

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Public Diplomacy and the Supremacy Sweepstakes ^[1]

One of the most intriguing aspects of public diplomacy involves efforts by various emerging nations to portray themselves as the "next" world power. Just as intriguing is the willingness of American influencers to reinforce the notion that the United States will inevitably be passed by others as a global power.

The usually understated *Foreign Affairs* magazine blared out the question "Is America Over?" on a recent cover. Writer Thomas Friedman hawks a book detailing "How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented." Additionally, scores of others are chiming in on the end of the American era and the "rise of the rest."

This makes for gripping theater, but the reality is murkier. Consider China and India, two rising powers that politicians and think-tank analysts most often suggest as successors to American economic, geopolitical, and cultural preeminence.

China is indeed a major creditor nation to overspending Westerners, and it will be home to the world's largest economy by the end of this decade. But this hardly constitutes supremacy. Per capita, China's gross domestic product ranks 94th globally, according to the International Monetary Fund. Botswana and Bosnia rank higher.

India has been growing even more rapidly than China in some recent years. But it ranks no higher than 120th in most rankings of GDP per capita, placing it below Honduras.

Experts are fooled by the laws of large numbers. For instance, China and India have more paved roads than any other nation except the U.S.; but when ranked for the percentage of roads they have paved, they both sit around the 80th spot, in the company of Malawi and Djibouti. That puts them in a poor position to address the difficult lives of many hundreds of millions of their citizens.

China and India look better in the World Economic Forum's 2011 global competitiveness index, ranking 27th and 51st overall, respectively, and 31st and 42nd in innovation. But even here, they are more in the company of Tunisia than America.

Beyond the stories and lies that statistics tell, the larger issue of culture arises. America is ideally suited to the process of globalization, which is why it essentially invented it. It has a head-start of generations, perhaps even centuries in its ability to perform the demographic, cultural, and intellectual blending that globalization requires and which globalization further nourishes.

Any Westerner knows about France's ambivalence toward being Americanized; yet the difference between France and the U.S. are relatively minimal. Meanwhile, many Asian and South Asian societies are only beginning to fight battles relating to whether American

concepts of materialism, individualism, social mobility, and anti-traditionalism should be embraced, tolerated, or shunned.

Other populations do not want to be like America as much as we might imagine. By the same token, many Americans seem to overreact to the threat of quickly becoming irrelevant.

Winston Churchill described war as “a catalog of blunders,” and all too often a nation focuses on only on its own. It is true that the U.S. has suffered failures. However, the rising powers suffer their dilemmas as well: experts have increasingly spotlighted China’s commodity bubbles, health problems, aging population, political uncertainty and corruption. India has made astonishing strides since it liberalized its economy in 1991, but today its citizens have more cell phones than sanitary toilets, a jarring reminder of the unevenness of the process of globalization. Both nations face looming environmental crises due to the nature of their urbanization. Moreover, several challenges that face China and India are also facing Russia and Brazil, the other two members of the esteemed BRIC contingent.

Is America "over" on the world stage? Not in the short term, and quite possibly not in the long term. Meanwhile, the rising and falling of its competitors will be more unpredictable than many would guess.
