

The Future of American Power

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While most observers around the globe see the United States as the world's preeminent power at present, there is a widespread expectation that this preeminence won't last.

- Nye cited Pew international polling data showing broad expectation, even among Americans, that China will soon be the international system's dominant power.

Nye disagreed, however, with this proposition. He said that *declinism* is a recurring feature in the American psyche, and that we tend to confuse contemporary problems, even serious ones, with longer-term trend lines. Other analytic mistakes cast further doubt on the prediction of US decline.

- We don't know what the *life cycle* of a country is.
 - If it's 250 years we might be in trouble; if it's 500, then we're in good shape.
- Events jar trend lines onto new trajectories.
 - We've seen, for example, the hydraulic fracturing technique change America's energy security picture; mastering emerging biotech and nanotech potentialities might produce similar transformative effects.

In more fine-grained analysis, Nye continued to question the expectation of American decline.

- America is way ahead, of China for example, in *per capita* income – and it is per capita income which reflects the sophistication of an economy.
- America has the world's most capable military.
 - The US spends 5 times what Beijing does, and China will likely be behind for decades.
- US *soft power* – i.e. the attractiveness of the American system and its allure for others -- is highly resonant globally.
 - Beijing's emphasis on domestic control inhibits Chinese civil society from fully exerting an attractive force.
- The US is still the world's leader in Research and Development, university rankings, Nobel laureates, and entrepreneurial opportunity.

Despite the United States' *primus inter pares* stature, Nye cited the National Intelligence Council's (NIC) recently issued publication, *Global Trends 2030*, and its heralding of the "rise of the rest" – i.e. increasingly powerful countries such as China, India, and Brazil.

- In a succinct comment on *smart power*, Nye said that the United States has been dealt a good hand of cards, but that we must play with others.

A second part of the evening's program involved Prof. Nye taking questions from and interacting with Amb. Nancy Soderberg.

In an interesting discussion of the information age and which country "had the best story," the issue was raised about China's prospects for democratization. Prof. Nye cited social science research which indicates that as per capita income rises, popular demands for political participation increase as well.

- He judged that control-oriented political leaders would have a hard time accommodating more open and inclusive types of participation, and put the odds of China's democratization in the foreseeable future at 50/50.

Prof. Nye was asked how Washington does in striking a balance between soft and hard (coercive) power. He implied that hard power is often misapplied, characterizing the invasion of Iraq as a strategic mistake. He further laid out the interesting concept of *contextual intelligence*.

- Our military involvement in Vietnam, for example, was seen in the context of falling Southeast Asian dominoes. Had we seen it in the context of competing regional nationalisms, our opportunities to divide and conquer would have been substantially higher.

Prof. Nye and Amb. Soderberg discussed cyber insecurity, citing the recent Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Global Threat Testimony's characterization of cyber as the country's premier threat. Regarding privacy concerns often associated with combatting cyber threats, drawing on his experience as a former NIC Chair, Prof. Nye suggested that a special court could be created to temper Executive Branch intrusiveness, modeled on the current Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

In commenting on terrorism, Nye provided some historical analysis. He observed that previous waves of terrorism, *anarchists* in the early 20th century, and *romantic leftists* in the 1960s tended to burn themselves out after a generation.

- If history is a guide, the current wave of terrorism, driven largely by a violence-prone faction within Islam, should burn itself out in another decade. This is premised on our following a smart strategy which does not inadvertently inflame terrorist grievances and aid recruitment opportunities.

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