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Continuities and Changes of the International Affairs in the American Century: Review on Joseph S. Nye's *A Life in the American Century*

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Abstract: This is a book review on Joseph S. Nye, Jr.'s latest work *A Life in the American Century*. On inspecting the American century, three plot lines of historical, theoretical, and personal approach compose the whole contents of this paper. In each part, both the continues and changes are detected and debated for a better understanding not only for Nye's academic accomplishments, but also for America's role of global leadership. Beyond the new book, the remarkable legacies, focuses, and controversies of Nye's series books and essays on power and leadership will be necessarily cited and commented as well. Thus, this paper is a hard try to illustrate the contour of Nye's universe of his international thoughts.

Keywords: Joseph S. Nye, Jr.; American Century; Soft Power; Regime; Owl

1. Introduction

That Politics is essentially a study about power is both popular and persuasive in academics. On this subject, if there is some suspicion in the domestic experience, where law and morality are the parallel determinant factors attained to politics, then in the international arena, due to the widely known restriction of anarchy, it cannot be more evident that power is always treated as the north star and road map for the followers to navigate through the historical muddling turbulence of human affairs. It is just a slight exaggeration to say that the study of international politics was nothing if power were not the core. Despite of such significance, what is power and how can it be measured till now remain a myth for the IR researchers. Is it an outcome of realizing hopes? Or is it a combination of various capabilities, like military, economic and culture, et al? We surely cannot build house on the quick sands, but can we construe IR with a vague concept of power? Isn't it a responsibility, maybe the prime one, that every IR researcher need to take to solve the problem?

The Realism School of international theory put power in the highest position when analyzing international affairs, hence it is frequently labeled with Power Politics. Alas, when we talk about

power politics, not only the power factor is emphasized, but also the powerful countries, mainly the most powerful ones, the poles, are focused.

When we collect the history of modern international relations, i.e. the time of Westphalian system, a predominant power can be identified at each century, from the 15th century on, may it be Portugal, Dutch, the Great Britain, or the US. Mighty capability, excess interest and strong will combined to contribute to being a leader in each period of international system, and the enmity and amity among those powers are the dynamics of shaping both the shape and mechanics of that system. With same power position, different hegemons hold various values, try to imagine what the world order would be if NAZI defeated the Alliance?

Speaking of The Second World War, a story needs to be mentioned. It was February 1941 when Henry R. Luce, the founder of Time and Life magazine, said that it will be the America's century — another expression of Pax Americana. For Luce, with the falling of the Great Britain, a new kind of Internationalism with American character should be provided, that Internationalism is not the obsolete disastrous one-man rule, but the “product of the imaginations of many men”. The prophet had had his words come true, the twentieth century can be defined as American Century, at least after the end of that war. However, here is the same question as we mentioned early in the power section that what does American century mean exactly? Is the American century over? Or is the US in decline? If we cannot give answers to these questions, what else can IR researchers do to champion their profession?

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., a professor of International Relations in Harvard University, has been devoting his entire prominent academic and official life for the power and American century questions.

Soft Power theory, a masterpiece of Joseph S. Nye, Jr., is familiar nearly to everyone in the circle of politics. For Nye, the theory can offer a logical influent and practical convenient mental map to navigate contemporary international affairs courses, especially among the dominant ones. From Princeton, to Oxford, and finally to Harvard, Nye has never stopped cultivating and developing his curiosity and insight in academics on international relations. And before he gained reputation as a successful professor, he served the US government as well. As a DOD officer, he was in charged with NPT issues, mainly the curbing of the nuclear weapon proliferation. During that period, he had also proposed the so-called “Nye Initiative” — he argued trade and defense should be separated for the long-term benefit of national interest. For his all of his eminent achievements, he is now a world-famous guest for leaders of various countries and universities of world class.

This paper is for Nye's new book *A Life in the American Century*, which is formally published by Polity Press in the spring of 2024. The author of this paper believes that no sooner do we read the Nye's works than we can understand a life not only of a professor but also of a century. Honestly speaking, *A Life in the American Century* is a little bit hard reading, it is based on Nye's chronical

diary, though not so scattered. However, we can still find at least three plot lines out of the memoir and with which the Nye's universe of international relations could be coherently knitted.

Throughout Nye's new book, we can find three plot lines and each of these composes the following sections of this paper: the American century in historical lens, the American century in theoretical inspection, and the American century in personal experience. The three plot lines may not only be the systemic menu of the new book, but also the stars of the Nye's academic universe. Furthermore, beyond the mission of book review, this paper is trying to show the landscape of Nye's mind based on his plenty marvelous series of books, especially the 1986-published *Nuclear Ethics*, which is the only book that Nye mentions in his memoir as "one of my favorites".

2. American Century in History

There are continuities and changes full of human history, the ultimate goal of academic elaboration is to distinguish under what condition should each be properly called universal laws or seen as fault lines. Inspected as a period of history, the American Century has represented us both the changing situations and traditional approaches, which is just the timeline of Nye's whole memoir.

The first changing thing in this section is the extent that US domination at the world stage. For two times the US has exhibited its wax and wanes in the position of leadership in world affairs. Put specifically, it peaked in 1945 and 1991, it exhausted at Vietnam and Iraq. In Nye's eyes, "it is more accurate to date the American century with Franklin Roosevelt's entry into World War II in 1941." (Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2024) That is to say, as a world leader, one must match its supreme power with active will.

When the war was over, the US is on top of the world — nearly no matter on what item we count as vital evidence. About twenty years later, mainly due to the disastrous Vietnam War and withering dollar domination, an anxiety of the US decline is so popular that the Americans could not accept the truth that the American hegemony is of such a short life. Since then, the US decline subject is never stopped being fiercely debated till nowadays.

Despite the numbers and failures, Susan Strange argued that maybe an opposite situation was correct, and she proved it with a theoretical concept of structural power, which is composed of four necessary elements — production, security, knowledge, and finance — to form a pyramid of political power in world affairs (Susan Strange, 1994). To follow the structural power logic, a power position is four-dimensional, and there is no substitute for the US domination. Alas, whether the US is in decline is one thing, whether decline is a bad thing is another. For David P. Calleo, the US decline is not such a bad thing that the patriots should go crazy, because "the slow transition from American hegemony to a more plural world is not, in itself, a defeat for American policy. On the contrary, it is precisely the outcome that might have been expected to follow from the policy itself." (David P. Calleo, 1982) According to Calleo, the decline of the US from the 1945 position to a widely developing and equilibrium world is a right proof of the Luce's idea of "imaginings of many men". For Nye, the decline thing is assessed through a conception of soft power. Hard power may not always

get everything done, when it is impotent, an image of declining emerges. With the soft power theory — we will introduce it later in the next section, Nye's answer to the question of US decline is negative, he states in *Is the American Century Over?* that “‘the American century’ — date of birth: 1941; date of death: uncertain. The short answer to our question is that we are not entering a post-American world.”(Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2015)

In Nye's memoir, he has claimed that “Every modern generation witness what it believes to be unprecedented changes in technology and society, but not every generation experiences the rise of a nation to global power and suffers recurrent anxieties about national decline.” Thus, beside the rise and fall story, the second changing thing is the fast evolution of advanced technology and expansion of world economy. Within the last eight decades, human society has at least realized two times of industrial revolution and two waves of globalization. As for the former, human's ability of massive communication and construction has made an evolution from nuclear bomb to artificial intelligence (AI); as for the latter, a rule-based international order has been built with gradual covering nearly the entire world — with which accompanied incremental maturing international regimes and effective global governance. Confronted with such a situation, Nye points out a truth that “the American century was one of rapid technological change, but the social effects were sometimes slow to catch up.” We can already conclude that the bright side of this fast changing is a deep wave of globalization, and the bad side is the diffusion of power, and the latter is not only the outcome of the former, but also the greatest danger the America faces today.

Globalization means interdependence. And a complex dense international interdependence is unrepresented, it contains both positive and negative process. On the one hand, the nuclear weapon generates a MAD — Mutually Assured Destruction — situation among great power relations, in this situation if one trigger the launching button of atom bomb the collective demise of the world ensues. On the other hand, the process of globalization, under the function of division of labor, has made the world much more developed and abundant. All these things are not seen in the world before 1945, it is a sea change in the history of international relations.

As Nye has warned that the American century may live by these fast-changing things, it dents by them either. To certain extent, the America's shifting power preponderance and the technology and economic expansion are mutually reinforced. In Nye's recognition, “on the motivational level political and economic factors are frequently so closely intertwined that they cannot be disentangled. An international economic system is affected by the international political system existing at the time, and vice versa.”(Joseph S. Nye, Jr. Et al., 1975) Therefore, Nye's description of “geonomics” is almost overlapped with the conception of “geoeconomics”, and he is now a well-known expert in international political economy. At last, the diffusion of advanced technology and expansion of division of labor have accelerated the overall redistribution of power in the international system, and which means the resurgence of great power competition.

Despite there are things that change fast, Nye's experience in the American century tells us that something remains as old fashion — namely the diplomacy and balance. Stuff of diplomacy and balance is always articulated and proposed by the realist school. The realist believes that for the ultimate goal of pursuing international interest, diplomacy is the tool and balance is the principle. In the whole American century period, America has been dealing with the rising power one after one with just only a shot interval in the 1990s. Due to the existence of nuclear weapon and economic interdependence, “a managed balance of power strategy ... rests on the importance of enhancing mutual transparency and communication”(Joseph, S. Nye, Jr., 1986), thus the diplomatic approach is ever more significant for protecting national interest.

Nye tells us in his book that “foreign policy is about trad-offs among objectives and about price and timing”, and “pure evil and pure good are rare in this world”. And in practice, although we may treat Nye as an icon of international liberalism, Nye had played the game of balance once he was the servant of US government, and he judged himself as “it looked my efforts to influence the East Asia balance of power were succeeding.” When he was addressing the triangle relationship between the US, Japan and China, he thought that: “I felt that the US could better engage China if we first repaired the relationship with Japan. The logic was simple. In a three-country balance of power, it is better to be part of the two than isolated as the one.” It is prudence that naturally attained with diplomacy and balance as “prudence in the calculation of consequences is essential to protect against wishful thinking that can produce great evil.”

What we must bear in mind here is that if diplomacy is incompatible with unilateralism, then, the opposite of diplomacy is hubris. Hubris leads to arrogant, and arrogant leads to overreach. As there is hardly a way to regulate the leaders of great powers, then Nye's conclusion of “leadership is an art, not a science” trumps. After having read all these stories, we may wonder what has been essentially altered in the international politics arena during the American century? Maybe the answer is quite disappointed. Hence, it could be concluded that there remains a gap — maybe even a growing one — between the used way the human group treat each other and the huge uplift of the tool that man could use to destroy. Nye has found that “political and social change is the key factor in the long-range future”, but he also reminds us that “I was amazed at what humanity could invent. But I worried about our capability to control it”. As we can see, to be a liberalist, Nye has not enough faith on progress; and to be a realist, Nye has too much empathy on community.

When we finish the first section of this paper, the basic elements of American century could be refined out of Nye's book in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Elements of the American Century

ITEM	KEYWORD	PAGE	ITEM	KEYWORD	PAGE
Span	not end	235	Declines	turning point	14, 164
Status	pre-eminent	x	Peaks	unipolar	5, 88

Birth	1941	ix	Features	it's economy	150, 162
Foundation	long-term advantages	5	Challenges	domestic change	166, 198, 223, 235

Source: Made by the author.

3. American Century in Theories

The second plot line of Nye's book is the American century in theoretical approach. It is for about forty years that Nye has his ideas of international affairs — mainly the issues of power, order, morality — consistently cultivated, and it is especially for this academic role that Nye has been playing that has earned him a world-famous reputation as one of the best thinkers in the world. In this section, Nye's three classic theories will be introduced, and they are: soft power theory, theory of interdependence, and cosmopolitan-realist theory. Although Nye feels that "our mental maps of the world have changed dramatically over my lifetime", some inherited traditions could be found, and we will continue to check the continuities and changes in these theories along with the introduction.

The knowledge of power has captured Nye's curiosity all the time, he commits in his book that he "have always been amazed at the ways in which humans work out pecking orders." Power is the ability to get one's wanted outcomes, and there are two ways to inspect the elements of power, i.e. the resources approach and the effectiveness approach. When the resources approach is taken, the power assets are counted like military (defense expenditure), economy (GDP), culture (popularity) and so on; when the effectiveness approach is concerned, the tactic of playing the international game is mainly focused — just as Nye often says that holding the high cards does not guarantee a victory (Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2002).

On soft power, the questions of its dynamic, connotation, and misunderstanding will be illustrated successively. Nye tells us that he developed the soft power theory as an analytic concept to round out his description of American power and add to his reasons for why American century was not over. In a fast-changing circumstance, how we construe power decides how we use power. Nye has finished an innovation about understating power — "soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. When you can get others to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction." (Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2004)

Here are two points of soft power that should be noted: firstly, soft power, as a process, is related with how you use the tool of power assets — i.e. through attraction and persuasion instead of coercion and payment; secondly, the effectiveness of soft power is whether other nation take your position and follow your leadership voluntarily. According to these understandings, we must point out one big mistake people have been making about soft power theory — too often has soft power been equated with specific power assets. Specifically, when we talk about soft power, we are used to think about culture factors. If culture is the same thing as soft power, then every country in the world has some extent of soft power. It is not such an easy thing that you sow the seeds of culture broadly and

you gain the outcome of soft power — even not a popular culture can naturally brew soft power. Nye has lamented many times that: “with time, I have come to realize that concepts such as soft power are like children. As an academic or a public intellectual, you can love and discipline them when they are young, but as they grow, they wander off and make new company, both good and bad. There is not much you can do about it, even if you were present at the creation.” Never forget what Nye has warned that the root of soft power is domestic change.

Another innovation of Nye’s accomplishments is the theory of interdependence. You can catch Nye’s exciting emotions when you read the experience of how he and his colleague Bob jointly coined a new theory of power and interdependence. Under the “complex interdependence” assumption, Nye confidently states that “political processed change so much that, contrary to realist assumptions, states are not the only important actors, military force is not the most useful instrument, and military security is not the most important goal.” For Nye and Bob, rather than replacing the traditional theory of realism, they supplemented it by showing how to integrate the new elements and actors in world politics.

Interdependence as a new phenomenon in world politics is attained with the growth and operation of international regimes. In *Power and Interdependence*, we could read that “we refer to the sets of governing arrangements that affect relationships of interdependence as international regimes.” (Robert O. Keohane et al., 2012) Besides, early in *Nuclear Ethics*, Nye claimed that: “indeed, an international ‘regime’ — a set of tacit or explicit rules and procedures — may be developed to encourage a stabilizing perspective of long-range rather than short-range self-interest.” Hence, the theory of soft power and international regimes are closely interrelated. In *Bound To Lead*, Nye (1991) revealed the mechanics as “the universalism of a country’s culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power.” To sum up, a positive correlation can be identified in the relationship between regimes construction and soft power effectiveness.

Theory of interdependence or international regime theory could be surely distinguished from realism, but they share a common motivation of self-interest. We don’t know if it is proper for Nye being a liberalist to argue that “the development of cooperation among states rests on self-interest rather than goodwill is encouraging, because it implies that cooperation is consistent with realist premises.” The author of this paper can hardly believe that Nye is a liberalist from head to toe, and we should not forget what Bob and Nye have found: “We conclude that a useful beginning in the political analysis of international interdependence can be made by thinking of asymmetrical interdependencies as sources of power among actors.” Thus maybe it is too difficult and too bewildering to judge whether the theory of interdependence is something new in dealing with world affairs.

The last theoretic issue we address in the section is so called cosmopolitan-realist theory. To a large extent, the cosmopolitan-realist seems another saying of liberal realist. In retrospect, it is Grotius who proposed a dualism in analysing the Westphalian system, under this perspective, both national

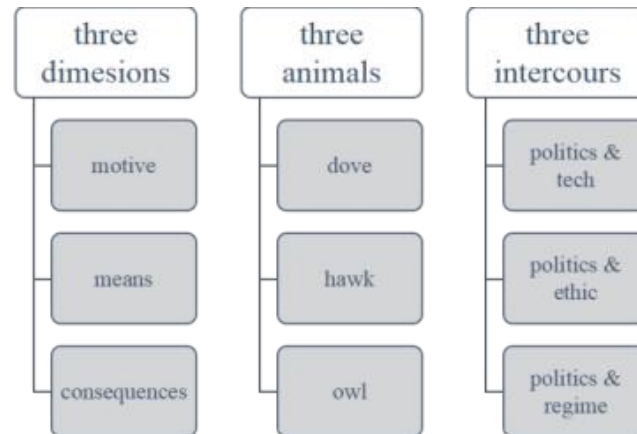
interest and international common goods should be taken and realized equally. Because of the obvious blindness of both pure cosmopolitan view and realist preference — the former ignores self-interest, and the latter despises shared community — Nye has chosen this Grotius middle path. In *Nuclear Ethic*, Nye described his position as “cosmopolitan-realist”, which “accepts transnational obligations, but in a manner limited by the realities of the way the world is organized into states at this stage of history.” We can say it is out of this recognition that Nye has extracted his tools of analysis and policies of engagement.

People are usually marked into the group of doves and hawks when they discuss foreign policy, Nye does not fall into the trap cliché. For Nye, a smarter way of dealing with foreign affairs is the owl’s view. In such a view, it “worry about loss of control more than wrong intention”, besides it is “a middle position that focused on risk reduction rather than the number of armaments or weapons”. Sometimes if you don’t see the future clearly or get troubles done, you should give Nye’s method a try — for some time “it was at the heart of my strategy to buy time, slow things down, ...”. Time is not panacea, but it is a choice for rethinking and alternation. Instead of seeking the best way, Nye more often devotes him to the effective way, and he does believe morality in foreign policy, but power calculation has never slide away from his mind.

Means and Ends are the key factors when researchers talk about morality in international affairs. On this subject, Nye also has found a third way. For Nye, the check of morality in foreign policy must be three-dimensional, which contains the motives, means, and consequences, thus, “careful appraisal of facts and weighing of uncertainties along all three dimensions are critical to good moral reasoning.” Nye has held this idea for no less than forty years, and in his *Do Moral Matter?: Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*, which is published in 2020, Nye(2020) uses such a three-dimensional instrument to judge all the presidents’ foreign polies after the Second World War. Nevertheless, if we take the position of decision-maker, it is impossible to consider all these dimensions given a precondition of international anarchy, resources scarcity, and mutual distrust. But we do admit it is a proper way to use the three-dimensional tool to criticize and appraisal policies for academic innovations.

We have finished the academic inspection of Nye’s proposals. The theory of soft power and international interdependence may have some new elements for analysing international affairs and power preponderance in the American century, but the cosmopolitan-realist is the tradition of keeping moderate, and we could find the legacy in the works of Grotius, Kant, and E.H. Carr, et al. With the exploration of Nye’s academic accomplishments, we could sort out three sets of concerns out of Nye’s series of books in four decades, and which are illustrated in **Chart 1**.

In Nye’s opinion, power is not good or bad per se(Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2011). But if power is interwoven with technology and morality — which is the main body of the last section of this paper — can we avoid value judging yet?

Chart 1: Nye's Coherent Academic Concerns

Source: Made by the author.

4. American Century in Experiences

It is true that even bad writing is better than good memory. Nye “kept diaries for fifty years,” and he believes “diaries help protect against ‘the rosy glow of the past.’” Through the touching words of his diaries, we the international relations followers could both share and learn some common experiences and lessons about life and research. There by, in the last section of this paper, some personal preferences and political conundrum — like the relations between politics and academics, between politics and technology, and between politics and morality — in Nye’s mind will be dug elaborately.

Is the boundary between theory and practice clear or not? For some, theory and practice are either the same thing, or at least on the same page; for others, they are completely two worlds, at least the demarcation line is obvious. Nye has kept his faith in the latter whenever he is a government official or a university professor.

When the politics/power and academic/theory are compared, what Nye proposes is “we need to walk a tightrope between academic excellence and policy relevance. and the reason is that: “policy involves power to implement ideas, but academia must privilege truth over power. When playing the power game, there is always a temptation to tailor ideas for the sake of power and this must be resisted as much as possible”. Power means obedience, while academic needs integrity, they may not inevitably clash, but they need mutual respect. When Nye was an governmental official, he never crossed the line, and when he returned to school, he spoke out his mind when he finds the wrong doings of government in foreign policy. What a fortune for Nye that he has never changed these ideas in four decades!

Beside the idea on the boundary between politics and academics, Nye has also shown us his perspectives about teaching, publishing, and meaning of doing academics. Nye does love teaching international relations, he has kept learning all his academic life like his students, and when he receives high marks in the end-of-term evaluations he is pleased a lot. Once there was another choice of simultaneous arrangement between university and government, he was convinced by one of his

close friends and colleagues — Graham Allison — that he could write and think more broadly in university. For Nye, the gravity of academic is strong enough to pull him back from the pathetic world. As for the meaning of all this, Nye believes “society would be poorer if academics debased their search for truth and universities became just another pressure group,” and his hope is “[that] careful academic analysis could help move the national debate in a more productive direction.” Although the function of academic is significant, the process of studying is difficult, thus students of international relations should bear in mind about what Nye has found out throughout his entire academic work — the rule of the academic is “publish or perish” and “the more you learn, the less you know”.

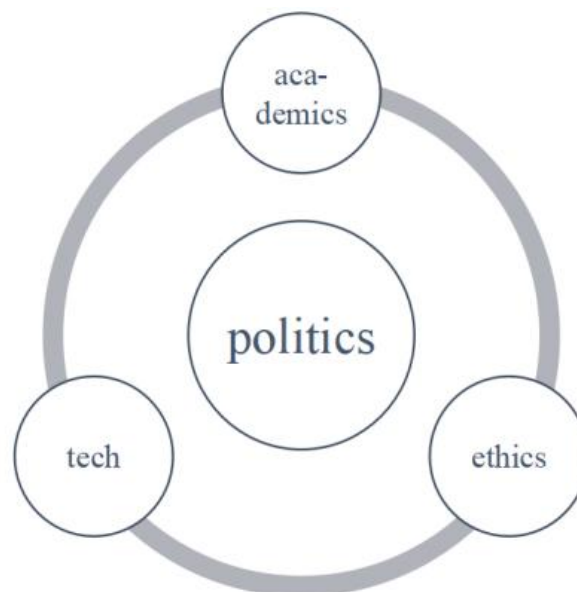
Beside the iron law of publishing and learning, the moral issue in international studies is ever lasting as well. Since the birth of the study of international politics, the question of which is more important between power and morality has been the crux of lasting academic confrontation. The question is more a philosophic challenge than a scientific problem, due to which it seems the threshold of studying IR is enhanced, but maybe the condition is just the opposite, because “one of the reasons why the study of international relations is so attractive to thoughtful students is that it inevitably raises so many complex ethical issues.”(Paul Wilkinson, 2007) As one of the thoughtful followers who has been attempting to offer answers, Nye is clear about the fact that “ethical considerations often move people, at least in part. Most leaders do not live wholly by the word, but neither do they live solely by the sword. Mixed motives are a fact of human life.” The issue of morality and value in international politics is the vital concern of Nye’s Nuclear Ethics, and that is the right reason why the book is so special for him.

As a cosmopolitan-realist with owl’s perspective, Nye could naturally insist the stance of “crusades based on moral outrage can lead to horrendously immoral consequences” and basically “it is not moral simply because of good intentions.” The root of the regrettable compromise and discounts the international morality have to pay is the given precondition of separate operational systems of politics within and outside the legal territory. In the absense of law, there is no morality, this is a well-known political wisdom, and as such Nye reminds us “the fact that international politics is a difficult domain for ethics means that one must be cautious about too simple a transposition of moral maxims from relations among individuals to the domain of states.” Since we have cared too much about whether there should be ethics in international relations, the following question is even more thorny — which specific moral demand should be on top of the value ranks if they are in collision with each other, to name a few — should it be peace? stability? security? multi-polarity? liberty? This concern is rightly correspondent with Nye’s statement of “in practice, peoples do want self-determination and autonomy, but they want other values as well. There is a constant problem of tradeoff and balancing competing moral claims between autonomy and other values.” For about a century, human has not found the regulation of moral questions once for all, which means the America century does break the record both practically and theoretically. What does it mean if human cannot solve the problem at all?

While predicament of ethic challenge is continued, the students of international relations must deal with the technological shock at the same time. The American century witnesses two human inventions with a capability of mass destruction, i.e. the nuclear bomb and artificial intelligence. Those two machines have all attracted Nye's interest on how to analysis the relations between politics and advanced technology. On nuclear bomb, Nye's comment is "there is no precedent for the challenge that nuclear weapons present to our physical and moral lives", which means "their full use in war could destroy our civilization". Four decades later, cyber power has joined the team, to catch up the pace of shift, Nye's attention is increasingly drawn to cyber conflict as a new dimension of security and world affairs.

If the atomic power can bring an end to human society physically, then the AI power can do the same thing psychologically, which means on the former, man can at least take some control, but on the latter, man could even hardly know whether they are terminated. How could we tackle the intricate affairs of international relations is one thing, and whether it should be the man to tackle them is another. This is the intrusion of the AI age. Human beings are indeed come to a crossroad never seen in millions of years of history, but "technology along will not solve our ethical dilemmas", what's more, "politics is harder than physics". So that the real progress and modernization is how politics operates. What Kissinger et al.(2021) conclude on this matter is "in our period, new technology has been developed, but remains in need of a guiding philosophy." Nye will accept the judgement as we have known his attitude about nuclear weapon in the former part of this paper.

Chart 2: Philosophical Challenges in Dyads



Source: Made by the author.

We have already checked each of these dyads (listed in **Chart 2**) in the final section, and they are confronted by every researcher of international relations. Nye has shared his experiences and answers, and they are aspirational and nutritive. Based on such findings, this paper tries to collect Nye's

knowledge of international relations scattered in his numerous accomplishments and synthesizes them into a reasonable and workable mental map or guiding system. It is a necessary work to be completed not only for understanding Nye's academic ideas, but also for grabbing the essence of current world affairs.

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Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data on which the study is based were references.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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