

Jun 24 2008

Professor Paul Kennedy – The Power Game

LSE Ideas

By Paul Kennedy

Paul Kennedy has spent the last academic year as LSE's Philippe Roman Chair in History and International Affairs, based in LSE IDEAS. Here the author of 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers' summarises his lectures to IDEAS on American power, and you can hear the podcasts of the lectures using the link at the top of the page.

The Power Game

As I travelled to LSE early in February to deliver my lecture, it struck me that it was the 20th anniversary of my summons to Washington to debate what had become known as the 'Kennedy thesis' before the Senate foreign relations committee. It was not an experience that I would recommend.

The debate on American power, what it is and where it is going, was not new. The nature of American power had been much discussed following the Vietnam war and the setbacks of the Carter administration. Indeed, the idea that over time great powers rise and fall was hardly original. The Romans said it, the Arabs said it, George Bernard Shaw said it.

In my lecture I sought to understand how this debate had developed over the intervening 20 years, to consider how American power had been measured, and give some idea of the fractured world that has both challenged American power and buttressed it.

One of the key players in this ongoing debate is my great colleague at Harvard, Joseph Nye, professor of international relations. In a number of books in the 1990s Nye grappled with this issue and developed a definition of power that I have found useful ever since. He argued that one way of understanding power is to see it as the capacity to get others to do things that you would like them to do. In other words, the capacity to influence people.

Nye went on to argue that if you thought about power in more concrete ways, you could consider it as being played out on three separate chessboards: the chessboard of relative military strategic power; the chessboard of relative economic and productive power; and the chessboard which fascinated him most — that of influence in the realms of ideas and culture, or what he called soft power.

Military power

The first measure Nye pointed to was the obvious one: American military power. And if you want a symbol of this real, hard power you need look no further than a nuclear full-fleet carrier of the US navy. These are 20 storeys high, displace around 103-105,000 tonnes of water and are a mobile home to just under 6000 people. The cost of building these carriers comes to about \$28 billion, which is slightly more than the entire defence budget of Italy.

In all, the US defence budget accounts for just over half of total defence expenditure in the world. This has never happened before in world history. The Roman Empire had a massive Persian empire to the east; Pax Britannica was chiefly a naval-based global reach system with a small army; none of the European powers in the 20th century got anywhere near this sort of share of total defence expenditure.

So can Americans sleep easy in their beds at night? Well, one of the interesting things that strategic writers talk about is asymmetrical warfare. If your enemies cannot match you head on, they go for weapons systems that are affordable, ones that are not going to challenge your assembled might so much as find weaknesses in the system.

Today, the People's Republic of China is doing just that and is regarded as the number one threat to American supremacy by US military strategists. It lost its ranking after 9/11, but is now back in pole position. The Chinese are buying weapons from the

Russians, modifying them and improving them. Their diesel submarines can now sneak up on American aircraft carriers undetected.

And then there are the asymmetrical attacks by groups that are not pad of nation slates. If you really want to attack a superpower then you are not going to go for its aircraft, but for its civilians, its banking networks, students, cruise ships, electronic networks. You will use agents, sub-agents, small elements of discontented groups.

US policy makers are struggling with how to deal with these groups— essentially the strategic military challenges which come to the international community from what are termed 'failed states'. Most of these states — and the slaughter, mayhem, civil war and genocide that go with them — occur in troubled pads of Africa, in the Middle East and through into Central Asia, with some outliers.

The instinct of the American military is to walk away from this one. On the other hand, the instinct of quite a number of the liberal imperialists in Washington is to grapple with the problem. After all, these are the breeding grounds for Al Qaeda and terrorism.

This number of problems is manageable so long as Mr. Bush is willing to add \$50 billion here and \$75 billion there, so that each one be tackled. But these demands suggest to me that the responsibilities of being the number one global power tend to grow steadily and metamorphose.

So, although I have ended that particular chessboard analysis by suggesting that there are weaknesses in the giant, when we move to the second chessboard — that is to say the economic and productive measures of power— then something quite different is happening.

Economic and productive power

The second chessboard is much more multi-polar, with America's share of GDP declining significantly since 1945. However, it is important to bear in mind that the immediate post-war period was rattler artificial – with much of Europe and Japan flattened, with two thirds of the world still under colonial domination, and the US economy benefitting from a massive kick-boost.

The recovery at Japan, the recovery of Europe led by Germany and the beginnings of shifts of production to East Asia started the erosion of this relative share — and I have to stress relative share. The total world GDP in 1945 was around \$4 trillion; by the early 1990s it was about \$45 to \$50 trillion.

Today, the EU and US both have around a fifth of total GDP— and it has been that way for the last 20 years. This economic equality has all sorts of implications for the US, ones that the Americans of the 1950s, '60s or '70s just did not have to think about.

Take the three-way dance between Microsoft, Google and Yahoo. For a US senator from Silicon Valley the idea that the European Commission's sub- body on competitiveness has a crucial say in any merger is ridiculous. But to Microsoft it is not— they have already paid enough fines to the Commission to last 15 years. And so the idea of getting others to do things they do not want to do, Nye's idea of power and influence, is much curbed.

And then you see the significant increase, year by year, of the Chinese share of the GDP pie. I tend to regard the debate on the world's rising

economies with a fair amount of suspicion, but it is worth looking at some much quoted research by the Goldman Sachs study team in October 2003 on the risk posed to established economies by Brazil, Russia, India and China ('Dreaming with EPICS: the path to 2050'). According to Goldman Sachs projections, should the world have a relatively harmonious international trading system without major war or environmental catastrophe, China's total GDP will be higher than that of the US by 2025.

We must be careful about these forecasts, but what we can say is that the power balances between nations in the last decade have been moving faster than at any other time since the 1890s — when the US economy overtook that of Victorian Britain and Germany.

So the second chessboard is a mixed story, with more signs of weakness emerging despite towering strength.

Soft power

And what of the third chessboard — the one Nye called soft power? If you look at his books of the early 1990s you will see that he put an awful lot of weight on cultural icons such as blue jeans, Hollywood movies, MTV and Marlborough man — all indicators of the popularity of American youth culture in particular. I am pretty sure that if he went back to revise those books now he would be less convinced. Indeed, I guess he would say that he got it wrong. He did not see how a few years of an imperial presidency and a lot of clumsy diplomacy would turn what were once seen as attractive elements of the number one country into unattractive ones.

So the debate on American power continues, and it is a complicated one. I want to conclude by asking a simple question. How long into the 21st century do you think that a country with less than 5 per cent of the world's population and a fifth of the world's product can carry more than half the world's total defence expenditure? At some point there is going to be what economists like to term 'convergence' – and since it is unlikely that the US's share of total world population and GDP will grow, there is a much bigger chance that its share of global defence spending will contract. Then we shall see how well, or poorly, Washington manages to balance its extensive overseas commitments with more constrained resources.

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