

# The New Strategist Journal

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## The New Strategist

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## Soft Power in Theory and Practice

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In this assessment we define, analyze, and evaluate the meaning and especially the utility of ‘soft power’. There is no doubt that this concept has had wide currency in international studies as well as playing a major role on the world stage, at least in American politics.

For two decades, the concept of ‘soft power’ has been associated with Professor Joseph S. Nye, who first mentioned the notion in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and then wrote about it in a Foreign Policy article, ‘Soft Power.’ (Nye 1990) In his 2004 book Nye defined ‘soft power’ as co-optive power based on attraction:

[S]oft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence. Simply put, in behavioral terms soft power is attractive power. . . Co-optive power – the ability to shape what others want – can rest on the attractiveness of one’s culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem to be unrealistic.’ (Nye 2004, pp. 6-7)

Yet, Nye is certainly *not* the originator of the idea of ‘soft power’ in international relations scholarship. When Hans Morgenthau, in his celebrated *Politics among Nations* talks about national character, national morale, and the quality of diplomacy and government as elements of national power, he is talking about ‘soft power.’ Morgenthau argues that ‘the observer of the international scene who attempts to assess the relative strength of different nations must take national character into account, however difficult it may be to assess correctly so elusive and intangible a factor.’ (Morgenthau 1967, p. 128) ‘National morale,’ defined as ‘the degree of determination with which a nation supports the foreign policies of its government in peace or war,’ is fundamentally a form of ‘soft power,’ with at times critically important consequences — as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon learned during their war in Vietnam.

Morgenthau would readily concede that power projection as cultural attraction goes back at least to Thucydides and Pericles’ funeral oration. Yet, Nye makes no mention of Thucydides in *Soft Power*, and in *The Future of Power* simply equates the ancient Greek with ‘the dominant classical approach to international affairs. . . realism.’ (Nye 2011, p. 18) Nye acknowledges the exercise of soft power by

France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Britain during World War I, but makes the odd observation that ‘though the concept of soft power is recent, the behavior it denotes is as old as human history.’ (Nye 2011, p. 81)

In truth, of course, it is the *nomenclature* of ‘soft power’ that is recent; the idea, and invocation of the concept, is very old, as is the wisdom to understand that ‘soft power’ is not the inverse of ‘power politics.’ Even Nye concedes that ‘there is no contradiction between realism and soft power. Soft power is not a form of idealism or liberalism. It is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes.’ (Nye 2011, p. 82) This concession aside, Nye muddies an already imprecise concept into a ‘baggy’ dualistic typology.

Nye is equally dismissive of constructivism, despite the obvious relevance of the core constructivist argument to his soft power thesis. It seems reasonable to argue that constructivists are ultimately talking about a form of soft power, yet nowhere in either *Soft Power* or *The Future of Power* is constructivism even mentioned. As Alexander Wendt explains ‘The distribution of power may always affect states’ calculations, but how it does so depends on the intersubjective understandings and expectations, on the ‘distribution of knowledge,’ that constitute their conceptions of self and other.’ (Wendt 1992, p. 397)

By the time one finishes Nye’s work it is clear that ‘soft power’ encompasses every application of power other than the application of (or threat of applying) hard military power or tangible economic coercion. ‘Soft power’ embraces not only cultural and political attraction, but also traditional diplomacy, intelligence cooperation, military-to-military contacts, psychological operations (‘psy-ops’), confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), public diplomacy, multinational enterprise, and various other kinds of multilateral undertakings.

Nye, however, rejects the criticism that the concept is overly expansive, emblemized in Leslie Gelb’s remark that ‘soft power now seems to mean everything.’ (Gelb 2009, p. 69) Writes Nye:

Many types of *resources* can contribute to soft power, but that does not mean that soft power is any type of *behavior*. The use of force, payment, and some agenda-setting based on them I call hard power. Agenda-setting that is regarded as legitimate by the target, positive attraction, and persuasion are the parts of the spectrum of behaviors I include in soft power. (Nye 2011, p. 20)

This is misleading. Nye exaggerates the distinction between hard and soft power, but more importantly he commits a logical oversight. The major problem, as Nye grudgingly notes, is that the success of ‘soft power’ is inordinately dependent upon the cooperation of its target, or at least on the ease with which the target can be ‘co-opted.’ If the target is not cooperative, if no ‘attraction’ has been consummated, then — according to Nye — no soft power has been exercised. The argument is therefore tautological. ‘Soft power’ is present when it is successful, and absent when it is not.

Lacking a standard for the existence of soft power, Nye provides only a crude definition based on target ‘behavior.’ With soft power, the analyst seldom knows when it has failed, because there are so many other factors that might account for failure. In its dependence on a target state’s (or society’s) behavior, ‘soft power’ is rather like the concept of deterrence. In both cases success or failure rests in the hands of the target state or audience. The difference, of course, is that the tools

of coercion on which deterrence depends are largely in the hands of the state. The tools of soft power, on the other hand, are diffused throughout society and cannot easily be brought to bear in support of state policy. There is no guarantee whatever that their effects will produce strategic advantage. Colin Gray has brilliantly argued that soft power is not (and cannot be) a discretionary tool of policy because its use cannot be regulated, adjusted, calibrated or planned. '[S]oft power is very different indeed as an instrument of policy. In fact, I am tempted to challenge the proposition that soft power can even be regarded as one (or more) among the grand instruments of policy.' (Gray 2011, p. 30)

Nye tries to rescue soft power as *an instrument of policy* and as *a substitute for hard power* by broadening its definition to include virtually all instruments of foreign policy other than the use (or threatened use) of hard military and economic coercion. In *The Future of Power* he attempts to finesse the fuzziness of the distinction between 'command power' and 'co-optive power' by invoking the concept of 'smart power,' which incorporates a combination of both, but which again is an outcomes-based, *ex-post facto* concept. (Nye 2011, pp. 8–9, 11, 16, 22–23) 'Smart power' is present if the policy outcome is successful, and not present if the policy is a failure.

Finally, Nye's analysis is oddly partisan. Like most American liberals and neo-conservatives, he is enamored with the idea of American exceptionalism. He is convinced that 'soft power' is a uniquely American instrument of policy; that the shining 'city upon a hill' remains a reality despite such tawdry adventures as the Vietnam disaster and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This remains the case despite attempts by Hu Jintao to claim soft power for China, Putin for Russia in Crimea, or the Cameron Government for Britain.

Ultimately, Nye's soft power thesis should be seen as part of his career-long effort to disavow the arguments of political realism. He mechanically equates realist thinking with the use of force. However, no serious scholar of international relations, and no policymaker seeking to advance the interests of a government, would ignore 'attraction' as a component of policy outcomes. Even Clausewitz, the scion of European *Machtpolitik*, identifies the enemy's *will* as the primary target of influence, in an invocation of soft power fully consistent with Nye. The problem is that cultural and political magnetism is an unpredictable tool of policy, unless one hopelessly expands 'soft power' to include diplomacy, alliance building, intelligence cooperation, and the like. No doubt, some realist scholars are too dismissive toward the idea of 'attractiveness,' but that has not been the case for the realist school as a whole.

The bottom line is that 'soft power,' as a concept, presents serious analytical and practical problems. These problems are not addressed in Joseph Nye's recent work, despite his invocation of sloganeering notions such as 'smart power' and other examples void of evidenced-based analysis. Indeed, the only remaining question may be – how 'soft' is 'soft power'?

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