

## BOOK REVIEW

**Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China** by Joseph S Nye, published by Springer, USA, 2023, ISBN 978-981-99-0714-4 (eBook), viii+208 pages.

Joseph S Nye, a scholar quite distinguished in the field of international relations, is widely recognised for introducing the concept of “soft power” into the lexicon of international political discourse. His seminal works, such as *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (published in 1990) and *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (published in 2004), have helped to shape the current understanding of how nations exercise influence beyond conventional military power. In *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China*, Professor Nye revisits and expands upon his earlier work, and he contextualises it within the evolving dynamics of Sino-American relations of recent times. Given the increasing tensions between the United States and China, this book is both timely and relevant, offering insights into how soft power strategies might shape the global order in the upcoming decades.

The book involves evolving discussions on the developing facets of soft power in global order and within the current context of great power rivalry. Across the main sections of theoretical foundations, the empirical analysis of Sino-American competition, and the implications for global order, Professor Nye elaborates on how soft power is increasingly shaping international relations over the years. It is evident from the 31 essays across three broad sections, that soft power is an ever changing and indirect form of authority that countries with such influence can exert over others. It is dependent on elements of social values, culture, and political ideologies. Professor Nye recognises that this power helps states to supplement the (now) costly military approaches to coercion. This not only results in states having more leeway in their options to expanding power and influence, but also has the added benefit to making other states more agreeable to such influence. This gives global powers new avenues to exert their desired influence. He argues that soft power support current interdependent interstate relationships, much in the favour of the United States. The narrative presented throughout the different essays reflect the actual changes that have taken place in the international arena over the past few decades. Economic interdependence has made it costly for stronger states to coerce weaker states with explicit force and has instead given power to states with weaker military capabilities to have a stronger collective influence upon larger powers. This is offset by the presence of the unique leverage that soft power presents, which allows the United States to influence other states for its own benefit by virtue of its global cultural

dominance and a worldwide perpetuation of its core cherished democratic values. Players in the global scene wishing to exert their influence in the global arena, however, can more smartly utilise an effective combination of hard and soft power strategies in the pursuit of their interests. Professor Nye discusses such an approach as “smart power”, where a state combines tools of defence, diplomacy, and development in a chaotic world of unipolarity, and multipolarity. This is not an approach exclusive to the United States, as even small states can utilise them with significant effect. Professor Nye tackles the concept of “sharp power” that involves the manipulation of information and implicit threats of sanctions by authoritarian powers and contrasts it with soft power. The latter, he argues, favours long term tangible gains through diplomacy based on truth and openness. He exemplifies sharp power with China’s actions towards countries criticising its actions and soft power with how the United States and Japan have achieved a widespread global acceptance through their widely favourable democratic values and cultural elements respectively.

Theoretical discussions aside, the empirical discussions are where Professor Nye examines the cultural, political, and diplomatic strategies employed by the United States and China to project their influence globally. He elaborates on how China sells its charming global image through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes, and global media outlets such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), with a view to enhancing its soft power. Among these, the BRI is perhaps China’s most significant and far-reaching soft power endeavour. Professor Nye explained that while the BRI is primarily an infrastructure development project aimed at enhancing trade and connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe, it also serves as a potent soft power tool for the country. Through financing and constructing roads, ports, railways, and energy projects in developing countries, China has been able to extend its influence and foster goodwill among its partner nations. Towards this end, Professor Nye points out that the BRI is not just about physical infrastructure, but also about building relationships and creating a narrative of China as a “benevolent” global leader. This narrative is carefully crafted to portray China as a country that is willing to share its wealth and expertise to help other nations develop, and thus positioning itself as an alternative to the Western-dominated global order.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Nye also discusses the aim of outlets like the CGTN towards presenting China’s perspective on global events. He argued that CGTN is part of China’s broader effort to shape global narratives and challenge the dominance of Western media. By

---

1 This development and the its shortcomings (as discussed shortly after) have been discussed in more detail in: Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, “Sources and limits of Chinese ‘soft power’,” In *Survival*, (Routledge, 2023): 17-35.

providing an alternative viewpoint, particularly on issues where Chinese interests are at stake, CGTN seeks to enhance China's image and influence international public opinion. However, He has also pointed out that CGTN's effectiveness as a soft power tool is limited by the network's credibility. While CGTN offers extensive coverage of global events, its content is often perceived as state-controlled and biased in favour of the Chinese government. This perception can undermine the network's ability to attract and persuade international audiences, particularly in democratic countries where media independence is highly valued.<sup>2</sup> Professor Nye's analysis suggests that for CGTN and similar initiatives to succeed in enhancing China's soft power, they would need to earn the trust of their audiences by adhering to higher standards of journalistic integrity and transparency. His empirical analysis expanding across such Chinese soft power initiatives further reveals that while the aforementioned Confucius Institutes have been successful in expanding Chinese cultural influence, they have also sparked controversy, particularly in the West. Critics have accused the institutes of being vehicles for Chinese propaganda and of undermining academic freedom in host institutions.<sup>3</sup> A few countries have even closed Confucius Institutes amid concerns about their influence on academic discourse. Professor Nye suggests that these controversies highlight the challenges that China faces in its soft power projection—specifically, the difficulty of balancing cultural diplomacy with the perception of ideological influence. This is where he elaborates upon the limitations and challenges faced by China in building a lasting soft power, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the increasing global scrutiny of its objectionable human rights records. He then compares this with United States' soft power which, he argues, has been significantly damaged in recent years due to internal political polarisation, the erosion of its democratic norms, and a retreat from multilateralism under its previous administration of President Donald J Trump.

Professor Nye describes Trump administration as a turning point for the relative decline of American soft power. With a dedicated "hard power budget" from Trump's budget director Mick Mulvaney, the focus shifted during this administration on consolidating United States' hard power away from public diplomacy of any meaningful significance.<sup>4</sup> This approach resulted in a neglect towards building

---

2 Zhengqing Yan, Jiuru Tang, and Xinlong Liu, "A critical analysis of the challenges posed by China Global Television Network (CGTN) to the traditional dominance of global media by western outlets," *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research* 5, no. 11 (2022): 102-107.

3 Kenneth King, "Confucius Institutes in Africa: Culture and language without controversy?." In *China-Africa Relations* (Routledge, 2017): 98-112.

4 The 2018 defence budget conundrum during the Trump administration is more elaborately discussed in: Ashley Townshend, Dougal Robinson, and Brendan Thomas-Noone, *Trump, Congress and the 2018 Defence Budget: A Primer for Australia* (United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, 2017.)

“perceptions of legitimacy” which soft power builds upon to strengthen a state’s hard power itself.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen as a strategy showing relatively impressive short term gain, while harming perceptions of legitimacy across the general public and international partners built up over the decades. However, he then contrasts this with his cautious optimism about the resilience of American soft power, holding up examples of enduring appeal of American culture, its higher education, and its technological innovation. He highlights Hollywood as one of the most potent sources of American soft power. For decades, American films, television shows, and music have captivated global audiences, promoting not only entertainment but also American values such as individualism, freedom, and democracy. Professor Nye points out that Hollywood’s influence extends far beyond mere entertainment, as it shapes perceptions of the United States and helps to create a positive image of the country as a land of opportunity and innovation. However, he also acknowledges that American cultural products can sometimes generate backlash, particularly in regions where they are seen as promoting values that conflict with local traditions and norms. He discusses how the global spread of American culture has, in some cases, led to accusations of cultural imperialism, where American values are perceived as being imposed on other societies. Despite all this, Professor Nye argues that the overall impact of American culture on the United States’ soft power remains overwhelmingly positive,<sup>6</sup> as it continues to attract people to American ideals and ways of life.

Professor Nye also examines the role of American universities as a key component of United States’s power. The United States is home to many of the world’s top universities, which attract students from around the globe. These institutions not only provide education but also serve as hubs for cross-cultural exchange and intellectual collaboration. Professor Nye notes that the experience of studying in the United States often leaves a lasting impression on foreign students, many of whom return to their home countries with a favourable view of American society and values. He discusses how American higher education institutions contribute to the country’s soft power by fostering innovation, research, and leadership development. Many of the world’s leaders, particularly in developing countries, have been educated in the United States, which often creates a sense of affinity and connection to the country. This ‘educational diplomacy’ helps to build networks of influence that has the potential to significantly benefit the United States in various ways over the long term, from

---

5 Myunghye Kim and Jonathan O. Knuckey. “Trump and US soft power, In *The Trump Administration* (Routledge, 2022): 257-273.

6 First discussed by Professor Nye in: Joseph S. Nye, “Soft power,” *Foreign policy* 80 (1990): 153-171; then further in: Joseph S. Nye, “Soft power and American foreign policy,” *Political science quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2004): 255-270.

facilitating diplomatic relations to promoting economic ties. Professor Nye adds to this the role of public diplomacy and international institutions in maintaining the American soft power, despite the challenges China's rise poses to it. He advocated in his discussions a higher emphasis at the state level, in order to improve its public diplomacy initiatives on a "country-by-country" basis,<sup>7</sup> quoting from Newt Gingrich.

Professor Nye then begins wrapping up his discussions with how the evolving competition between the United States and China can influence the international arena and suggests a way forward on how it should process for the global benefit. He contextualises this competition within the framework of global power dynamics. He asserts that while hard power—defined by military capabilities and economic influence—continues to play a pivotal role in international relations, the significance of soft power has been increasingly recognised. Soft power, with its focus on shaping preferences through appeal and attraction, offers a different dimension of influence that can prove to be more sustainable and less confrontational in nature compared to hard power. He warns against the dangers of a zero-sum approach to soft power competition, arguing that both the United States and China would benefit from a more cooperative approach to global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation. Professor Nye argues that the balance of global governance will not be determined solely by who has the most military might or the largest economy, but also by which nation can wield the most effective combination of soft and hard power—which is the very concept of smart power that he has introduced to the reader in the theoretical discussions in the book's beginning.

The core strength of Professor Nye is how he describes soft power, smart power and related critical concepts of the evolving international scene with easy-to-understand narratives and anecdotes, making the discussion accessible to a wider audience as a result. He also has not shied away from criticising both the United States and China for their shortcomings in soft power projection. He was particularly critical of China's use of sharp power tactics of coercion, which he argues are counterproductive in the long term. However, he also acknowledges the United States' recent failures in soft power, particularly its retreat from multilateralism and the erosion of its democratic norms under the Trump administration. Professor Nye's analysis is thus fair and objective, avoiding the kind of ideological bias that can often characterise such discussions of Sino-American relations. However, the book is not without some limitations. One potential critique that can be made is how he has analysed China's soft power loosely. While he did provide a detailed account of China's cultural and

---

7 Gregory Koger, "The Oratory of Newt Gingrich," *Republican orators from Eisenhower to Trump* (2018): 175-192.

diplomatic initiatives, he did not go in-depth on the underlying factors that have enabled China to project its soft power so effectively. As an example, Professor Nye did not delve deeply into the role of China's economic power in enhancing its soft power, nor has he explored China's domestic factors that have shaped its soft power strategy. A more in-depth analysis of these factors would have provided a richer understanding of China's soft power. Another limitation that can be pointed out is that Professor Nye's focus on Sino-American competition has somewhat overlooked the role of other rising powers in shaping the global balance of soft power. While the book does briefly mention the soft power strategies of other countries such as Russia<sup>8</sup> and India,<sup>9</sup> these discussions are not as fully developed as the analysis of the United States and China on the matter. A more comprehensive analysis of the global soft power landscape would have added further depth to the book. Lastly, his call for cooperation between the United States and China in global governance may prove to be idealistic in nature, as not only there are other important players in the international arena, but also the tensions between the two countries are becoming more and more strained with recent developments. United States' confrontation of China's supposed support of Russia in the latter's war with Ukraine, and sanctions on China's semiconductor import by the United States are some of the significant examples of this strain. These are, however, limitations that can be improved upon in the future, and still, Professor Nye has brought his arguments fully to the forefront throughout his discussions in the book.

Professor Nye's book is a timely and important analysis of the changing dynamics of global power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By revisiting and expanding upon his earlier work on soft power, he has thus far provided readers with a deeper understanding of how nations exercise influence in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. The discussion contributes to the ongoing debate about the future of the international order. His analysis of Sino-American competition offers contemporary insights into the challenges and opportunities facing both countries as they navigate the complex landscape of global power. His call for a more nuanced and integrated approach to power is particularly relevant in an era where traditional forms of power are increasingly being challenged by new and emerging, and often non-state, threats. This book is crucially an important resource for policymakers and scholars alike. By offering a clear and accessible explanation of the concept of soft power, Professor Nye provides readers with the tools they need to understand and engage with the

---

8 Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, "The limits of Russia's 'soft power'," In *Emerging Powers in International Politics* (Routledge, 2019): 61-79.

9 Irene S. Wu, "India and the soft power rubric: the relevance of migrants, students, visitors and movies," *India Review* 20, no. 4 (2021): 373-401.

complexities of modern power dynamics. His analysis of the current state of soft power competition between the United States and China is particularly valuable for those interested in understanding the broader implications of this rivalry for global governance.

To summarise, Joseph S Nye offers in his book a comprehensive and insightful analysis of one of the most critical geopolitical dynamics of the present time. His revisiting of the concept of soft power and its application to the Sino-American rivalry is both timely and relevant, providing readers with a deeper understanding of how nations exercise influence in the modern world. Professor Nye's exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of soft power is particularly valuable in an era where traditional military and economic metrics are no longer sufficient to gauge a nation's global standing. His skill in contextualising soft power within the broader framework of international relations theory offers readers a nuanced perspective that proves to be both academically rigorous and practically relevant. While the book has some limitations, particularly in its somewhat superficial analysis of China's soft power and its idealistic call for greater global cooperation, it nonetheless makes a significant contribution to the field of international relations. Professor Nye's balanced and nuanced approach, combined with his clear and accessible writing, makes this book an important resource for anyone interested in understanding the changing dynamics of global power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Reviewed by  
*Muhammad Mazedul Haque*  
Research Officer  
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)