

Review - The Future of Power

Written by Luke M. Herrington

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, MAY 24 2012

The Future of Power
By Joseph S. Nye, Jr.
New York: PublicAffairs, 2011

Joseph Nye is arguably the world's preeminent scholar on power in international relations. Known for his work on complex interdependence with Robert Keohane and his pioneering role in soft power, his most recent book, *The Future of Power*, is perhaps his seminal work on the topic. It is an intriguing analysis of the changing nature of power in the 21st century, which seeks to elucidate how new geopolitical and economic trends will alter world politics in the coming years. In this respect, *The Future of Power* joins other such works, including Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, Dilip Hiro's *After Empire*, and George Friedman's *The Next 100 Years*, each of which limns a small portrait of the future of world politics through its own unique lens. Nye's contribution is evidently distinguishable from the others in two respects. The first is obviously his ubiquitous focus on power. The second is that his emphasis on power diffusion points the way toward a non-polar world (113), whereas Zakaria and Hiro both predict an era of multipolarity on one hand, and Friedman forecasts the continuation of unipolarity on the other.[1]

Nye covers a lot of terrain in *The Future of Power*, so his contribution is admittedly more complicated than this. In

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discussing everything from the empowerment of nonstate actors to the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), he conjures the image of a tri-level, three-dimensional chessboard to illustrate the nature of the international system. At the highest level, the world is viewed from the traditional, state-centric perspective that emphasizes military power. There, the world remains unipolar, and Nye adds that the U.S. "is likely to remain supreme for some time" (xv). On the second level, however, where economic power is the marker of the system, power is more evenly distributed between the U.S. and other powers, such as Europe and China. Here, the system is multipolar. Finally, the bottom level of the chessboard represents "the realm of transnational relations that cross borders outside of government control, and it includes nonstate actors as diverse as bankers... and terrorists" (xv). Nye asserts that power on the bottom board is so widely diffused that concepts like polarity simply become nonsensical.

Nye seeks to answer a number of questions, including how power will function in the 21st century, and how is it evolving (ix). With this in mind, he argues that

Americans will need to stop asking questions about who is number one, and entertaining narratives about dominance, and start asking questions about how the various tools of power can be combined into smart strategies for power *with* rather than merely *over* other nations. Thinking more clearly about power and stimulating that broader narrative are the purposes of this book (xvii, Nye's emphasis).

It is from within this framework that Nye analyzes military power (25-49), economic power (51-80), soft power (81-109), and the ways in which these types of power can be integrated to form what he calls smart power (207-234). Moreover, he examines how the information technology (IT) revolution and cyberpower are contributing to the diffusion of power more generally (113-151). Finally, he tackles the question of U.S. decline, the rise of China, and power transition (153-204).

Power

Power can be defined in multitudinous ways. For example, Nye offers a dictionary definition which maintains "that power is the capacity to do things and... affect others to get the outcomes we want" (6), but it can also be defined in terms of actors with power. This necessitates specification of "the scope of power," and the "domain of power." Ultimately, it is a behavioral definition in harmony with that offered by the dictionary. However, this definition is insufficient because it inspires qualitative measures of power that focuses on outcomes, rather than ability (6, 8). Political attempts to address this focus simply on power resources. However, suggests Nye, this too is problematic, even in spite of its ability to quantify power in terms of measurable variables.[2] In essence, its focus on tangible forms of power undervalues soft power, and it ignores the reality of power conversion: resources do not always yield desired behavioral outcomes. Thus, the paradox of resource-based definitions illustrates that even the most well-endowed states may not always obtain the outcomes they desire (8). Citing a need to influence outcomes rather than concern with resources, Nye accepts the former definition as superior (10).

Later, he demonstrates that power exists on a spectrum. Hard power exists on one end, and includes "tangibles such as force and money" (21). Soft power resides at the other end, along with agenda framing, persuasion, and the awfully vague concept of attraction. "Fully defined," he argues, "soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (21). Because power is spectral, overlap is common, particularly with regards to the instruments of its execution. Said differently, the resources associated with power production can be used in both hard and soft power strategies. Nye contends military units "can produce both command behavior (by winning a battle) and co-optive behavior (by attracting) depending on how it is used." Here, attraction remains a vague construct, but he elaborates with a real-world scenario: the U.S. Navy can be deployed to win battles, or it can be deployed to win hearts and minds. For example, in 2004 the Navy provided relief to Indonesia after the East Asian tsunami (21-22).

Soft Power and the Military

Interestingly enough, this reflects the challenges endemic to soft power, and Nye accidentally illustrates one of the unique ways states overcome these obstacles vis-à-vis more traditional power apparatuses. Consider that soft

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power incorporated into government policy takes a long time to achieve results. Moreover, politicians and the public are both impatient; they need “a prompt return on their investments” (83). Thus, soft power approaches to international problems are deemed superfluous.

Politicians fear appearing “soft,” as Nye points out. So, Congress often finds it easier to increase the Pentagon’s budget versus that of the State Department (18). The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) possesses a \$500 billion-plus budget that dwarfs the State Department’s measly \$36 billion. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has addressed this by calling for a larger commitment “to soft power tools including diplomacy, economic assistance, and communications” (ix). Although military power has limits, the DOD remains the best-resourced branch of the U.S. government because “it can get things done” (xiv). It does not appear to matter that the Secretaries of State, Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all concur on the need for a greater emphasis on soft power. Obviously, military force is essential in the structure of the international system (49), but politicians fail to comprehend that “a number of issues simply do not lend themselves to forceful solutions” (31).

Under these circumstances, the incredible edifice of the U.S. military machine has become an instrument of smart power. Smart power is a synthesis of traditional sources of hard power, including military and economic resources, and soft power, including institutions, culture, ideas, the perception of legitimacy, and values (21-23). It combines coercion, payment, persuasion, and attraction (xiii). The example of the Navy’s participation in Indonesian relief operations is, therefore, just one example of how a military keen on the use of soft power can get around the constraints of political ambivalence. The Pentagon has a prodigious budget, so reality dictates the implementation of creative smart power strategies. Resultantly, the DOD has supplemented the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, for instance, with military chaplains. Moreover, the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard have trained their chaplains in matters of statecraft, “an initiative,” argues Douglas Johnston, “designed to enhance the conflict-prevention capability of the sea-service commands.”[3] Perhaps this also explains why the U.S. Army developed the Human Terrain System, a program meant to inject cultural competence into U.S. counterinsurgency efforts.[4]

Smart Power and “Liberal Realism”

Smart power is part of a new paradigm Nye advances: liberal realism. A liberal realist strategy is based on the need to provide security for the U.S. and its allies, but it also recognizes the importance of a strong economy, multilateralism, and values. The U.S. then is justified in encouraging “liberal democracy and human rights at home and abroad.” This, however, should not insinuate approval for the forceful imposition of American values, for Nye winces at policies of hegemony and empire (231-232).

Smart power is nothing new; Nye simply gives name to this age old policy-congruence. One of his critics rightfully points this out that smart power was widely employed by the U.S. in the aftermath of World War II, as it built the “international security and politico-economic architecture that underlay seven decades of security and prosperity benefiting much of the world.”[5] Criticisms notwithstanding, Professor Nye would certainly agree. After all, he recalls that rising powers generally implement “smart power strategies to good avail” (210). The example of Otto von Bismarck comes to mind, as he forcefully unified the German state, whilst also consciously altering the European balance of power to transform Germany into the diplomatic hub of the continent (210).

In the more modern context, Nye regularly praises the Obama Administration’s adoption of smart power. He cites the fact that soft power was integrated into counterinsurgency doctrine in an effort to win “the hearts and minds” of Afghan and Iraqi civilians (37). He even discusses how the election of President Barack Obama improved the U.S.’s global image (98-99). However, he fails to take account of, *inter alia*, the president’s much-hyped Cairo speech. President Obama expended substantial capital trying to reach out to the Muslim world, but in the Middle East the U.S. remains unpopular (98). Nye preaches the importance of an appealing narrative (19-20), but he fails to caution against a reductionist foreign policy. For all of his outreach to the Middle East, President Obama’s efforts were likely stifled not by his inherited wars, but by U.S. policy towards Palestine. This is a luculent example of how power can undercut itself without, as Nye calls for, good contextual intelligence distinguishing how soft, hard, and smart power interact in different situations (24). Only a holistic understanding of the Islamic World would have clarified the

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manner in which seemingly unrelated issues would stymie President Obama's soft power propaganda blitz in the Middle East.

From Power Transition to Power Diffusion

Although a solid portion of the book is dedicated to the issue of power transition, Nye joins other authors who challenge the China-rise thesis,[6] and he easily dispenses with the inhering tradition of declinism in American political thought. On one hand, Nye fails to recognize how the China-rise narrative is a soft power coup for the PRC, but on the other, he affirms that the U.S. is not in decline, and that "it is likely to remain more powerful than any single state in the coming decades" (204). Instead of worrying about China, Nye suggests that the IT Revolution (and globalization more generally) has ushered in an era where "power diffusion may be a greater threat than power transition" (xiii).

He attributes this to the fact that more and more nonstate actors are gaining new power resources. Recalling the horrors of 9/11, Nye dubs this the "privatization of war," though he is undeniably not the first to grapple with this concept (xiii).[7] He points out that hacktivists have the ability to attack a nation's cyber infrastructure (126)—a salient point now that groups like Anonymous regularly attack the Department of Justice, geopolitical forecasting firms like STRATFOR, major corporations, such as Bank of America, and so on. In what seems like more tautological regurgitation of things already established elsewhere, he emphasizes the importance of social networks, including Facebook and Twitter. However, he only refers to Wikileaks once (118), altogether failing to reference the Cablegate scandal. Finally, he asserts that the world's largest powers will be hard-pressed to exert control over the cyber domain in the way they have gained primacy over air, sea, and land (150).

Some Criticisms

Before concluding his chapter on cyberpower and power diffusion, Nye contributes a very concise history of the internet and its awesome growth. In 1993 there were only around fifty websites in existence; by 2003 the PRC alone was home to more than 400 million internet users. Unfortunately, this brief history is also home to the most glaring error in all *The Future of Power*. Nye asserts "the social network Facebook has some half a *trillion* users" (114-115, emphasis added). Does Facebook really have 500 *billion* users? The global population barely exceeds seven billion, and even now, Facebook only possesses a myriad 845 million users. In fact, *The Future of Power* was published in 2011, so around the time Nye would have been writing his book, Facebook had amassed roughly 500 *million* users.[8] Clearly, this mistake is obviously a typo, but from a scholar of Nye's caliber, it is a mistake that should have been avoided.

The only other truly bothersome flaw in Nye's otherwise superb book had to do with the spread of Islam. Digressing back to his discussion of soft power, Nye claims that ideas "play a role in organizing people for war and conquest" (26). Then he conveys a misnomer about the expansion of Islamic identity: "the spread of Islam was based on the attraction of belief" (26-27). Ideas are important, and belief certainly played a role in the spread of Islam. However, like the idea that Islam was spread at the tip of the sword, this is a common—and forgivable—mistake that just needs to be corrected to prevent future confusion. At the dawn of Islam, raiding was a common—indeed, vital—aspect of the Arab economy. Mohammad and his successors forced their tribal neighbors to submit to nonaggression pacts that banned raiding. Henceforward, "Muslims were forced to launch forays beyond the Arabian Peninsula into Byzantine and Persian territory,"[9] the result of which was the economically-driven expansion of their religion. Arab armies were basically just "doing what they were naturally acculturated to do, what the economic conditions of their homeland had always constrained them to do." [10]

One glaring flaw, and one minor one aside, *The Future of Power* stands out as a good book that will likely rouse the interest of seasoned scholars and graduate students. It is by and large an accessible book, though it is more for the intelligent reader, and—probably to Nye's chagrin—even more for the academic audience to which he explicitly hoped not to pander (xvii). It is a complex treatise on the nature of power itself, and that easily lends itself to advanced readers. Some foreign policy experts will likely find the book useful, but it is likely to be best received among those politicians, policymakers, and authors who fear and oppose U.S. declinism.

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[1] In some respects, more continuity exists between Zakaria's and Nye's findings than the other two works might allow. Both Zakaria and Nye concede that the United States of America (U.S.) will maintain military hegemony, but that it will be constrained by the rise of other powers, such as China and Brazil to name two, and the growing importance of nonstate actors. Nevertheless, Nye dismisses Zakaria's predictions that a "post-American world" will soon supplant the existing international order (234).

[2] Generally speaking, Nye finds attempts to develop composite indexes of power suspect, for they fail to account for contextually varying human relationships, the power of nonstate actors, or anything other than hard power (4-5). In recent decades, however, Chinese scholars have been attempting to establish a Chinese School in international relations theory, which bore fruit in the form of a statistical measure that combines economic, military, and soft power. Apparently, Nye is unfamiliar with the Comprehensive National Power (CNP) index, which measures "what might be referred to as a nation's gross national power." Although he dismisses the utility of these indexes, Nye may have found familiarity with the Chinese CNP index useful to his discussion of China's rise, because China's own CNP projections ironically "illustrate that the PRC will likely not overtake the U.S. in the 21st century." This could have interesting ramifications, at least in terms of Chinese soft power. Luke M. Herrington, "Why the Rise of China Will Not Lead to Global Hegemony," *E-International Relations*, 15 July 2011, available from <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/15/why-the-precarious-rise-of-china-will-not-lead-to-global-hegemony/>; Internet; accessed 21 March 2012.

[3] Douglas Johnston, "Introduction: Realpolitik Expanded," in *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, ed. Douglas Johnston (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4] Articles about the human terrain program are legion, due primarily to the considerable controversy it fostered within the field of Anthropology. Readers unwilling to turn to *Wikipedia* ought to find George R. Lucas, Jr.'s descriptions of the program sufficiently satisfying. See, for example, George R. Lucas, Jr., *Anthropologists in Arms: The Ethics of Military Anthropology* (New York, New York: AltaMira Press, 2009), 5.

[5] John W. Coffey, Review of *The Future of Power*, Prism 2.4 (September 2011), 161.

[6] For instance, refer to Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York, New York: Random House, 2001); John Gulick, "The Long Twentieth Century and Barriers to China's Hegemonic Accession," *Journal of World-Systems Research* XVII (2011); and George Friedman, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century* (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2009), 96-100.

[7] Fareed Zakaria referred to it as the democratization of violence, and Thomas Friedman referred to it as the super-empowerment of individuals and subnational actors. Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), 16; and Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 13.

[8] Facebook, "Factsheet," 2012, available from <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>; Internet; accessed 23 March 2012; and Eric Eldon, "Facebook Announces 500 Million Users, Stories and Thanks Applications," *Inside Facebook*, 21 July 2010, available from <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/07/21/facebook-announces-500-million-users-stories-application/>; Internet; accessed 23 March 2012.

[9] Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 86-87.

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[10] Ibid., 87.

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