

## Joseph Nye on Soft Power

Written by Maxime Gomichon

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### Part One: Introducing Liberalism

Liberalism dominated the International Relations discipline since its foundation and until the post-war years, when Realism emerged. Later, in response to the domination of Neorealism in the late 1970s, a distinctive school of thought was created: Neoliberalism. It shares some common assumptions with Neorealism, such as the existence of anarchy and the difficulty of cooperation, whilst being close in many aspects to Liberalism – as it mainly studies the importance of international institutions.

Liberalism identifies one main problem in international politics: war. To solve this, it proposes three solutions. The first is democracy: Liberals argue that democratic states are more peaceful with all other states and never go to war against other democracies. This is the argument of Democratic Peace Theory. The main reason for this is that states' leaders are accountable and they fear that they may not be re-elected if they go to war: 'When the citizens who bear the burdens of war elect their governments, wars become impossible' (Doyle, 1986, p.1151). The second solution is economic interdependence. Liberals affirm that international trade binds states together, as the interests of a state become those of other states. Thus, war appears too costly for states and they prefer to cooperate. International institutions are the third solution proposed by Liberalism. The theory implies that institutions enhance cooperation between states and therefore make war less likely. Neoliberal Institutionalism particularly looks at this solution: it argues that international institutions promote cooperation and limit the effects of anarchy.

Indeed, Neoliberals accept the existence of anarchy within the international system, but that does not prevent cooperation. Keohane (1984) presents three advantages of international institutions under anarchy: they lower coordination costs, they raise the cost of cheating, and they diffuse information. Furthermore, Neoliberals believe that states are more concerned with absolute gains rather than relative gains. States conceive of their gains not in comparison with other states but looking towards the total gains, which enhances cooperation between them. Therefore, international relations may be a positive-sum interaction, where each side benefits from cooperation. Eventually, Keohane and Nye (1998, p.83) developed the notion of "complex interdependence", 'a world in which security and force matter less and countries are connected by multiple social and political relationships'. They found three conditions of complex interdependence: an increasing number of channels of contact between societies, the fact that governments reluctantly use military force, and that security is no longer the main issue in international relations.

### Part 2: Relevance of the Theory

Joseph Nye differentiates between two types of power. Hard power is 'the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies' (Nye, 2011, p.11). This is the ability to coerce, through threats and inducements ("sticks" and "carrots"). On the contrary, soft power is the ability to get 'others to want the outcomes that you want' (Nye, 2004a, p.5), and more particularly 'the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion' (ibid., x). Finally, Nye introduces smart power as the 'balance of hard and soft power' (Nye, 2005). He argues that soft power is as important as hard power, and even more so in international politics. Indeed, soft power

## Joseph Nye on Soft Power

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enables a change of behaviour in others, without competition or conflict, by using persuasion and attraction. Furthermore, the use of hard power in the modern day would be more costly (both financially and politically), whereas it is possible to say that soft power is “free”, in the sense that it does not require substantial resources and has limited consequences in case of failure. He also points out the importance of style: as soft power is a matter of seduction, behaviours such as arrogance might be counterproductive and entail repulsion rather than attraction. Nye finally acknowledges that soft power does not always have good purposes, as for example propaganda is a form of soft power: ‘It is not necessarily better to twist minds than to twist arms’ (Nye, 2011, p.81).

Therefore, the concept of soft power is close to the Liberal tradition, even if ‘there is no contradiction between realism and soft power’ (Nye, 2011, p.82). In opposing hard power, soft power emphasizes not the ever-possibility of war, but the possibility of cooperation; not military power, but the power of ideas. More precisely, soft power is relevant to the three solutions that Liberals propose to solve the problem of war. The first is that democracies will not go to war against other democracies. In a democracy, the people have a say in the country and can impose peaceful goals. Democracies are therefore more inclined to use soft power rather than hard power. Furthermore, Nye asserts that even in case of difficulties, a democratic state will not lose its soft power. For instance, ‘in democracy, the presence of dissent and self-criticism can be beneficial: it enhances the credibility of messages’ (Nye, 2011, p.109). Thus, when a policy is criticised, it may produce some soft power as the people from other countries may see that as a proof of authenticity and as a sign of freedom of speech.

The second solution to the problem of war for believers of Liberalism is economic interdependence. The fact that it constrains states to cooperate with others appears more to be coercion rather than attraction, and this solution would be therefore closer to hard power than soft power. Nye’s writings agree with that in the sense that a state with significant economic resources is likely to exert pressure on, and change the behaviour of, other states that are economically weaker. However, ‘economic resources can also produce soft as well as hard power. They can be used to attract as well as coerce’ (Nye, 2011, p.85). Thus, a free trade economy will produce soft power, as it will attract others to its model. A successful Liberal economy may create a desire in other countries to adopt this model.

International institutions are the third solution posed by Liberals to the problem of war. In promoting cooperation through common rules and norms, they foster peaceful relations. This is a core assumption of Neoliberalism, which sees institutions as a means to tone down the effects of anarchy. Nye agrees with this argument and without forgetting that cooperation is difficult to achieve; he asserts, with Robert Keohane, that the simple establishment of institutions enables them to last: ‘a set of networks, norms and institutions, once established, will be difficult either to eradicate or drastically rearrange’ (Keohane and Nye, 1998). Furthermore, Nye (2005, p.10) affirms that ‘institutions can enhance a country’s soft power’. Indeed, they are likely to promote a country’s values, ideas, policies, both with other members and countries outside the institution. Therefore, ‘if a country can shape international rules that are consistent with its interests and values, its actions will more likely appear legitimate in the eyes of others’ (ibid). For instance, the United States uses institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization to promote its values of liberalism and democracy. Thus, soft power, as presented by Joseph Nye, adopts a lot of Liberal theory, and particularly of Neoliberal Institutionalism.

Joseph Nye uses the theory to study the particular case of the United States. He aims to prove that the country is not in decline and that isolationism must be avoided. Indeed, in a globalized and interdependent world, the United States has to cooperate and it also needs the cooperation of other countries. Because an increasing number of issues are global, a multilateral approach in international relations is required. Therefore, it is soft power that will be helpful in this situation, rather than hard power. Indeed, issues such as global warming, outer space and cyberspace are more likely to be solved with soft power, whereas military force would be inefficient or insufficient. Nye justifies the use of multilateralism in U.S. foreign policy as it enables other countries not to feel threatened by its supremacy: ‘The multilateralism of American pre-eminence was a key to its longevity, because it reduced the incentives for constructing countervailing alliances’ (Nye, 2005, p.65). Likewise, Nye agrees with Neoliberalism that absolute gains are more important for states than relative gains. Even with soft power, a positive-sum interaction can be implemented. ‘Soft power need not be a zero-sum game in which one country’s gain is necessarily another country’s loss’ (Nye, 2011, p.90). Soft power can therefore benefit each side. It contradicts the Realist assumption that states only seek security. For Nye and other Liberal thinkers, states sometimes seek prosperity.

# Joseph Nye on Soft Power

Written by Maxime Gomichon

Thus, Nye succeeds in putting together the assertion of the pre-eminence of the United States with the Liberal theory of a multilateral international system. He uses a three-dimensional chess game (Nye, 2004a, p.136-137): on the top chessboard, military power is unipolar, with the hegemony of the United States. On the economic board, power is multipolar: even though the U.S. takes first place, it is not hegemonic. And on the bottom chessboard, transnational relations are a dispersed power where no one leads. Therefore, the author can conclude that the U.S. must be mainly concerned with the bottom chessboard and it must use soft power to deal with this problem. Finally, for both the concept of soft power and the case of the U.S., Nye uses Liberalism, and particularly Neoliberal theory, to justify his arguments.

## Part 3: Limits of the Theory

Having demonstrated the relevance of the Liberal theory in Nye's writings, I will explain in this third part the limits of this relevance. Nye's writings are closer to Neoliberalism, and therefore they contradict some of the Liberal assumptions. First, he acknowledges the existence of anarchy within the international system: 'The context of international politics is often understood as an anarchic world of states seeking security in which the ultimate (but not only) instrument is the use of military force' (Nye, 2008b, p.55). Secondly, Neoliberals focus mainly on the state as a unitary actor. While acknowledging the Liberal view that the power of states is declining due to globalization and the emergence of non-state actors, they maintain that the state is still relevant. 'The modernists of 1910 and the 1970s were right about the direction of change but simplistic about its consequences' (Keohane and Nye, 1998, p.82). Indeed, Neoliberals admit that transnationalism undermines states' power, but they do not conclude that they are less resilient.

Further evidence that Nye is defending the U.S., and trying to find the best solution for it, is that he sometimes steps away from Neoliberal assumptions themselves. He acknowledges that military force is sometimes useful when the security of the state is threatened. That may challenge his theory of complex interdependence, of which the main condition is abandonment of military force. Thus, he sometimes takes off the clothes of the theorist to put on those of the politician, noting:

'As a former assistant secretary of defense, I would be the last to deny the continuing importance of military power. Our military role is essential to global stability. And the military is part of our response to terrorism' (Nye, 2002, XV).

Furthermore, he argues that 'the military can sometimes play an important role in the generation of soft power' (Nye, 2008a, p 106). Indeed, attraction and seduction of the opposite camp may be crucial in wartime, such as being seen in a positive way by the people or persuading soldiers to desert. However, even though Nye admits that military force may be useful, it does not challenge his theory of soft power, nor is he contradicting Liberalism. Indeed, he instead introduces the notion of smart power, 'the ability to combine hard and soft power effectively' (Nye, 2008a, p.107). He argues that soft power is always more important, in the long-run, than hard power. It is therefore legitimate to use military force in exceptional circumstances, but one should mainly focus on soft power. Furthermore, Nye does not think of gains in absolute terms only. He acknowledges that international politics can be positive-sum and both sides may benefit from interdependence. However, he adds that joint gain may entail conflicts over who gets the larger slice: 'the distribution of benefits – who gets how much of the joint gain – is a zero-sum situation in which one side's gain is the other's loss' (Nye, 2003, p.212). Likewise, he denies the idea that globalization automatically entails cooperation. Indeed, using the example of economic sanctions, he affirms that 'economic interdependence can also be used as a weapon' (Nye, 2003, p.212). Here, states are more concerned with relative gains.

The main criticism of Nye's writings on soft power is that they focus recurrently on the United States' power. Thus, the use of Neoliberal theory is sometimes orientated to prove that the pre-eminence of the U.S. will last. The most relevant one is his article '*Recovering American Leadership*', where he is seeking the conditions for 'the United States [remaining] the leading power in world politics well into the twenty-first century' (Nye, 2008b, p.66). Moreover, by focusing on the example of the U.S., the author sometimes moves away from theory. In his article '*Obama's soft power*' (Nye, 2009), Nye tries to adopt an optimist view of America's reputation in the world, which he argues has been dramatically damaged by the "war on terror". He affirms that soft power can be easy and quick to recover, but he takes the risk to lessen the importance of the concept of soft power itself.

## Joseph Nye on Soft Power

Written by Maxime Gomichon

Finally, it is useful to remember that Nye's writings always must be analysed within the context. Nye wrote his article 'Soft Power', published in *Foreign Policy*, in 1990, at the end of the Cold War, and he tries to contradict the thesis of a U.S. decline. Thus, he creates his famous concept in this context. In 2002, his book *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* is a direct response to the 9/11 attacks. Likewise, when Nye published 'Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics' in 2004, it followed the war in Iraq and a worldwide decrease in the United States' attraction. However, these Western-centric and American-centric views and the context in which Nye's writings are published do not challenge the relevance of the Liberal theory in his work. The concept of soft power does not only apply to the U.S., it also works with all other countries: 'The United States is not alone. Others, both countries and nonstate actors, also possess soft power' (Nye, 2005, p.73). Therefore, even though Nye's use of Liberal theory has some limits and some contradictions with his work, he often comes back to it, eventually.

To conclude, after having presented the Liberal theory, I have assessed the extent to which Joseph Nye uses it, and particularly Neoliberalism, in his writings on soft power. Although the relevance of the theory is undeniable, the author sometimes takes the liberty to depart from it. Thus, I have discovered that scholars are not bound by theories, they do not have to follow all their points, and they may even use opposite arguments in their writings. However, they always keep the theory in mind and incorporate the opposite arguments in their works, as, for instance, Nye creating the concept of smart power. Therefore, I think that theories are not completely closed and that they may interact with others, but nevertheless they could never be fused together.

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