

**THE CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION OF SOFT POWER**

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Annotation: *The article provides a comprehensive analysis of Joseph Nye's influential theory and the concept's theoretical underpinnings, historical trajectory, and contemporary significance, identifying four key evolutionary phases: its initial formulation; its expansion during the unipolar moment of the 1990s; its institutionalization and the rise of "smart power" in the 2000s; and its ongoing transformation within the digital landscape. The author highlights the distinction between soft power, predicated on cultural attraction, shared values, and credible foreign policy, and hard power's reliance on coercion. Furthermore, the analysis considers the impact of diminished U.S. legitimacy post-9/11 and the emergence of digital technologies—including social media, streaming platforms, and major tech corporations—as significant tools for shaping global perceptions. The article concludes that digital soft power is now a pivotal aspect of international strategic competition, underscoring the critical role of legitimacy and credibility in maintaining global influence in the 21st century.*

Keywords: *Soft power, Joseph Nye, smart power, U.S. foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, legitimacy, globalization, digital soft power, social media, digital diplomacy, global competition.*

Introduction

The concept of soft power is a necessary move away from classical ideas of international power in the globalized, networked world. Soft power was developed by Joseph S. Nye in the late 1980s and is defined as the power of a state to attract and influence other actors to favor and adopt its policies through non-coercive influence or material inducement. Whereas hard power is dependent on military



influence and economic coercion, soft power is founded on the employment of intangible resources such as cultural attractiveness, political ideology, and legitimate foreign policy. During an era of rapid globalization and technological innovation, soft power has not only endured but also evolved, particularly following the advent of the digital age.

Analysis and discussion

Nye articulated soft power as the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” According to this framework, states can influence global actors by making their culture appealing, promoting values others aspire to, and pursuing foreign policies perceived as legitimate. These elements foster voluntary alignment rather than compliance achieved through threats or inducements. Sources of soft power often extend beyond government actions, encompassing private actors, cultural industries, academic institutions, and civil society organizations.¹

We can divide into four distinct historical and conceptual phases of the evolution of soft power

- **The first phase is conceptualization** (Late 1980s – Early 1990s)

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the late 1980s to explain how states could influence others without coercion or payment.

During the latter phase of the Cold War, a noticeable erosion in the perception of U.S. global dominance led scholars to question the adequacy of traditional power metrics. In response, Joseph Nye introduced a broader conceptualization of power, arguing that influence in the modern international system is not confined to military and economic capabilities but also hinges on attraction and legitimacy (Nye, 1990). Nye posited that when a state’s culture, political values, and foreign policies are perceived as legitimate and desirable, it can achieve its objectives through voluntary cooperation rather than coercion or material inducements. This notion, later termed soft power, underscored the importance of persuasion and normative appeal as essential complements to hard power resources.

¹ Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs



In an era marked by interdependence, global communication, and ideological competition, Nye's argument shifted the discourse from dominance to influence based on credibility and attractiveness, redefining strategies for sustaining leadership in the international arena.²

- **The second phase is Post-Cold War Expansion and U.S. Dominance (1990s)**

After the Soviet Union's collapse, soft power became central to understanding U.S. global leadership.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the termination of the Cold War in 1991 ushered in what was widely characterized as the "unipolar moment," with the United States emerging as the dominant world power. It was an era of rapid expansion of American power in political, economic, and cultural domains. Without an ideological peer, Washington employed its preeminence to promote liberal democracy, open markets, and international governing institutions reflective of Western values. Globalization, facilitated by technological transformation and U.S.-led economic institutions, hastened the dissemination of American culture through the media, entertainment, and consumer brands, reinforcing the reputation of the U.S. as a normative power.³ Joseph Nye's soft power theory was imbued with additional meaning during this time because it explained the United States' ability to shape global tastes without the use of coercion. The attractiveness of American values—democracy, individual rights, and economic opportunity—was a source of legitimacy for American leadership. U.S.-led institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank further entrenched this dominance by writing liberal economic norms into the global order. Critics, however, maintain that this expansion was not entirely attractiveness-based because the U.S. also employed coercive tactics, including military interventions in the Balkans and later in the Middle East.⁴

² Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.

³ Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

⁴ Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.



So the 1990s were a time when soft power and hard power were complementing one another, generating what Nye later described as smart power. Since American political and cultural appeal was at an all-time high, this hegemony sowed the seeds of future resentment, as global opinion began to shift in the early 2000s because of perceived U.S.⁵

- **The third phase is Institutionalization and Strategic Integration (2000s)**

At the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, it became clear that in international politics, power could no longer be measured solely by military or economic means. Globalization, technological progress, and transnational problems have increased interdependence between states. In this context, the concept of soft power, put forward by Joseph Nye, has become an integral part of strategic policy discourse. Soft power is the ability to influence the will of other states without coercion or economic incentives, but through charm and legitimacy. Culture, political values, international image, diplomacy, and information flows serve as the main tools.⁶ In the 1990s, the global dominance of the United States further demonstrated the practical effectiveness of soft power. Through its democratic values, popular culture (cinema, music, technology), and leading role in international institutions, the United States was able to influence the political decisions of many states without the direct use of force. As a result, soft power has become not only a theoretical idea, but also one of the main directions of practical policy.⁷

The concept of Smart Power

However, at the beginning of the 21st century, especially after the events of September 11, 2001, the complexity of global security has shown that it is difficult to protect national interests with soft power alone. Problems such as terrorism, armed conflicts, and global economic instability have also made military and economic

⁵ Ikenberry, G. J. (2001). *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.

⁷ Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.



means important. Therefore, Joseph Nye proposed a new concept that combines soft and hard power - smart power.⁸

Smart power is a strategy for achieving goals through the harmonious use of hard power (military and economic means) and soft power (charm and diplomatic influence). This approach involves using military force only when necessary, and recognizing diplomacy and economic cooperation as the main means. For example, the US's use of hard measures (military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq) alongside soft tools (international aid, cultural exchange, diplomacy) in international security policy in the 2000s is an example of a smart power strategy.

The U.S. image suffered after 9/11 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, highlighting the limits of soft power when military dominance overshadows credibility.

The events of September 11, 2001, ushered in a new era in international politics. The largest terrorist attack in US history fundamentally changed not only domestic security policy, but also the global strategic approach. The administration led by President George W. Bush declared the doctrine of the “War on Terror” and launched large-scale military operations in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). These operations were initially accepted by the international community as a legitimate measure against the threat of terrorism. For the first time in NATO history, Article 5 was invoked, and many countries supported the United States in sending troops to Afghanistan.

However, over time, these military interventions did not produce the expected results, but rather led to many negative consequences. The long-term war in Afghanistan and the instability following the overthrow of the regime in Iraq have not only exacerbated, but also exacerbated, the threat of terrorism not only in the region but also globally. In particular, after the allegations of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were proven to be unfounded, the international legitimacy of the United States was seriously questioned. Acting without the full consent of the UN Security Council, ignoring international law, and pursuing an

⁸ Nye, J. S. (2009). The Future of Power. New York: PublicAffairs.



aggressive foreign policy have caused significant damage to the image of the United States.⁹

Loss of Image and Legitimacy

During this period, the US soft power potential declined significantly. According to the Pew Research Center's global surveys from 2003 to 2008, positive attitudes towards the US declined sharply in both Europe and the Middle East. For example, in France, the share of those who assessed the US positively fell from 62% in 2000 to 31% by 2003. In Turkey, this figure fell from 52% to 15%. The main reasons for this were the illegality of the war in Iraq, human rights violations (the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons scandals), and the US's avoidance of international organizations in many policy decisions. The legitimacy and attractiveness that lie at the heart of soft power weakened during this period. Attempts to achieve political goals through military superiority not only failed to produce the desired results, but also negatively affected the international reputation of the US. As a result, as Joseph Nye has noted, this period clearly demonstrated the limits of soft power: if a state's military policy is perceived as aggressive and illegitimate, its cultural and political values also lose their appeal.

The Need to Shift to Smart Power

The post-9/11 era has proven that relying solely on hard power to ensure global security is not effective. Military interventions, instead of eliminating terrorism, have created many new conflicts. Therefore, there is a need to restore soft power tools in US strategic policy and combine them with hard power. It was in this context that Joseph Nye put forward the concept of smart power. Smart power includes not only the use of force, but also diplomacy, economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and working with international institutions. This approach means that a balance between military and soft tools is necessary to solve the complex global problems of the 21st century.¹⁰

⁹ Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. (2003–2008). *Global Attitudes Survey*



The events of September 11 and the wars that followed showed that US military superiority is not enough to maintain global leadership. This situation confirmed that the effectiveness of soft power is directly related to legitimacy and trust. The damage to the international image of the United States and the loss of global trust have made new concepts, including the strategy of smart power, relevant. Today, this experience shows that sustainable leadership in international politics is not achieved by the use of force, but by policies based on charm, cooperation, and

- **The fourth phase is Digital Era and Global Competition (2010s – Present)**

Digital technologies transformed soft power, making online platforms and cultural content central to influence strategies.

The second decade of the 21st century is characterized by the global expansion of digital technologies and the Internet. This process has fundamentally changed the traditional mechanisms of soft power. While previously culture, values, and diplomacy were mainly disseminated through traditional media (television, radio, and the press), today online platforms, social networks, and digital media content have taken on a central role in influencing the global public consciousness. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have expanded the ability of states to distribute cultural content globally and control narratives. The United States has emerged as one of the number one soft power actors in this process. Companies such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Netflix have become not only technological giants, but also vehicles for promoting US values – open markets, freedom of speech, and individualism – on a global scale. For example, through Netflix series and Hollywood films, the US cultural model reaches a wide audience, which indirectly affects political views. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook also played an important role as a means of communication in political processes such as the Arab Spring.

At the same time, the development of digital soft power has also created new competition and risk factors. As China expands its information space through



platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and Huawei, Europe is promoting a policy of “digital sovereignty.” Control over narratives in the digital space has become a new front in the global political struggle. Threats such as cybersecurity, disinformation, and algorithmic manipulation are threatening the credibility and legitimacy of soft power. Today, digital technologies not only support soft power, but also reinterpret it. The concept of “digital soft power” has now been formed, which refers to the way states create their image through social media, produce global content, and develop digital diplomacy. Therefore, the digital era has made soft power an even more central factor in strategic policy.

Conclusion

The concept of soft power has evolved alongside the increasingly interconnected landscape of global politics. Initially conceived in the late 1980s, its utility as a complement to hard power became evident in the post-Cold War period. While the early 2000s showcased both its potential and limitations—particularly the erosion of U.S. soft power when hard power dominance undermined its appeal—this led to the development of the “smart power” doctrine. The digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped soft power, integrating online platforms, cultural exports, and digital diplomacy into its mechanisms for narrative construction and public opinion management. However, this digital environment also presents significant challenges, including disinformation campaigns, algorithmic bias, and cybersecurity vulnerabilities. The enduring effectiveness of soft power hinges not merely on technological prowess, but also on the consistent projection of credible values and the cultivation of trust. Therefore, the capacity to integrate hard, soft, and digital influence strategies will be critical for maintaining global leadership and stability in the 21st century.

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