

Joseph Nye

The inventor of the term soft power shares his thoughts with Alan Philps on America's role in an increasingly affluent world, Russia's decline and China's own goals

In the Syrian crisis America seems incapable of wielding any form of power. Is Washington's policy destined to be late and reactive?

America's challenge is to wield smart power, a combination of hard and soft power. Power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes you want. That can be done by coercion and payment (hard power) or attraction and persuasion (soft power).

Most smart strategies involve both elements of power, with the mix depending on the context. In some contexts, you may not be able to get the outcomes you want by hard or soft power. In such cases, the Hippocratic Oath should prevail: first do no harm. It is not clear that we know how to get the outcomes we want in Syria. As Gideon Rachman wrote recently in the *Financial Times*, smart leadership sometimes entails delaying decisions, rather than plunging in.

It took Bill Clinton two years to launch air strikes in Bosnia. Could America go to war again in the Middle East?

In Libya, Obama waited until he had the soft power legitimacy of Arab League and UN resolutions which George W. Bush failed to obtain before the invasion of Iraq. I would not be surprised to see the US use force again in the Middle East, but I doubt it would be a war of occupation based on a counter-insurgent strategy.

Since withdrawal in 2011, the US has turned its back on Iraq. Isn't lack of staying power the defining characteristic of US foreign policy today?

The so-called law of holes says that when you are in one stop digging. I regarded withdrawal from Iraq as common sense, not lack of staying power. Had Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, been more forthcoming on a Status of Forces





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Agreement, some troops might have remained. The US has been in Afghanistan for more than a decade, and the current plan (pending a Status of Forces Agreement) involves some troops remaining.

In your book, *Soft Power*, Russia barely features. It now looks like the Kremlin is getting revenge for having been written off as a global player by the US. How should the West deal with Russia?

Alas, although Putin has urged his diplomats to wield soft power, Russia does not have much. That is why I did not spend much time on Russia. Although I have described Russia as a declining power, I do not think we can write it off. And the Obama Administration did try to engage Russia with its 'reset' in 2009. However, I think Putin finds anti-American nationalism useful for domestic political reasons after the demonstrations that followed his election.

One of the elements of power is wealth. If the extraordinary wealth of the US is a freak result of the Second World War, how is the 'end of affluence' going to affect US power?

American wealth is not just a freak result of the war. In my new book, *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*, I have a chart that shows the changes in America's share of world product over time. The US entered and left the 20th century with about a quarter of world product. After 1945, when the war had strengthened the US while weakening other countries, the US share climbed close to half of world product. That was bound to change as others regained their economic health. Nixon and others misinterpreted this as economic decline and the onset of multipolarity when it was really reversion to the long-term norm.

Ironically, even when America had a preponderance of power resources, it was sometimes unable to get the outcomes it wanted: witness the year 1949, which saw both the 'loss of China' and Stalin's first atomic weapon.

Still the relative decline of the US must change the balance of power?

There have always been limits to US power in terms of behavioural outcomes, even when we had a preponderance of power resources. Some of our biggest problems have arisen when we failed to understand those limits to power. We did not have a smart power strategy in Vietnam or Iraq.

'I frequently cringe when I read people using the term soft power as a rough synonym for economic power'

Hu Jintao said in 2007 that soft power was 'central to China's strategic vision'. Can authoritarian governments ever succeed in harnessing this concept?

When Hu told the 17th Party Congress that China needed to increase its soft power, he was outlining a smart power strategy. If a country's hard power increases dramatically, it is likely to frighten its neighbours into coalitions to balance its power. If it can reduce the sense of threat by increasing its soft power, those coalitions are likely to be less effective.

The question is whether China knows how to increase its soft power. Its wonderful economic performance and attractive traditional culture produce soft power resources, but its governmental control of civil society and party control of media undercut its attraction in many venues. Witness the success of the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Exposition that was followed by the locking up of Liu Xiaobo, the human rights activist, leaving an empty chair on the stage at the ceremony when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In brand management, this is sometimes called 'stepping on your own message'. And government broadcasting that sounds like propaganda does not produce the soft power of attraction.

China has lifted millions of people out of poverty while the US political system is gridlocked. Is this China's biggest source of attraction?

Yes, China's impressive economic accomplishments are attractive to others and thus a resource for soft power, and the gridlock of the American political system can undercut its soft power. But American government was originally designed to protect liberty, not to promote efficiency. As some say, the Founding Fathers designed a government that would prevent King George III ruling over us, or anyone else for that matter. And, for all its flaws, many people are attracted by those freedoms of speech, assembly, religion and

others. Moreover, a good deal of the soft power that a country generates comes from its civil society, not just from government.

The attraction of Western ideas is in decline. There is a process of re-Islamization in the Middle East, while in East and South Asia we see a process of indigenization rather than borrowing from the West. Is this a threat to the liberal order?

A liberal order does not require an identity of political views. Each society can interpret modernity in its own way. And this is not new. Woodrow Wilson spoke of a world made safe for democracy, but John F. Kennedy spoke of a world made safe for diversity.

When an idea such as soft power gains wings, is it possible for the author to keep control of it?

No author can control the use that is made of his concepts. I frequently cringe when I read people using the term soft power as a rough synonym for economic power or anything that is the opposite of military action.

Critics say the term soft power has become so fuzzy that it has lost all meaning. Is it time for its retirement?

Usually the people who make this charge are those who misuse the concept. It is always easier to knock down a straw man. Very often people fail to distinguish the resources that can produce power from the behaviour of obtaining preferred outcomes. I try to spell this out carefully in the first chapters of my 2011 book, *The Future of Power*. But I often encounter critics who have never looked at those careful definitions and prefer to joust with a creature of their own imaginations.

It is 20 years since Samuel Huntington published his essay, *A Clash of Civilizations*. How should his legacy be viewed, given the uses to which his theory was put post-9/11?

Huntington was correct that, after the defeat of fascism and communism, culture would become a more frequent source of conflict. But he was mistaken to identify culture with Toynbee's grandiose concept of civilizations. Many of the world clashes have been within those civilizations rather than between them. He neglected what Freud called the 'narcissism of small differences' such as we saw in Northern Ireland or Bosnia. Ironically, his theory was misused by bin Laden and others to accentuate the differences between Islam and the rest.