

Interview - Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Written by E-International Relations

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Ever had a burning question for one of the top academics or practitioners in the International Relations field? Are you wondering how you can follow in the footsteps of your favorite IR scholar? e-IR is proud to announce a new interviews feature where you can do just that. Each month, we'll be soliciting questions from you, our readers, to ask leaders in the International Relations field.

We're kicking off with an interview with Joseph S. Nye, Jr. University Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard University, where he has been a faculty member since 1964. Dr. Nye has been named a top global thinker by Foreign Policy and the 2011 TRIP survey of international relations scholars. Along with Robert Keohane, he famously developed a new branch of International Relations theory – neoliberalism. He also developed the concepts of asymmetrical and complex interdependence, and more recently coined the term 'soft power.' His concept of 'smart power' – combining soft and hard power into a successful foreign policy strategy – helped shape the foreign policies of the Clinton and Obama administrations. He also served as chairman of the National Intelligence Council and later Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs under the Clinton administration, and prior to that as Deputy to the Undersecretary of State for Security Assistance from 1977-1979.

Professor Nye has answered some of your questions about the relevance of soft power in cybersecurity, the rise of China, and the Arab Spring, and offers some advice for young IR scholars.

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e-IR: Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

I have always thought the most interesting work lies on the boundaries and interstices of established fields and theories: for example between domestic and systemic politics; between economics and politics; between regional studies and IR theory. My forthcoming book, *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era* explores the relationship between IR theory and leadership theory, or what is often called the first and third images. It asks whether in the growth of American primacy it mattered who was president or not.

e-IR: How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I did not start with the central questions of war and security that dominated our field. I studied philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford, and my Harvard doctoral field work was on the relationship between economic and political rationality in the East African Common Market. As I tried to make sense of my empirical findings, I found the theoretical work of Ernst Haas very helpful. In the early 1970s, Robert Keohane and I began collaborating on transnational relations and power and interdependence, and we have exchanged so many ideas over the decades that he has critically affected my thinking.

e-IR: What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?

Follow your intellectual curiosity rather than the current fashion of the field. Look for anomalies and puzzles that you

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would like to think about. That way you may discover something interesting, and even more important, you will never be bored.

e-IR: Do you think the theory/practice divide is growing or abating?

There is a growing awareness of the sterility of the divide. I have always found that my time in government raised new questions I wanted to answer when I returned to the academy, and my academic work helped me think of new approaches to problems I faced in government. I describe this in my chapter in the Oxford Handbook of International Relations. Alex George wrote cogently about this more than two decades ago, but the problem persists.

e-IR: How will soft power evolve & extend into cyberspace, where power dynamics are inherently decentralized & hard to control? Similarly, how has social media changed the ability of states as well as non-state actors to project soft power (eg the recent Twitter exchange between Israel and Hamas during the exchange of missile fire)?

Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment, and it is well suited to the cyber domain. In the world of information, control of narrative becomes increasingly important, and struggles over soft power complement struggles over hard power as I describe in *The Future of Power*. The Twitter exchange between Israel and Hamas is a good case in point.

e-IR: In an increasingly multipolar world with emerging BRICs, do you see the use of soft power in IR becoming more frequent or rare?

I have never been much of a fan of the BRIC acronym, nor of the conventional wisdom that the world is multipolar, but I do think that in an information age, soft power and control of narrative will become increasingly important.

e-IR: Can soft power ever be threatening, and if so, is China's soft power a threat?

Like any form of power, soft power can be benign or threatening depending on the context and how it is used. It is not necessarily better to twist minds than to twist arms. If China uses its soft power as part of a campaign to expel the US from East Asia, that would be threatening. If Chinese soft power grows in the US and American soft power grows in China so that it becomes easier to manage conflicts, then it is a joint gain situation.

e-IR: How has the Obama administration's commitment to smart power affected the US foreign policy response to the Arab Spring? Is it working?

When Obama decided to abandon Mubarak and back the Tahrir Square demonstrators, he was betting on their narrative that they were on the "right side of history". The alternative would have been very costly in the short run. It is too soon to know whether it will work in the long run. Revolutions take decades to work through. Think of France in 1789, 1799, 1815.

e-IR: What role can/does soft power play in the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Neither side has been successful in using soft power to obtain outcomes by attracting or persuading their opponent, but both use it to try to attract the support of third parties.

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Next month we'll be interviewing Dr. Michael Osterholm, a nationally-recognized biosecurity expert in the United States, and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. Look out for our upcoming Twitter and Facebook announcements where we'll ask you for your questions for Dr. Osterholm.

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