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Book Review

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Is the American Century Over?* (Global Futures Series), Cambridge and Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2015, 146 pp. + vii

Reviewed by Monir Hossain Moni

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I am ecstatic that it is a felicitous happenstance for me to review this book authored by Joseph Nye, a distinguished service professor and former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University who was ranked by his own institution's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs as the world's sixth most-influential international relations (IR) scholar and 'No. 1' with respect to his epoch-making works' implication on United States (US) foreign policymaking paradigm over many years. In fact, I have just completed one of my Japan-concentrated research projects by using a widely quoted and increasingly-popular (despite receiving some opprobrium) concept of 'soft power' for which Nye is actually the originator. Without any limitation, I can send my best wishes to Nye for this book with its timeliness and importance. Nevertheless, while a reviewer in an effort of the volume's commercial advertisement makes much of it "The future of American power is the great question of our century. No-one is better equipped than Joe Nye to answer it", this project neither met my scholarly inquest up to a pleasing level nor filled my enjoyment to the brim. Honestly, the research's concluding findings made me disconsolate due to a number of reasons. As the sole founder and creator of the Dhaka (Bangladesh)-based Asia Pacific Institute for Global Studies (APIGS), which has already proved itself as the best knowledge base on current global studies by making a truly great difference in the academic world, I championed by numerous international recognition scholarly and research awards (including the two most illustrious prizes named differently after Japan's former prime ministers Masayoshi Ohira and Yasuhiro Nakasone) wish to openly challenge Joseph Nye's book in its each and every side.

First of all, coming across that the book's two chapters out of its seven have interrogation marks, its main title (*Is the American Century Over?*) itself puts a question sign. But if it can adequately be answered by either 'yes' or 'no', why is there a necessity for realizing this book publication project? Anyway, when Nye (a US national) adopts the following 'forceful argument' made by another analyst in the concluding chapter "the United States is only at the beginning of its power. The twenty-first century will be the American century" (p. 113), it goes against his 'hopeful forecast' in a succeeding paragraph as follow "the American century is likely to continue for a number of decades at the very least" (p. 127). To be more specific, the two locutions (ie, 'the entire twenty-first century' and 'a number of decades') read directly antithetical. Contrastingly also, voluminous publications on the 'Asian century' owing to Asia's not only growing clouts but also shining values are nowadays being produced in which observant researchers feasibly envision that the 21st century will belong to Asia. By documenting the interrelated dimensions of American political, economic, social and cultural declining trends both locally and globally in 'absolute' terms, many US academics themselves have also reckoned that the American century together with '*Pax Americana*' (Latin for 'American Peace') has already come to an end, although the US has been the world's sole global superpower since the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. Conjointly, Nye believes that they have yet entered a 'post-American world'. In opposition to such a presumption, fairly good number of international thinkers (including Americans) arguably point to the fact that the world with the 'rise of the rest' has by this time turned to multipolarity from unipolarity. Moreover, as the book's first paragraph of first chapter evidences: "In recent years, polls showed that in 15 of 22 countries surveyed, most respondents said that China either will replace or has already replaced the United States as the world's leading power" (p. 1), this statement contrarily answers its only question, making Nye's focal claim fallible. For Nye's better knowledge, John Hay, US Secretary of State (from 1898 to 1905) more than a century as a period of 100 years ago prognosticated that the '21st century'

will be the ‘Pacific century’ as a whole in which the whole North America was included. This means that it will not merely be the ‘American century’.

Now, I like to confer my ‘counter arguments’ to Nye’s ‘cardinal arguments’ adduced in his (this) ‘so-called’ cogent thesis. First, Nye recaps that America’s three astounding capabilities (military muscle, economic affluence and soft power) will continue to subside any new challenger (such predominantly as China) to his country. But it would have been engrossing and meaningful for the most curious and highbrow readers if he had more factually answered the following three questions with respect to these three efficacies of his country: (1) Why have the American armed forces occupied or boomed so many countries throughout the world (particularly Muslim nations) during many decades when war crimes violently committed by them have gone against universal human rights, peace and humanity by and large? (2) How can the US get rid of such severe socioeconomic drawbacks as widening income inequality, poverty and unemployment in addition to its political stalemate that is negatively affecting on fulfilling ordinary people’s necessities and gratifications of Nye’s nation? (3) What is the true claim of Joseph Nye who himself has authored the article (titled “The Decline of America’s Soft Power: Why Washington Should Worry”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004), granted that his country has recently strived to revitalize its soft power as a core tool of public diplomacy?

With special emphasis on the third point, as Nye comments in the concluding chapter’s last paragraph “Now, with slightly less preponderance and a much complex world, the United States will need to make smart strategic choices both at home and abroad if it wishes to maintain its position” (pp. 126-127), I am really in a puzzle over why and how he can offer such a suggestion concerning the concept of ‘smart power’ for which Nye is also the creator. More explicitly, as I have given a hint about it in my review’s beginning part, Nye, incompatible with his non-academic positions as an ex-assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs and chairman of the National

Intelligence Council of the US, is not only the ‘acclaimed mastermind’ but also the ‘long promoter’ of the idea of ‘soft power’ (as against the brute forces of ‘hard power’) through which any state can win hearts and minds of foreign publics by communicating with them in today’s world of power struggles. But regrettably, his proposal on ‘smart power’, which is a tailored synthesis of both hard power and soft power and the precise mixture of the two depending on circumstances, with his judgment that it might be a mistake to rely on soft power alone. Anyway, such ‘smart power’ approach unusually undermines his standalone and lofty cultural ‘soft power’ notion. As we are informed, the Bush administration neglected the relevance of soft power and wasted its advantages in a foolish and reckless manner. As a matter of fact, its ostensible modern-day crusade against Islam and Muslims in Iraq has actually helped promote the ‘Bush hatred’ in other world regions when making America the most disliked nation on earth, though a few countries love America until now. Additionally, Washington allegedly exploits its smart power as a part of the Obama administration’s 2012 ‘Pivot to East Asia’ regional strategy simply for pursuing self-interests. In sum, the majority of the globe’s poor countries (mostly in Africa), which feel deprived of the opportunities of globalization indiscriminately managed by a club of a very few powerful nations, will of course not be interested at all in ‘military hegemony’, ‘economic selfishness’ and ‘cultural expansion’ pursued by any unipolar superpower or great power in the guise of its self-controlled centurial period. That is to ask: What will the self-proclaimed century (American or Chinese) make sense for the poorest of the poor in the world?

Sometimes, boastful and extravagant protestations or promises beyond an author’s capacity clearly misguide the common readers, leave a candid reviewer be. It is also the case for Nye. In any event, I do not desperately consider that it should be any of the following four questions posed by Nye: Whether China as a nimbly rising rival will replace America as the world’s leading nation; Whether the ‘American century’ will ultimately be eroded by the ‘Chinese century’; Whether these two monsters (both militarily and economically) will engage in a fight with each other for global

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supremacy; Whether Europe is doomed to fail understanding that the 19th century was the ‘British century’. In this connection, Nye completely overlooks some of his country’s think tanks’ prognosis about the ‘Indian century’. In any case, I see in my mind’s eye that the prime concern must be why, how and when we could create a more inclusive and empowered regimen of global governance for a decorative and harmonious world order amid an entangled interplay of political chicaneries and economic magnetisms. From this viewpoint, it should be stressed that while ‘the world without America’ is a fallacious perception, the world needs America and vice versa America needs the world, meaning that any country (including the US) alone cannot solve the globe’s most pressing human security issues, or address the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in particular. In place of the volume’s long list of further readings, I expected some realistic solutions on such topical problems from this globally renowned scholar, especially because this book has come to light from Polity’s ‘Global Futures Series’. Whereas, Nye has developed his book’s introductory chapter with a lengthy story of when the American century began, how it was created and why their country has been able to keep possession of its leadership and dominance worldwide during the last half of the 20th century. It sounds a too historical narrative and much discussed subject on the myth of ‘American exceptionalism’. Therefore, this repetition might easily make this study’s readers (mainly those who have anti-American sentiment) lackluster. More to the point, although a 24-page chapter titled “Absolute Decline: Is America like Rome?” (Chapter 5) has insanely been incorporated for this project, nothing is essentially contemplated about the ‘Asian century’ attributable to Asia’s growing socio-cultural values in addition to politico-economic powers even with strategic military rivalries that is title of burgeoning literatures on Asian/global studies, as I said before.

Similarly, many famous predictions were proven to be totally false. For example, as Nye himself remarks, Harvard professor Ezra Vogel published (in 1979) *Japan as Number One: Lessons*

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for America (later translated into Japanese), an all-time best-selling book that celebrated Japan's manufacturing-fueled rise to help Japan to become the world's 2nd largest economy. Though the country was advancing incrementally and a mood of sunny optimism prevailed at that time, there exists a commonsense among many Japanese in Japan that their country is crumbling and thus it would be unprepared for shouldering heavy duty at the world stage any longer. While Vogel's volume seems controversial, this Western author is still upbeat on Japan's future. Cheerfully, as per some surveys, Japan will still be in the list of 'Top 10 Superpowers' of the world in 2050 as well. Furthermore, while most Japanese manifestly view that America as their closest and prolonged ally in the framework of the US-Japan strategic alliance are in downturn and thus a far-reaching threat to the security of their nation, anxieties about non-assurance on military logistic services from America's unswervingly subservient partner as a reportedly long stagnant economy apart from Tokyo's security policy shift as a blare to forge ties with East Asia are at the same time being acutely felt in Washington. But Nye has pretty well forgotten this crucial aspect, condemning that he in this book gives only a 4-page coverage on Japan in contrast to a 25-page separate chapter on China, which mostly reads descriptive.

Relevantly also, there is probably none other than Nye himself who strongly criticized the deficit but push of Beijing's soft power at odds with this country's hard power consisting of both military strengths and economic incentives. But he seems overwhelmed with the prospect of a century to be ruled by China. Rather, he should have unfolded that this Japan's neighboring country has for a long time been the 2nd biggest recipient of Tokyo's generous official development assistance (ODA). Beyond this massive contributory support for the Chinese industrialization (but unfortunately military modernization) process and even though China has surpassed Japan as the world's second-biggest economy in 2010, China remains lower-ranking than Japan in the matters of world famous multinational business conglomerates, technological innovations and its numerous more and more

vibrant non-state actors. In fact, Nye dismissed Japan's soft power as negligible in the early 1990s. But he diverted himself later by providing his firmly-held opinion in 2012 that one should not doubt the persistence of Japan's cultural uniqueness. He continued that though Japan's story was still lousy, this nation because of its distinctive and proactive 'pacifist constitution' and 'non-nuclear principles' compared to his own country (the US) almost looks like a 'role model'. However, it has not become clear from Nye's book how China that is still a trivial donor and accordingly struggling to assume its leadership positions in both regional and multilateral organizations will soon exceed Japan's 'kudos' (ie, praise and honor) this nation received for its already outstanding achievements for these domains. Although he traditionally foresees that China would automatically attain a superpower status and China's dramatic transformations (both internal and external) will ultimately impact the US and the American century insisted by him, he does not suppose that China might head toward Japanese-style 'lost decades' of financial sluggishness.

Nye finally declares that the American century due to the extraordinary period of his nation's pre-eminence in the arenas of both global geopolitics and international contribution is still not over, having an impression that the US is somehow an exceptional country in the world worthy of widespread admiration. But he avoids saying that his homeland is growingly and loathingly treated as the world's policemen as pointed out before. Also, its global public goods basically in the form of foreign aid to the developing countries aside from its billion-dollars trade in weapons to autocrats worldwide is seen from the perspective of America's own national gains. Moreover, when Nye is even now lucidly dreaming of a 'continual' American century, the most extreme reality is that several of its parallels and competitors are coming up. However, Nye rightly warns that the status of America as the only superpower in the post-Cold War international system might seriously be tightened by its own domestic weaknesses and uneasiness 'relative' to the belief that the 21st century in the command of a booming Asia as a world power or the potential of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South

Africa) as a group of rapidly emerging market economies will perilously take America out of the global scene. Hence, this American citizen recommends that the US should have some pragmatic ideas on how to exert its historically-elevated ‘leadership’ (unlike ‘hegemony’ or ‘domination’), Washington must need to give practical responses to Beijing’s proactive strategies as well as the country would have to listen for getting others to enlist in a multipolar world order with the spread of global geographical balance-of-power politics thanks to today’s high-tech society.

On these grounds, it will not be excessive and irrelevant to raise a question whether President Barack Obama’s 2008 ‘Change We Can Believe In’ slogan in the final campaign pitch has eventually brought any amazing change to America domestically let alone internationally. In the same way, the political slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, which was trademarked the Ronald Reagan’s campaign of 1980, clearly illustrates that America has over the time lost its greatness. According to a Connecticut (US)-based Quinnipiac University National poll, there is a deep well of dissatisfaction and pessimism among American voters who say that the US has lost its identity, they are falling behind financially, their beliefs and values are under attack, and public officials do not care what they think. So, some of my blunt but logical questions to Nye and all Americans as follows: (1) Will the American leaders really be able to revitalize ‘American exceptionalism’ (ie, their historical reputation, sociocultural morality, political decency as well as economic luxuriance) of which they are so proud always? (2) Will their nation be sincere and responsible enough to correct its image and revamp its stature in the global community and society so that it not only can consolidate its place in a new multipolar world but also can adaptively work with it? (3) Will the United States, as Joseph Nye has advocated over a long period of time, be destined and entitled in the genuine sensitivity to serve as a constructive and distinctive exemplar for our degrading humanity in the new centennial world? In essence, it will be wise and better for Nye and his nation to

acknowledge the physical existence of a post-American world, and act in accordance with the changing multipolar global governance architecture.

To recapitulate, the book’s core question (as its title stands) itself is quite contradictory, and Nye, who is regarded as an ‘epitome’ for other IR scholars in the US and overseas, seems less self-confident to persuasively prove his self-anticipated case. Rather, it is the book that will help more familiarize the term ‘Chinese century’ with the involved parties. Certainly, Nye’s ‘we versus they’ schism or ‘West versus East’ chasm in the volume will also help contribute further to the fractions in midst of the global power shift. More outwardly, some ideal scholars might look upon Nye as a person who is America’s one-sided ‘propaganda prompter’ and one who does not mind to distract his scholarly theories or noble visions only for the sake of his personal rewards or his nation’s benefits. In other words, I am afraid whether some would unenthusiastically behave toward Nye’s ‘big talk’ as his country’s ‘grandiose rhetoric’. To tell the truth, the volume suffers from its narrowly specified purpose with a substandard and tendentious title. In addition to Nye’s contradictory standpoints, wrong predictions and inevitable omissions, it at the same time lacks methodical approaches, viable insights and unavoidable suggestions. Moreover, discovering that there are some imperfections in the contents and indispositions in the frame of references, the volume is bereft of reference works in the non-English (particularly Chinese and Japanese) languages. In short, this book is not an outcome of a so punctilious and excellent research with truly intellectual dissension, engaging style and exciting taste.

Regardless of all of my criticisms, I am quite sure that this close-packed but originally-written piece (compared to other books on this similar theme) accomplished by Joseph Nye might still be of seduction especially for US political leaders as well as this country’s local policy makers and global strategic planners. As an independent but unprejudiced reviewer of this book with its need for our time, I take the scope to sketch my own constructive and indispensable foresight by reflecting the benevolent feelings of all ethically-minded and peace-loving people throughout the world as follows:

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“The 19th century experienced the birth of modern science. But the two world wars have turned the 20th century into the worst ever. By learning lessons from the past centuries, we all world citizens together in the 21st century should robustly and earnestly affirm the judgment in the sanctity and dignity of each and every human’s life regardless of region, religion or race, and thus start our globally-networked actions right now for our ever-unstable and risk-prone humanity’s prosperous and successful future”. Indeed, I publish to create values needed distinctly for peace of insecure humankind, not generally for promotion of academic rank.

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