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## Soft Power and Higher Education

**SOFT POWER IS THE ABILITY** to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and foreign and domestic policies. When the United States' policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. Joseph Nye, dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University from 1995 to 2004, coined the term "soft power." He describes how soft power differs from hard military strength and economic power, and why it is becoming more important than in the past—largely due to globalization and the communications revolution. Nye suggests how higher education leaders might enhance American soft power by helping to build a better understanding of the nature of power and increasing international student and cultural exchange programs.

### Soft Power

Power comes in many guises. Although we may believe that the United States is the only superpower in a unipolar world, in reality the distribution of power resources in the contemporary information age varies greatly across different issues. Power always depends on its context—requiring a far more complex analysis than first meets the eye. World politics has become like a three-dimensional chess game in which one can win only by playing vertically as well as horizontally. On the top

board of *classic military issues*, the United States is indeed the only superpower with global military might and reach, and it makes sense to speak in traditional terms of unipolarity or hegemony. However, on the middle board of *inter-state economic issues*, the distribution is multipolar. For example, the United States cannot obtain the outcomes it wants on trade, antitrust, or financial regulation issues without the agreement of the European Union, Japan, China, and others. It makes little sense to call this American hegemony.

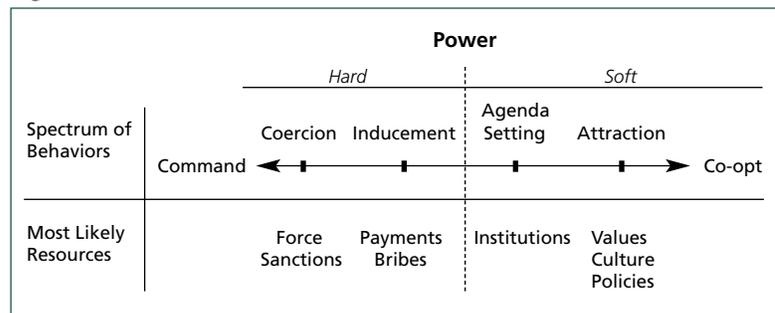
On the bottom board of *transnational issues* such as terrorism, international crime, climate change, and the spread of infectious diseases, power is widely distributed and chaotically organized among state and nonstate actors. It makes no sense at all to call this a unipolar world or an American empire—despite the claims of propagandists on the right and left.

Many political leaders still focus almost entirely on military assets and classic military solutions—the top board. They mistake the necessary for the sufficient and are one-dimensional players in a three-dimensional game. In the long term, that is the way to lose.

To obtain favorable outcomes on the other boards—particularly the bottom, transnational board—the use of soft power assets is often required. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not just force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.

Hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one’s purpose by affecting the behavior of others. The distinction between them is one of degree, both in the nature of the behavior and in the tangibility of the resources. Command power—the ability to change *what others do*—can rest on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power—the ability to shape *what others want*—can rest on the attractiveness of one’s culture and values or on the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express

Figure 1.



some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic. The types of behavior between command and co-option range along a spectrum from coercion to economic inducement to agenda setting to pure attraction, as illustrated in Figure 1.

### Sources of Soft Power

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources:

- its culture, in places where it is attractive to others;
- its political values, when it lives up to them at home and abroad; and
- its foreign policies, when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.

Culture is the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society. It has many manifestations. When a country’s culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of achieving desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that its culture creates. Narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power. The United States benefits from a universalistic culture. The German editor Josef Joffe argued in 2001 that America’s soft power was even greater than its economic and military assets: “U.S. culture, low-brow or high, radiates outward with an intensity last seen in the days of the Roman Empire—but with a novel twist. Rome’s and Soviet Russia’s cultural sway stopped exactly at their military borders. America’s soft power, though, rules over an empire on which the sun never sets.”

The political values a government champions in its behavior at home (for example, exercising democracy), in international institutions (working with others), and in foreign policy (promoting peace and human rights) strongly affect the preferences of others. Governments can attract or repel others by the influence of their example.





Government policies can reinforce or squander a country's soft power. Domestic or foreign policies that appear to be hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to the opinion of others, or based on a narrow approach to national interests can undermine soft power. The steep decline in perceptions of the attractiveness of the United States after the Iraq invasion, as measured by polls taken in the spring of 2003 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, offers a recent vivid example. However, respondents with unfavorable views for the most part said they were reacting to the Bush administration and its policies rather than to the United States generally. They distinguished the American people and culture from American policies. Respondents in most nations continued to admire the United States for its technology, music, movies, and television, but large majorities in most countries said they disliked the growing influence of America in their country.

### **Globalization, the Information Revolution, and Power**

It is often said that the world changed on 9/11. I would argue, however, that the attacks on America that day served as a flash of lightning that illuminated an already changed world landscape—one that we have only just begun to understand and chart a course through. Two primary shifts already well under way in September 2001 were globalization and the information revolution.

Globalization, characterized by networks of interdependence at global distances, has many facets beyond the well-recognized economic ties that now span the globe. Military, political, social, environmental, and health issues all cross borders and are driving the construct of global connections pushing the world toward modernity. The United States, while greatly influencing the spread of globalization, must also come to grips with what globalization means to our nation's place in the world order. Witness the profound effects of terrible conditions prevalent in a poor, weak country, Afghanistan, on the United States—which following the Cold War hadn't viewed Afghanistan as a nation of strategic importance.

Globalization is fueled by the information revolution, which has led to an incredible reduction in the cost of computing and communications. Between 1970 and 2000, the cost of computing dropped by a thousandfold, such that by 2000, instantaneous global communication was available to anyone with a laptop and an Internet connection. The result has been a tremendous growth in non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), from approximately 6,000 in the late 1980s to roughly 26,000 in the late 1990s. Much good stems from NGOs such as Oxfam and Doctors without Borders, but the ease of global communication also enables the activities of groups such as Al Qaeda, the international terrorist organization with cells in 50 to 60 countries.

What is different today is the ability of NGOs to communicate rapidly and coordinate their efforts over great distances. This ability has led to the privatization of war. Consider that a transnational network was able to kill more Americans in 2001 than the Japanese did at Pearl Harbor. Mass killing was possible in years past, but it occurred under totalitarian governments (e.g., Germany under Hitler, China under Mao, and Russia under Stalin).

The democratization of technology has made NGOs more powerful and terrorism more lethal. The United States must adjust its mental framework to this new landscape. Our post-9/11 focus has been on the use of hard power—the top board—when the problems we face stem from transnational issues on the bottom board. One metric to assess progress in the current struggle against terrorism is whether the number of terrorists being killed with hard power is greater than the number Osama bin Laden is recruiting with his soft power. From this point of view, things do not look good.

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### **Higher Education's Role**

Colleges and universities can help raise the level of discussion and advance American foreign policy by cultivating a better understanding of power and how the world has changed in important ways over the last 20 to 30 years. We can work to instill in our students and in the broader public a better appreciation of both the realities of our interconnected global society and the conceptual framework that must be understood to successfully navigate the new landscape we face.

Many observers agree that American higher education produces significant soft power for the United States. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, said in 2001: "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the

friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.”

The Cold War was fought with a combination of hard and soft power. Academic and cultural exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union, starting in the 1950s, played a significant role in enhancing American soft power. American skeptics at the time feared that visiting Soviet scientists and KGB agents would “steal us blind”; they failed to notice, however, that the visitors vacuumed up political ideas along with the scientific secrets. Because exchanges affect elites, one or two key contacts may have a major political effect. For example, Aleksandr Yakovlev was strongly influenced by his studies with the political scientist David Truman at Columbia University in 1958. Yakovlev eventually went on to become the head of an important institute, a Politburo member, and a key liberalizing influence on the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

From 1958 to 1988, 50,000 Russians visited the United States as part of formal exchange programs. Contrast that to today, when restrictive visa policies have caused a precipitous drop in applications from foreign students to study in the United States. The long-term implications are that talented foreign students seeking a quality higher education will go elsewhere, and thus America will lose the opportunity to both influence and learn from foreign students. This will diminish American’s awareness of cultural differences precisely when we must become less parochial and more sensitive to foreign perceptions.

Higher education leaders need to continue to press for less restrictive student visa policies and for more expeditious handling of visa requests. Further, colleges and universities can assess their internal policies concerning



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foreign enrollment and evaluate whether that enrollment is high enough to meet the needs of our global society.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. government invests a little over a billion dollars a year on soft power, including the State Department’s public diplomacy programs and U.S. international broadcasting. The nation’s defense budget is over \$400 billion a year and rising. Thus, we are spending approximately .25 percent of the military budget on soft power, or, put another way, 400 to 450 times more on hard power than on soft power.

Americans—and others—face an unprecedented challenge from the dark side of globalization and the privatization of war that have accompanied new technologies. Our success in this changed world will depend upon developing a deeper understanding of the nature of power and the role of soft power, and achieving a better balance of hard and soft power in our foreign policy. Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both.

**Joseph Nye** is University Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard University and served as dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government there from 1995 to 2004. Nye also has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and chair of the National Intelligence Council. His most recent books include *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), an anthology, *Power in the Global Information Age* (2004), and a novel, *The Power Game: A Washington Novel* (2004).

