half.

If, as Nye grudgingly concedes, China has replaced the US as the leading economic power in Asia, he does not understand the dynamic components of Chinese economic power, especially its long term, large-scale accumulation of foreign reserves and rapidly growing technical knowhow. Even worse, Nye ignores how the military dimension of world power has actively undermined US economic supremacy.

It is precisely Nye's belief, along with other Pentagon advisers, that US military supremacy make it a 'world power', which has led to catastrophic, prolonged and costly wars. These wars have degraded and undermined US pretensions of 'world leadership' or more accurately – *imperial supremacy*.

While the US has spent trillions of dollars of public money on prolonged and losing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, as well as ongoing military interventions in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, China and other emerging powers have engaged in large long-term economic expansion, increasing market shares, acquiring productive enterprises and expanding their sources of capital accumulation in dynamic regions.

US repeated projections of military power have not created new sources of wealth. The US capacity and willingness to engage in multiple disastrous wars has led to a greater loss of military influence.

Consequences of High Military Capacity and Declining Economic Performance

The consequence of utilizing its great storehouse of military capacity so disastrously has degraded and weakened the US military as well as its imperial economic reach. Repeated

US military defeats, its inability to secure its goals or impose its dominance in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan has severely weakened the domestic political foundations of global military power, to the point where the US public is adverse to sending large scale US ground troops into combat.

Nye's inventory of military resources, stockpile of up-to-date bombers, nuclear weapons, fighter planes, military bases, special forces operations, and its vast spy ("intelligence") apparatus, in other words the US's supreme military 'capacity', has not resulted in the establishment of a prosperous, stable and submissive empire (the goal that Nye euphemistically dubs 'world supremacy'). US military engagements, both high and low intensity wars, have resulted in costly defeats and retreats as adversaries advance into the vacuum. Superior material capacity has not translated into US dominance because nationalist, anti-imperialist consciousness and movements based on mass armed resistance, have demonstrated superiority in countering foreign (US) invasions, occupations and satellite building.

Nye ignores a decisive 'military resource', which the US does not have and its adversaries have in abundance – nationalist consciousness. Here, Nye's notion of US supremacy in 'soft power' has been terribly wrong-headed. According to Nye, the US superiority in the use and control of mass media, films, news and cultural organizations and educational institutions continues and has allowed the US to retain its global supremacy.

No doubt the US global propaganda apparatus and networks are formidable but they have not been successful, not least, as a bulwark of US global supremacy. Once again Nye's inventory of soft power assets relies exclusively on quantitative, contemporary, material structures and ignores the enormous counter-influence of historical legacies, nationalist, cultural, religious, ethnic, class, race and gender consciousness, which rejects US dominance in all of its forms. US 'soft power' has not conquered or gained the allegiance of the people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or Yemen. Nor has it convinced the billions of Chinese, Latin American or Islamic peoples to embrace American 'leadership'.

No doubt 'soft power' has worked to a limited extent, especially among sectors of the educated classes and the local political elite, converting them into imperial collaborators. No doubt elements of the educated elite have been co-opted by US funded 'non-governmental organizations' that engage in grass roots counter-insurgency as the counterpart to the drone attacks from above. But, once again, Nye relies on quantitative, rather than qualitative, measures of influence. Despite an army of NGOs and the budgeting of billions of dollars, US imperial conquests, coups, occupations, rigged elections, and puppet regimes are highly unpopular. As a result, US troops need to diminish their presence, and its overseas and visiting diplomats require a squadron of security officials and operate out of armed fortresses.

Professor Nye's treatment of what he calls 'soft power' is reduced to an inventory of propaganda resources, developed and/or cultivated by the imperial state (the US) to induce submission to and acceptance of the global supremacy of the US. However vast the spending and however broad the scope of 'soft power, Nye fails to recognize the ineffectiveness of the US 'soft power apparatus' in the face of systemic crimes against humanity, which have profoundly alienated and decisively turned world opinion and specific national publics against the US. Specifically, Washington's practice of torture (Abu Ghraib), kidnapping (rendition), and prolonged jailing without trial (Guantanamo); its global spy

network monitoring hundreds of millions of citizens in the US and among allies and its use of drones killing more non-combatant (innocent) citizens than armed adversaries, have severely weakened, if not undermined, the appeal of US 'soft powers'. Nye is oblivious to the ways in which US projections of military power have led to the precipitous long-term decline of 'soft power', and the way in which that decline has resulted in the greater reliance on military power ... in a vicious circle.

Nye ignores the changing composition of the strategic decision makers who decide where and when military power will be exercised. He blandly assumes that policy is directed by and for enhancing US 'global supremacy'. But as Professors Mearsheimer and Walt, (*The Israel Lobby*) and Petras, (*The Power of Israel in the United States*), have demonstrated, powerful, organized lobbies, like AIPAC, and Israel First officials in the Executive branch have taken military decisions to focus on the Middle East at the behest of Israel in order to enhance its power. These decisions have had an enormous cost in terms of loss of human and financial resources and have contributed to the decline of US global supremacy. Nye fails to recognize how the ascendancy of his militarist colleagues in the Pentagon and the Zionists in the Congress and Executive have drastically changed the way in which hard power (military) is exercised

And how it has weakened the composition and use of soft power and provoked greater imbalances between economic and military power.

Nye's argument is further weakened by his incapacity to '*problematize*' the changing content of military power, its shift from a tool of economic expansion, directed by US empire-builders, to an end in itself exploiting economic resources to enhance Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. This weakness is exacerbated by his failure to recognize the changing nature of economic power – the shift from manufacturing to finance capital and the negative consequences, which result for the projection of US economic power and dominance.

Finally, Nye totally ignores the moral dimension of the US drive for world dominance. At worst, he blithely assumes that destructive US wars are, by their nature, virtuous. Nye's political commitment to the '*American Century*' and total belief in its benignancy blind him to the killing and displacement of millions of Iraqis, Syrians, Afghans, Somalis, Libyans and now Ukrainians – among others. Nye's assumption of the beneficial effects of the US-NATO-EU expansion into the former Warsaw Pact countries, and especially Russia, ignores the vast impoverishment of 70% of the Ukrainian population, the outward flight of 20 million skilled professionals and workers, and the subsequent militarization of Eastern Europe and East Germany via its incorporation in NATO. According to Nye's moral calculus, any policy that enhances US global power is virtuous, no matter how it impacts the recipient population. These are not only Nye's views, they provide the ideological underpinning of the official 'soft power' propaganda accompanying past, present and near future wars of mass destruction.

Nye is not your typical garden variety *Ivy League-ideologue-for-US-and-Israeli-dominance* (and there are many in US academia). Nye has been an important theoretical architect and strategic planner responsible for US global wars and the accompanying crimes against humanity. His global fantasies of US ascendancy have led to the parlous state of the US domestic economy, multiple unwinnable wars overseas and the eclipse of any strategic thinking about reversing the economic decline of the US in the world economy. Applying a cost-benefit analysis to Prof. Nye's policies, if he were employed as a CEO in the private sector, he would have long ago been fired and dispatched to a prestigious business school

to teach 'ethics'. Since he is already tenured at Harvard and employed by the Pentagon he can continue to churn out his irresponsible 'manifestos' of US global leadership and not be held to account for the disasters.

In Joseph Nye, we have our own American version of *Colonel Blimp* surveying his colonial projects: He has exchanged his pith helmet, short britches and walking stick, for a combat helmet and boots, and has limited his 'reviews' of the Empire to secure zones, surrounded by an entourage of combat ready Leathernecks or mercenaries, circling helicopter warships and super-vetted local military toadies.

Historical Fallacies

Even at its zenith of 'global power' during the 1940's, 50's and 60's, US military performance was the least effective component of world power. Two major wars, Korea and Indo-China, speak against Nye's formula. The US military failed to defeat the North Korean and Chinese armies; Washington had to settle for a 'compromise'. And the US was militarily defeated and forced to withdraw from Indo-China. Success in securing influence came afterwards, via economic investments and trade, accompanied by political and cultural influences.

Today, Nye's reliance on the superior military resources of the US to project the continuance of the 'American Century' rests on very shakey historical foundations.

Nye's Military Metaphysics as Crackpot Realism

The US has declined as a world power because of its 'military pivot' – following Nye's military metaphysics and 'soft power' psychobabble. In every practical situation, where the US attempted to secure its dominance by relying on its superior 'military capacity' against its competitors' reliance on economic and political resources, Washington has lost.

China has set in motion the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – with an initial offering of \$50 billion dollars. The US is staunchly opposed to the AIIB because it clearly represents an alternative to the US-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite Washington's pressure to reject membership, its 'allies', led by the UK and followed by all major powers (except Japan for now), have applied for membership. Even Israel has joined!

Washington sought to convince leading 'emerging economies' to accept US-centered economic integration; but instead, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICS) founded the BRICS' bank.

The US engineered the overthrow of the elected government in the Ukraine, and set up a puppet regime to incorporate it as a NATO client and military platform on Russia's border. Instead, the Ukraine turned into an economic basket case, run by kleptocratic oligarchs, defended by openly neo-Nazi brigades and incapable of defeating federal autonomist rebels in the industrialized east.

The US and the EU imposed economic sanctions on Russia and federal autonomist rebels of the Donbass in Eastern Ukraine. This has become another example of projecting political power to enlarge the scope of military operations at the cost of devastating losses in trade and investment, between Moscow and the European Union, not to speak of the Ukraine – whose economy was dependent on trade with Russia.

The decline of US world power is, in part, a result of the dynamism and economic growth of emerging powers such as China and the relative decline of US market shares and inferior rates of growth.

Nye, in one of his more egregiously foolish efforts to puff up US economic superiority and to downgrade China's economic rise, argues that China's growth rate is '*likely to slow in the future*'. *Dear Joe... don't you know that a Chinese 'slow down' from double digit growth to 7 percent is still triple the rate of growth of the US today and for the foreseeable future?*

Moreover China's balanced economy, between production and finance, is less crisis-prone than the lopsided growth of the corrupt US financial sector. Nye's economic calculus ignores the qualitative, as well as quantitative, dimensions of economic power.

Conclusion

The intellectual value of Joseph Nye's writings would not merit serious consideration except for the fact that they have a deep and abiding influence on US foreign policy. Nye is an ardent advocate of empire building and his arguments and prescriptions carry weight in the White House and Pentagon. His normative bias and his love of empire building blinds him to objective realities. The fact that he is a failed policy advisor, who refuses to acknowledge defeats, decline and destruction resulting from his world view, has not lessened the dangerous nature of his current views.

Nye's attempt to justify his vision of continuing US world supremacy has led him to blame his critics. In his latest book, he rants that predictions of US decline are 'dangerous' because they could encourage countries such as China to pursue more aggressive policies. In other words, Nye having failed, through logic and facts, to sustain his assertions against his better-informed critics, questions their loyalty – evoking a McCarthyite specter of intellectuals critical of US global power...stabbing the country in the back.

Nye tries to deflect attention from the fragile material foundations of US power to disembodied 'perceptions'. According to Nye, it's all perceptions' (or illusions!): if the world leaders and public believe that '*the American century is set to continue for many decades*', that faith will, in itself, help to sustain America's superiority! Nye's fit of irrationality, his reliance on Harry Houdini style of political analysis ('*Now you see US global power, now you don't!*') is unlikely to convince any serious analyst beyond the halls of the Pentagon and Harvard University's John F Kennedy School.

What matters is that the US, while it is a declining world power, is still militarily powerful, dangerous and destructive, even as its empire building is weakening and its forces are in retreat. As Mahatma Gandhi once stated about the declining British Empire, '*It's the aging tiger that becomes the man eater*'.

As an alternative, we can follow two lines of inquiry: One is to question the entire imperial enterprise and to focus on our return to republican values and domestic social and democratic reconstruction. That is a necessary, but prolonged struggle, under present circumstances. In the meantime, we can pursue policies that emphasize the importance of shifting from destructive military expansionism toward constructive economic engagements, flexible cooperation with emerging competitors, and diplomatic agreements with adversaries. Contrary to Nye's assertions, militarism and economic expansion are not compatible. Wars destroy markets and occupations provoke resistance, which frighten

investors. 'Soft power' and NGO's that rely on manipulation, lies and demonization of critics gain few adherents and multiple adversaries.

The US should increase its ties and co-operation with BRICS and China's AIIB. It should reach out to sign trade deals with Iran, Syria and Lebanon. It should cut off aid to Israel, because of its bellicose posture toward the Arab East and its brutal colonization of Palestine. Washington should end its support of violent coups and engage with Venezuela. It should lift sanctions against Russia and East Ukraine and propose joint economic ventures. By ending colonial wars, we can increase economic growth and open markets. We should pursue economic accommodation not military occupation. The former leads to prosperity, the latter to destruction.

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