

COMMENTARY **OP-ED**

Smart Power: Exaggerating America's Decline

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A new international relations orthodoxy is coalescing, to the effect that America is slouching towards mediocrity. In newspaper columns articles and on TV talk shows you will hear journalists charting the "relentless relative decline" of the United States. The military is overstretched; the economy is exposed; the political system is broken; the punters are suffering from an Iraq-induced hangover; and when it comes to international legitimacy, the White House has maxed out America's credit card. And all the time, potential competitors such as China, the European Union, Russia, India and Iran are closing in.

The best works in this area, by Richard Haass and Fareed Zakaria, are full of insight. Yet as a non-American living in the United States, I'm struck by the gulf that still remains between America and the rest – in terms of hard power, soft power and what we could call "smart power."

In relation to hard power, the \$14 trillion American economy dwarfs all the others. The United States spends roughly as much on its military as the rest of the world combined. Washington has been bloodied and diverted by its foolhardy invasion of Iraq, but it remains the only capital capable of running a truly global foreign policy and projecting military power anywhere on earth.

Almost every country thinks it has a special relationship with the United States, based on shared history or values – or clashing ones. None of the great challenges facing humanity can be solved without the Americans.

America has some worrying weaknesses – but we should not ignore the frailties of others: the cleavages in China, the divisions within Europe, the dark side of Russia, or the poverty of India.

In terms of soft power, too – the ability to get others to want what you want – the case for America's decline is easily overstated. America retains its hold on the world's imagination. For most non-Americans around the world, America's politics are, at some level, our politics as well.

Why is the world so interested? America's bulk is only part of the answer. Ultimately, it is not really the size of the U.S. economy that draws our attention. It is not even America's blue-water navy or its new bunker-busting munitions.

Rather, it is the idea of America which continues to fascinate: a superpower that is open, democratic, meritocratic and optimistic; a country that is the cockpit of global culture; a polity in which all candidates for public office, whether or not they are a Clinton, seem to come from a place called Hope.

It's worth noting that the declinist canon has emerged at the nadir of the Bush years; America's soft power account will look much healthier the instant the next president is inaugurated.

The final source of U.S. influence is the way in which American ideas continue to inform global narratives – its smart power. If you have an argument to make, or a book to publish, or a doctrine to expound, then the United States is the place where you must do it. It is not just that the market is so big, or that the world's attention means that events that occur in the United States today are fodder for pundits everywhere tomorrow. Just as important is the sheer quality of the creative output from America's great universities, think tanks, newspapers and magazines.

The effect of all this is that the opinions of Americans on the great issues of the day ripple out through the world and are repackaged everywhere.

Smart power flows from human creativity, which is why Americans should be happy about the migration flows that are replenishing their nation's human capital. Both blue-collar workers and gold-collar workers continue to be drawn here like iron filings to a

magnet. It is hard to imagine future Fareed Zakarias – or, for that matter, future Barack Obamas – emigrating to China or Russia or Iran instead of the United States.

There is a long tradition of foreign visitors bemoaning that such a strong country as the United States is so stupid. They could not be more wrong: America is powerful because it is smart.

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