

THE FUTURE OF POWER

Joseph Nye at Central European University

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It is always an exciting moment when a respected and world-wide known scholar visits a place like Hungary where International Relations can hardly be said to be a vividly developing field of science. Recently, we have had the opportunity to participate in the lecture of Joseph Nye Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor, the father of the new concept of power and co-founder of the theory of complex interdependence. These notions are well-known among IR students, who took part at the event in large numbers demonstrating that there is in reality a demand for a buoyant scientific life and that they want to be engaged personally in mainstream IR discussions.

As the guest of the Central European University on September 19, Joseph Nye developed his speech along his scholarly work in IR theory, as well as he presented his new book, *The Future of Power*. The lecture's key notion was 'power' approached from a liberal perspective which is more diffuse and changing, therefore it is much more difficult to define and explain adequately. For Nye (2004a)¹, power is the way to affect others which can be achieved by different means: by threat and other down to earth perspectives like inducements or more indirectly by persuading people to want to do what you want. This is the essence of what he called 'soft power', which is the substitute for the former 'hard power'. These two add up to the set of powers that is used by international actors to carry out strategies in favor of their interests. Their combination is often referred to as 'smart power', which is also an invention of Nye and means "the ability to combine hard and soft power into a successful strategy" (Nye 2007)².

The different dimensions of power have been emphasized by Nye in several books and articles. The notion of soft power was coined first in his book *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power* with the aim of arguing against the anticipated decline of the United States, claiming that besides military and economic power, a third dimension called soft power exists that makes America be able to maintain its leading role in the world (Bohorquez 2005). Later, Nye (2004a) elaborated more on his concept by differentiating the spectrum of behaviors – from agenda setting to attraction and co-optation – and most likely resources – institutions, values, culture, foreign policies – that soft power is based on. He describes it as a tool of diplomacy and alliance building, which in case of the US is needed because being the ultimate military power does not mean that it is able to achieve its goals alone on the international level (Bohorquez 2005).

This view of power is not accepted by everyone, evidence can be found in the realm of theory and also in practice. First, some scholars do not consider soft power as important. When it comes to realism, all that matters is power, and different forms of it are not as important as its role in protecting the state's national interest and increasing its dominance over others. Stephen Walt (2007) in a debate with Nye⁴ does not consider soft power as non-existing, but he deals more with hard power. He states that hard power causes more problems to the US today, because not the American economic achievements or cultural values are confronted with resistance, rather the US policy and its hard power instruments are loathed all around the world. He argues that setting American foreign policy right is more of a solution than soft power. Secondly, other critiques of Nye go further and claim that soft power works differently in theory and in practice.

¹ Nye, J. S. Jr. (2004a) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs: New York

² Nye, J. S. Jr. (2007) Smart Power. *The Huffington Post*, November 29 2007 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/smart-power_b_74725.html

³ Bohorquez, T. (2005) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Review. <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=34734>

⁴ The debate took place on the papers of *Boston Review*. See Nye's (2005) opinion:

<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.1/nye.php>, See Walt's response (2007): <http://bostonreview.net/BR30.1/waltresponse.php>

In his paper *Smart Power and US leadership: A Critique of Joseph Nye*, Paul Cammack (2008)⁵ insists on claiming Nye's argument on American power unchanged since two decades. Both soft and smart power have been used contrary to their assumed meaning: instead of paving a way to multilateralism, the notions have turned to be giving a base to American leadership. Thirdly, many of the criticism are based on the misperception and misuse of the concept. For example, Josef Joffe (2006)⁶ argues against the positive effect of the American soft power, claiming that soft power can result in the same resistance as the pressure of hard power. At the same time, he uses a narrow understanding of soft power restricted to the (seemingly) dominant popular cultural of the United States.

Since then, many authors like Fareed Zakaria⁷, Ray B. Williams⁸, Larry Elliott⁹, Gideon Rachman¹⁰ or Noam Chomsky¹¹ – just to name a few from the last year's newspaper publications – have been convinced of the intensifying decline of America. They base their explanation on many factors, not only in military but also economic and technological terms. They refer to statistical rankings of countries regarding many factors like poverty level, manufacturing employment, Human Development Index, infrastructure, elementary-school enrollment, life expectancy, obesity, etc. – all types of indicators that let the picture of American position in the world more shaded. Fareed Zakaria (2011) claims that the real economic problems of the US are addressed in an ill-fated manner, domestic political debates merely touch the surface. Larry Elliot (2011) even argues for comparing America to empires such as the Roman or the British in the 19th century as regards its beginning decline. He calls the attention to the general reluctance to admit the “cultural decadence” of the US. Gideon Rachman (2011) highlights the challenge of Chinese economic growth and military spending for America and an even broader trend of new rising economic powers that step in the competition for global dominance. Moreover, he is on the opinion that the internal problems China is facing now and need to handle in the future will not result in the disappearance of the challenge.

Even Nye admits the phenomenon of American decline – mainly with respect to popularity – as a result of the invasion of Iraq,¹² however, he rather explains it with the disapproval of American foreign policy behavior (Nye 2004a). In contrast, he generally prefers to point out the potential lying in the multifaceted nature of American power. In his article about smart power (Nye 2007), the focus is mostly on the normative dimension of state behavior by means of giving advices to the American administration how to handle and maintain its leading role in the world. Especially, he stresses the need for connecting hard power resources of the governmental sphere with the mainly private sources of soft power. Besides, his advices are concentrated on policy decisions: he prefers democracy promotion by attraction to imposing American values by force (Nye 2006)¹³.

This applies for the fight against terrorism, too. In his 2004 article in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁴, Nye already argued for establishing a cooperation of countries against terrorism, which has to be developed through regaining the attractiveness of the US not only by relying on military forces but also by strengthening alliances through soft power tools.

⁵ Cammack, P. (2008) *Smart Power and US leadership: A Critique of Joseph Nye*. 49th *Parallel*, Issue 22, Autumn 2011.

⁶ Joffe suggests that for Europe the way to resist the American cultural model is first to rely on it, to imitate and then to improve it. Joffe, J. (2006) *The Perils of Soft Power*. *Hoover Digest*, No. 3 2006
<http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/6314>

⁷ Ray B Williams provides with an up-to-date collection of articles discussing the main characteristics of America's place in the world and he claims the irreversibility of the decline in dominance. Williams R. B. (2011) *Why America is in Decline?* *Psychology Today*. March 13 2011 <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201103/why-america-is-in-decline>

⁸ Zakaria, F. (2011) *Are America's Best Days Behind Us?* *Time Magazine* U.S, March 3rd 2011
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2056723,00.html>

⁹ Elliot, L. (2011) *Decline and fall of the American empire*. *The Guardian*, June 6 2011
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jun/06/us-economy-decline-recovery-challenges>

¹⁰ Rachman, G. (2011) *Think Again: American decline*. *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2011
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/02/think_again_american_decline

¹¹ Noam Chomsky is on the opinion that corporate power is the one that derails the resolution of economic problems of the US by distorting political debates in the Congress. Chomsky, N. (2011) *America in Decline*. *Truthout*, August 5 2011. <http://www.truth-out.org/america-decline/1312567242>

¹² In his article published in the *Boston Review* Nye (ibid. 2005) calls the attention to the nose-dive in popularity of the US policy experienced not only in Islamic, but also in European countries.

¹³ Nye, J. S. Jr. (2006) *Progressive Realism*. *The Bangkok Post*, August 25 2006
http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1593/progressive_realism.html

¹⁴ Nye, J. S. Jr. (2004b) *The Decline of America's Soft Power*. *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004

Later, he wrote that America can only win this war by using its smart power and allocating more resources for public diplomacy (Nye 2005). Since then, terrorism has been preserved as a primordial threat in Nye's policy-making agenda, followed by the challenge of a "rising hostile hegemony" in Asia (Nye 2007).

During the lecture, Nye presented his new book *The Future of Power* in which he tries to defend his ideas against the critical voices by claiming that "power always depends on context". The main idea of his work is unfolded by circumscribing the nature of power today. He focuses on two power shifts in today's world: 'power transition' and 'power diffusion'. The former is regarded as the issue of rising powers while the latter focuses on power shifting from states to non-state actors. Nye argued that it is not the state which is turning to be obsolete but rather its power is being distributed to many other stages and networks. He pointed out examples such as the Arab spring for depicting the changes in transnational politics. As regards the information revolution, power is less tangible in terms of hard power. Costs of global communication have been reduced, thus "providing power resources for non-state actors". Lower barriers of entry into world politics by cheap communication tools are signaling a new world politics that America has to face (Nye 2011)¹⁵.

Regarding power transition, he claimed in his speech that we cannot predict the life-cycle of any country, so the term 'absolute decline' of the US is misleading. The fear of the rise of the rest, in other words the 'relative decline' of superpowers has had to be managed since centuries. He made a reference to the US-China relationship within this framework, in which he implied that today's power shifts are not reflected in all dimensions of power. Nye stood for the strength of American soft power that has not been reached by the Chinese counterpart. He pointed out that China is still in need for political change in order to achieve a higher level of diversity also in terms of power. However, its strength is mostly due to the exaggerated fear of Chinese power projection in the political discourse that works as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In his speech, Nye approached the US-China relations from an abstract point of view that is framed in the concept of power. He called attention to the need for thinking about international cooperation in terms of soft power that concentrates on building networks between countries, because new challenges have to be handled with a change in the perception of power. These changes however, do not come-and-go in a fortnight, so what Nye taught us on this occasion was rather about the difficulty of explaining processes in world politics with all-encompassing concepts and the difference between what states do and how ordinary citizens actually perceive it.

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¹⁵ Nye, J. S. Jr. (2011) *The Future of Power*. Public Affairs: New York.