

This article was downloaded by: [Syracuse University]

On: 28 August 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 768513897]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Survival

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713659919>

## Recovering American Leadership

Joseph S. Nye Jr

Online Publication Date: 01 February 2008

To cite this Article Nye Jr, Joseph S.(2008)'Recovering American Leadership',Survival,50:1,55 — 68

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00396330801899447

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330801899447>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Recovering American Leadership

**Joseph S. Nye, Jr**

Leaders are those who help groups create and achieve shared goals. Traditionally, the leaders in international politics have been the most powerful states. However, while hard military power counts for more in the context of international politics than it does in democratic domestic politics, even in international relations conquest, or pure coercion, is not leadership, but mere dictation. Disproportionate power, sometimes called 'hegemony', has been associated with leadership, but appeals to values and ideology also matter, even for a hegemon. As the realist E.H. Carr argued, there are three forms of international power: military, economic and ideas. The first two, also expressed as coercion and inducement, fall under the heading of 'hard power', while the third belongs to 'soft power' or 'the power of attraction'.

Similarly, leadership is a political process with three components: leaders, followers and the contexts in which they interact. The context of international politics is often understood as an anarchic world of states seeking security in which the ultimate (but not only) instrument is the use of military force. While this picture remains roughly accurate, it is undergoing change in the twenty-first century. New dimensions are being added to security, non-state actors are playing larger roles, and the context of power is becoming more complex. All this affects the role of the largest states in providing leadership. While there are vast differences among nations in terms of cultures and values, there are also some shared goals in the form of international public

---

**Joseph S. Nye, Jr**, is University Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard University, and a former Assistant Secretary of Defense. His most recent books are *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004) and *The Powers to Lead* (2008).

goods such as stable balances of power, an open international economy and access to global commons, goals that cut across the divergent values expressed in domestic cultures and polities. The largest states, when they help to provide these shared public goods, act as leaders by helping groups of nations to create and achieve shared goals – the very definition of leadership. The United Kingdom played such a role in the nineteenth century, as did the United States in the second half of the twentieth. However, a simple model of the United States as a hegemonic successor to the United Kingdom no longer captures the complex leadership role America must play in the twenty-first century.

### **The only superpower?**

Analysts and commentators have often misunderstood American power. As recently as 1990, conventional wisdom portrayed a United States in decline. Bestseller lists featured books that described America's fall, and predicted that Japan would soon become 'Number One'. When such predictions failed to come true, reports of American decline eased, but the new conventional wisdom that succeeded the declinists was equally misleading. As expressed by Charles Krauthammer and other neo-conservatives, America was enjoying a 'unipolar moment' and could lead unilaterally because others had no choice but to follow. This view misunderstood the limits of American power and led to an over-ambitious and unbalanced foreign policy that resembled a car with an accelerator and no brakes: sooner or later, it was bound to go off the road. This in turn has led to a new questioning of American power with analogies drawn between America's imbroglio in Iraq and the United Kingdom's problems in the Boer War as a harbinger of future power shifts. Some observers even worry that America will turn inwards in response to the Iraq War.

A number of realists have expressed concern about America's staying power as well. Throughout history, coalitions of countries have arisen to balance dominant powers, and the search for new state actors that might challenge the United States and shift the balance of power is well underway. Some see China as the new enemy; others envisage a Russia–China–India coalition. But even if China maintains its high growth rate of 9%, while the

United States achieves only 2–3%, China will not equal the United States in per capita income (a measure of the sophistication of an economy) until near the end of the century. In contrast, Germany's industrial production had surpassed the United Kingdom's well before open conflict between the two erupted in 1914. Others see India becoming a major challenger to the United States, but despite recent impressive growth, economically India lags behind China, and will have incentives to cooperate with the United States to balance rising Chinese power.

Russia is sometimes cited as a great power, but its recent resurgence is based on a single commodity, energy, and it faces serious health and demographic problems. Others see a uniting Europe as a potential federation that will challenge the United States for primacy, but this forecast depends on a high degree of European political unity, a willingness of European populations to spend heavily on defence, and poor conditions in transatlantic relations. While realists raise an important point about the economic rise of new powers in the international arena, their quest to identify traditional challengers who will surpass the United States or form coalitions to balance American military power misses a larger point by ignoring the deeper changes that are occurring in the distribution and nature of power in this century.

---

*Russia's  
resurgence  
is based  
on a single  
commodity*

### **Power in the twenty-first century**

At first glance, the disparity between American power and that of the rest of the world looks overwhelming. The United States is the only country with both intercontinental nuclear weapons and large, state-of-the-art air, naval and ground forces capable of global deployment. The United States also leads the world in the information-based 'revolution in military affairs'. With American spending constituting nearly half of world military expenditure, it would be very difficult for other nations to organise a traditional military challenge against the United States. In economic size, America's roughly one-quarter share of world economic output (at official exchange rates) is equal to the next three countries combined. In terms of soft power and cultural prominence, the United States is far and away the world's

number-one film and television exporter. The country also attracts the most foreign students each year to its institutions of higher education. In terms of power resources, America is well ahead. But power measured in resources is not the same as power measured in terms of being able to produce the outcomes one wants.

Some analysts describe this world as unipolar, others as multipolar, but both descriptions are wrong, because each is an oversimplification of the situation in a world where no one form of power is decisive. Unipolarity is misleading because it exaggerates the degree to which the United States is able to get the results it wants in some dimensions of world politics, while multipolarity is misleading because it implies several roughly equal countries. Power defined in behavioural terms – the ability to influence others to produce the outcomes one wants – always depends on context.

Power today is distributed among countries in a pattern that resembles a complex, three-dimensional chess game. On the top board (representing the first context in which power resources may be analysed), military power is largely unipolar. But on the middle board, economic power among states is already multipolar, with the United States, Europe and Japan representing a majority of world economic output, and China's dramatic growth rapidly making it the fourth major player. On this economic board, the United States is not a hegemon, and often must bargain as an equal.

The bottom chessboard is the realm of transnational relations that involve actors crossing borders outside of government control. This realm includes players as diverse as bankers electronically transferring sums larger than most national budgets, terrorists transferring black-market weapons and hackers disrupting Internet operations. It also includes ecological threats, such as pandemics and global climate change, that can do damage on a scale equal or larger to that of major wars. (More people died in the 1918 flu pandemic, for example, than as a direct result of the First World War.) This adds a new dimension to questions of security and risk, and includes issues for which the military instruments that dominate the top board are clearly insufficient. On this bottom board, power is widely dispersed, and it makes no sense to speak of unipolarity, multipolarity or hegemony. And yet it is from this bottom board that many of the most important security challenges arise. Those who

recommend a hegemonic American foreign policy based on traditional military power are relying on inadequate analysis, and like one-dimensional chess players in a three-dimensional game, they will eventually lose.

Because of its leading edge in the information revolution and its past investment in traditional power resources, the United States will likely remain the world's single most powerful country in military, economic and soft-power terms well into the twenty-first century. While potential coalitions to check American power could be created, countries like Russia, China and India have differing goals and priorities, and it is unlikely that they would become firm military allies unless the United States used its hard, coercive power in an overbearing, unilateral manner that undermined its soft or attractive power. Because soft power is particularly important in dealing with issues arising from the bottom chessboard of transnational relations, America's resources in this area are increasingly important. While polls show that American soft power has declined in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, they also show that the cause of the decline is government policies, not American culture and values. This is important because policies can change relatively quickly, while culture and values change more slowly. In the early 1970s, American policies in Vietnam led to low ratings in polls, but the country regained much of its soft power within a decade.

Still, the United States should guard against taking its soft-power resources for granted, as modern challenges to its leadership and security are of a different sort than they used to be. The contemporary information revolution and its attendant brand of globalisation are transforming and shrinking the world. At the beginning of this new century, these two forces combined to increase American power. But with time, technology will spread to other countries and peoples, and America's relative pre-eminence will diminish. For example, at the beginning of this century, the American twentieth of the global population represented more than half of the world's Internet users. Today that share has already declined. At some point in the future, the Asian cyber-community and economy will loom larger than their American counterparts.

Even more important, the information revolution is creating virtual communities and networks that cut across national borders. Transnational

corporations and non-governmental actors (terrorists included) will play larger roles in world affairs. Many of these organisations will have soft power of their own as they attract citizens into mixed coalitions that cut across national boundaries. It is worth noting that a coalition based on non-governmental organisations created a land-mine treaty over the opposition of the strongest bureaucracy in the world's strongest country. And a surprise attack by a transnational, non-governmental organisation killed more Americans in September 2001 than the government of Japan did in its surprise attack in 1941.

The events of 11 September were a symptom of the deeper changes occurring in the world. Technology has been diffusing power away from governments and empowering individuals and groups to play roles in world politics, including wreaking massive destruction, that were once reserved to governments. Privatisation has been increasing, and terrorism is the privatisation of war. Globalisation is shrinking the distance between peoples, and events in faraway places like Afghanistan can have great impact on American lives.

The problem for American leadership in the twenty-first century is that there are ever more things outside the control of states, even the most powerful one. Although the United States does well on the traditional measures of power resources, every year there is more going on in the world that

---

*There are ever  
more things  
outside the  
control of  
states*

those resources cannot address. Under the influence of the information revolution and globalisation, world politics is changing in a way that means Americans cannot achieve all their international goals alone. For example, international financial stability is vital to the prosperity of Americans, but the United States needs the cooperation of others to attain it. Likewise, global climate change will affect Americans' quality of life, but the United States cannot manage the problem by itself.

Last year China, which adds two new coal-fired generating plants each week, may have overtaken the United States as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. And in a world where borders are becoming more porous than ever to everything from drugs to infectious diseases to

terrorism, Washington must work with others and mobilise international coalitions to address these new security threats.

### **Isolationism and unilateralism after Iraq?**

The dramatically decreased cost of communication, the rise of transnational domains (including the Internet), and the 'democratisation' of technology that puts massive destructive power, once the sole preserve of governments, into the hands of groups and individuals all add new dimensions to global politics. In the last century, men like Hitler, Stalin and Mao needed the power of the state to wreak great evil. Today, if transnational terrorists were to obtain nuclear materials and use them to cause great destruction or great disruption of society, they could bring about enormous changes to the United States and the world, though the direction of such change is difficult to predict. Faced with such a threat, a certain degree of unilateral action, such as the war in Afghanistan, is justified if it produces global goods. After all, the British navy reduced the scourge of piracy well before international conventions were signed in the middle of the nineteenth century. But isolationism or extreme unilateralism are not promising options for the world's largest state.

In light of these new circumstances, how will the only superpower guide its foreign policy after the experience of the Iraq war? Will it provide global leadership or conclude that the best course in world affairs is to remain uninvolved? Some Americans are tempted to believe that the United States could reduce its vulnerability if it withdrew its troops, curtailed its alliances and followed a more isolationist foreign policy. But isolationism would not remove the vulnerability. Even if Washington had a more inward-looking foreign policy, radical groups would resent the power of the American economy that would still reach well beyond its shores. American corporations and citizens represent global capitalism, which is anathema to some. Moreover, American popular culture has a global reach regardless of what the government does. There is no escaping the influence of Hollywood, CNN and the Internet. American films and television express freedom, individualism and change (as well as sex and violence). Generally, the global reach of American culture helps to enhance America's soft power – individualism

and liberties are attractive to many people. Some, however, are repulsed by these American values, particularly fundamentalists. Moreover, new problems like climate change and pandemics cross borders without the slightest regard to American culture or intentions. Turning inward does no good if the problems follow you home.

American opinion leaders who look at US preponderance, see an empire, and urge unilateralism engage in arrogance that alienates potential allies in other countries. The American public is beginning to react against the unilateralism of the recent past. Granted, there are few pure multilateralists in practice, and multilateralism can be used by smaller states to tie the United States down, but this does not mean that a multilateral approach is not generally in America's interest. By embedding its policies in a multilateral framework, the United States can make its disproportionate power more legitimate and acceptable to others. No large power can afford to be purely multilateralist, but seeking to work with others should be the starting point for any policy. And when a great power defines its national interests broadly to include global interests, some degree of unilateralism is more likely to be acceptable.

At the moment, the United States is unlikely to face a challenge to its pre-eminence from other states unless it acts so arrogantly that it helps the others to overcome their incompatibilities and work together. The greater challenge for the United States will be to learn how to work with other countries to better control the non-state actors that will increasingly share the stage with nation-states. How to control the bottom chessboard in a three-dimensional game and how to make hard and soft power reinforce each other are the key foreign policy challenges for American leadership.

### **The United States and global public goods**

How should Americans set priorities in an age of global information? What grand strategy would help prevent the 'imperial overstretch' that would arise should the United States adopt the role of global policeman while avoiding the mistake of thinking the country can be isolated in an increasingly interconnected world? The place to start is by understanding the relationship of American power to global public goods. On the one hand, American power

is less effective than it might first appear. On the other, the United States is likely to remain the most powerful country well into this century, and this creates a role for the country in maintaining a degree of international order. To a large extent, international order is a public good – something everyone can consume without diminishing its availability to others.

Other public goods that can be enjoyed by both small countries and the United States alike, without any one nation diminishing the benefits enjoyed by others, include peaceful regional relations, freedom of the seas, open trade, control of infectious diseases and stability in financial markets. Of course, pure public goods are rare. Most public goods only partially approach the ideal definition of being non-rivalrous and non-exclusive (such as the paradigm case of clean air). Moreover, some things that look good from one perspective may look bad in the eyes of others from different cultures. Too narrow an appeal to the ‘public good’ can become a self-serving ideology for the powerful. But these caveats are a reminder of the need to consult with others, not a reason to discard an important strategic principle that could help America reconcile its national interests with a broader global perspective and assert effective leadership.

According to the logic of collective action, if the largest beneficiary of a public good (like the United States) does not take the lead in providing disproportionate resources toward its provision, the smaller beneficiaries are unlikely to be able to produce it because of the difficulties of organising collective action when large numbers are involved. While placing a larger share of the responsibility on the largest beneficiary often lets others become ‘free riders’, the alternative is that the collective bus does not move forward at all. To play a leading role in producing public goods, the United States will need to invest in both hard-power resources and the soft-power approach of leading by example. The latter will require more self-restraint on the part of Congress in international affairs as well as more robust action on domestic problems in such spheres as the economy, the environment and the criminal justice system. Providing public goods will also require an investment of resources in the non-military aspects of foreign affairs that Americans have been unwilling to make. The military rightly plays a role

---

*Pure public  
goods are  
rare*

in diplomacy, but Washington is currently investing in its power in overly militarised terms.

An American grand strategy for leadership must first ensure its national survival, but then focus on providing global public goods. The United States would gain doubly from such a strategy: from the public goods themselves, and from the way they legitimise power in the eyes of others. This means giving top priority to those aspects of the international system that, if not attended to properly, would have profound effects on the basic international order and therefore on the lives of large numbers of Americans, as well as others. The United States can learn from the lesson of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, when it was also a preponderant power. Three public goods that the United Kingdom took a leadership role in securing were the maintenance of the balance of power among the major states in Europe; the promotion of an open international economic system; and the preservation of international commons such as the freedom of the seas.

All three of these goods translate relatively well to the current situation. Maintaining regional balances of power and dampening local incentives to use force to change borders provide a public good for many (although admittedly not all) countries. This is something the United States does when it helps to 'shape the environment' (in the words of the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review) in various regions. The United States' role as a stabiliser and a bulwark against aggression by aspiring hegemons in key regions is generally seen as a public good by smaller states in those regions.

Promoting an open international economic system is good for American economic growth, and is good for other countries as well. Openness of global markets is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for alleviating poverty in under-developed countries even as it benefits the United States. In addition, in the long term, economic growth is more likely to foster stable, democratic, middle-class societies in other countries, though the time scale will be far lengthier than it was recently fashionable to believe. To keep the system open, the United States must resist protectionism at home and support international economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation

for Economic Cooperation and Development, that provide a framework of rules for the world economy.

The United States, like the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, has an interest in keeping international commons, such as the oceans, open to all. Here the US record is mixed. It is good on the traditional freedom of the seas. Today, however, the international commons include new issues such as global climate change, the preservation of endangered species, and the uses of outer space, as well as the 'virtual commons' of cyberspace. On some issues, such as the global climate, the United States has failed to lead. This is a mistake because the establishment of rules that preserve access to global commons for all remains as much a public good today as in the nineteenth century, even though some of the issues are more complex and difficult than freedom of the seas.

The three classic public goods of international stability, open markets and global commons enjoy a reasonable consensus in American public opinion, and some can be provided in part through unilateral actions. But there are also three new dimensions of global public goods in today's world for which the United States must take responsibility. First, the United States should be a leader in the development and maintenance of international legal regimes and institutions that address not just trade and environmental problems, but weapons proliferation, peacekeeping, human rights and other concerns. Unilateralists complain that the United States is constrained by international regimes, but so are others. Meanwhile, as a status quo power, the United States benefits from the order such regimes provide just as other nations do.

Washington should also make international development a higher priority, for this too is an important global public good. Much of the world is in turmoil, mired in vicious cycles of disease, poverty and political instability. Financial and scientific help from rich countries is important not only for humanitarian reasons, but to prevent failed states from becoming sources of disorder for the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the US record here is less than impressive. Protectionist trade measures passed by Congress often

---

*On issues such  
as climate  
change the US  
has failed to  
lead*

hurt poor countries most, and foreign assistance is generally unpopular with the American public. Development will take a long time, and the international community needs to explore better ways to make sure that help actually reaches the poor, but both prudence and a concern for soft power suggest that the United States should lead in making development a higher priority.

Finally, as a preponderant power, the United States should provide an important public good by acting as a mediator and convenor of coalitions, rather than yielding to the temptation to let intractable conflicts fester. By using its good offices to mediate conflicts in places like Northern Ireland, Morocco and the Aegean Sea, the United States has helped in shaping international order in ways that are beneficial to other nations. The Middle East is the crucial current case in which American leadership is certainly required to establish lasting peace. It is true that there are some situations in which other countries can more effectively play the mediator's role, and in other cases leadership can be shared, as with Europe in the Balkans. But often the United States is the only country that can bring parties together at relatively low cost, and when it is successful, such leadership increases American soft power at the same time that it reduces a source of instability. Finally, the United States can encourage other countries to share in the production of public goods. The rise of Chinese power presents an opportunity to welcome that country as a 'responsible stakeholder' in world affairs.

### **The future of American power and leadership**

The United States is well placed to remain the leading power in world politics well into the twenty-first century. This prognosis, however, depends upon some key assumptions: that the US economy and American society will remain robust and not decay; that the United States will maintain its military strength, but not become over-militarised; that Americans will not become so unilateral and arrogant in their strength that they squander the nation's considerable fund of soft power; that there will not be some catastrophic series of events that profoundly transforms American attitudes in an isolationist direction; and that Americans will define their national interest in a broad and farsighted way that incorporates global interests.

Each of these assumptions can be questioned, but they currently seem more plausible than their alternatives. If the assumptions hold, the United States will continue to be in a position to provide leadership in managing global security in all its dimensions. But it will have to learn to work with other countries to share such leadership. That will require combining the soft power of attraction with hard power into a 'smart-power' strategy. The information revolution, technological change, and globalisation will not eliminate the nation-state, but they will continue to complicate world politics for all states. The paradox of American power in the twenty-first century is that the largest power cannot achieve its objectives by acting alone. Just as shared and participatory leadership is becoming more prevalent in managing modern organisations, so too will the international situation require more cooperative leadership.

