

**FROM HARD POWER TO SMART POWER EVOLUTION OR CONCEPTUAL
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Annotation. *This article examines the evolution of the concept of power in international relations, moving from traditional notions of hard power to more contemporary frameworks of soft power and smart power. Particular attention is given to the theoretical contributions of Joseph S. Nye Jr., who redefined power as not only the ability to coerce but also the capacity to attract and shape the preferences of other actors.*

The article questions whether smart power constitutes a genuinely new theoretical framework or merely a strategic recombination of existing concepts. It argues that, despite its widespread use in academic and policy discourse, smart power suffers from conceptual ambiguity and analytical redundancy.

Through a critical analysis of existing literature and contemporary practices: such as educational exchange programs, cultural industries, and economic instruments. The study demonstrates that smart power is better understood as a strategic approach rather than a distinct category of power. Special emphasis is placed on the role of education (including programs such as the Fulbright Program, Erasmus Programme, and Chevening Scholarships), cultural industries (such as Netflix and HBO), and economic factors as key instruments of influence in the 21st century.

The article concludes that smart power should be viewed primarily as a practical foreign policy strategy rather than a theoretical innovation, reflecting the increasingly multidimensional, networked, and diffuse nature of power in the contemporary international system.

Key words: *international relations, power, hard power, soft power, smart power, Joseph Nye, cultural diplomacy, education, globalization, influence, foreign policy strategy.*

Аннотация. *В статье анализируется эволюция концепции власти в международных отношениях - от традиционного понимания жёсткой силы (hard power) к более современным категориям мягкой силы (soft power) и умной силы (smart power).*

Особое внимание уделяется теоретическому вкладу Joseph S. Nye Jr., который предложил рассматривать власть не только как способность к принуждению, но и как способность к привлечению и формированию предпочтений других акторов.

Статья ставит под сомнение статус smart power как самостоятельной концепции, утверждая, что, несмотря на её популярность в академическом и политическом дискурсе, она страдает от концептуальной размытости и аналитической избыточности. На основе критического анализа существующей литературы и современных практик (включая образовательные программы, культурные индустрии и экономические инструменты) доказывается, что smart power представляет собой не новую форму власти, а стратегический подход к комбинированию уже существующих ресурсов влияния. Особое внимание уделяется роли образования (например, Fulbright Program, Erasmus Programme, Chevening Scholarships), культурных индустрий (включая Netflix и HBO), а также экономических факторов как ключевых инструментов

современного влияния. В заключение делается вывод о том, что smart power следует рассматривать скорее как практическую стратегию внешней политики, нежели как полноценную теоретическую инновацию, отражающую многомерный и сетевой характер власти в XXI веке.

Ключевые слова: международные отношения, власть, жёсткая сила, мягкая сила, умная сила, Джозеф Най, культурная дипломатия, образование, глобализация, влияние, внешнеполитическая стратегия.

Introduction

The concept of power has always occupied a central position in the study of international relations. From classical realist interpretations emphasizing coercion and material capabilities to contemporary approaches highlighting attraction and legitimacy, the understanding of power has undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, power was associated with military strength, economic resources, and coercive capacity. However, with the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalization, scholars increasingly recognized the limitations of purely coercive approaches.

The emergence of Soft Power, introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr., marked a paradigmatic shift in how influence is conceptualized. Soft power emphasized the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. Later, Nye proposed the concept of Smart Power, defined as the strategic combination of soft and Hard Power.

Despite its popularity in both academic and policy circles, the concept of smart power remains contested. Is it a genuinely new theoretical framework, or merely a rebranding of existing ideas? This article argues that while smart power reflects an important evolution in the practice of international relations, it suffers from conceptual ambiguity and analytical redundancy. Rather than representing a distinct category of power, smart power is better understood as a strategic approach to combining existing forms of influence.

The Evolution of Power in International Relations

The concept of power has long been debated within social and political theory. Max Weber defined power as the probability of an actor achieving their will despite resistance, emphasizing domination and conflict.¹ In contrast, Talcott Parsons conceptualized power as a system resource aimed at achieving collective goals, thus introducing a more cooperative dimension.²

In international relations, realist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau viewed power as the central currency of politics, rooted in military and economic capabilities.³ This perspective framed international politics as a struggle for survival in an anarchic system.

However, the late 20th century witnessed a gradual shift. Nye challenged the traditional emphasis on material capabilities by arguing that power also includes the ability to shape preferences and attract others.⁴ This marked the transition from a purely coercive understanding of power toward a more multidimensional one.

Hard Power

Hard power remains the most traditional and tangible form of power in international relations.

¹ Weber, M. (1947). "The Theory Of Social And Economic Organization". p. 151-153

² Parsons, T. (1967). "Sociological theory and modern society". p. 208.

³ Morgenthau, J. H. (1949). "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace".

⁴ Nye, J. S. (1990). "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power".

It is based on coercion, inducement, and the use of force or economic leverage to influence the behavior of other actors. Instruments of hard power include military intervention, economic sanctions, and financial incentives. Historically, hard power has been central to major geopolitical events. For instance, the United States 'invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its embargo against Cuba exemplify the use of coercive strategies to achieve political objectives.⁵ These actions reflect the logic of "carrots and sticks", as described by Nye.

Despite its effectiveness in certain contexts, hard power has notable limitations. Coercive strategies can generate resistance, undermine legitimacy, and produce unintended consequences.

As contemporary global challenges, such as climate change and terrorism, require cooperation rather than confrontation, the limitations of hard power become increasingly evident.

Soft Power

Soft power represents a significant departure from traditional notions of power. It operates through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy rather than coercion. According to Nye, soft power derives from three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy.⁶

Cultural influence plays a particularly important role.

The global appeal of Hollywood films, streaming platforms like Netflix and HBO, and the spread of anime and music industries illustrate how cultural products can shape global perceptions.

These cultural exports often communicate values, lifestyles, and ideologies more effectively than formal diplomacy.

Education is another crucial component of soft power. Programs such as Fulbright Program, Erasmus Programme, and Chevening Scholarships foster long-term relationships and influence future elites. These initiatives create networks of individuals who are familiar with and often sympathetic to the values of the host country.

However, soft power is not without its challenges. As Raimzhanova highlights, the concept suffers from ambiguity regarding its resources, actors, and measurement.⁷ Unlike hard power, which can be quantified through military spending or GDP, soft power outcomes are intangible and difficult to evaluate.

Case Studies

To move beyond purely conceptual discussion, this section examines how smart power operates in practice through selected case studies. These examples illustrate that what is often labeled as "smart power" does not represent a distinct category of power, but rather different strategic configurations of existing instruments.

The United States represents the most developed and institutionalized example of smart power. Building upon the theoretical framework proposed by Joseph S. Nye Jr., U.S. foreign policy integrates both coercive and co-optive instruments in a coordinated manner. On the one hand, the United States relies on traditional hard power tools, including military alliances, global force projection, and economic sanctions. On the other hand, it actively deploys soft power resources through cultural industries, higher education, and public diplomacy.

Platforms such as Netflix, along with educational initiatives like the Fulbright Program, contribute to shaping global perceptions and preferences. What distinguishes this approach is not the mere coexistence of hard and soft power, but their strategic synchronization.

⁵ Gray, C. S. (2011). "*Hard Power and Soft Power*. US Army War College Press".

⁶ Nye, J. S. (2004). "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics."

⁷ Raimzhanova, A. (2015). "Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart".

This supports the argument that smart power functions primarily as a coordinated strategy rather than an independent form of power.

The case of China demonstrates an alternative model of smart power, characterized by the combination of economic statecraft and cultural diplomacy. A central instrument of China's global strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative, which provides large-scale infrastructure investments while simultaneously increasing economic and political influence. In parallel, China promotes its language and culture through institutions such as the Confucius Institute. This dual approach allows China to expand its influence without direct coercion, illustrating how economic and cultural tools can be strategically combined.

The European Union provides a distinct example of smart power rooted in normative and institutional influence. Rather than relying on military force, the EU combines economic leverage with the promotion of political values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights. One of the key instruments of EU soft power is the Erasmus Programme, which fosters cross-cultural exchange and long-term socialization. At the same time, access to the EU market is often conditioned on regulatory and political reforms.

The United Kingdom exemplifies a more subtle and long-term application of smart power through elite network formation. Programs such as the Chevening Scholarships attract future leaders from around the world, creating transnational networks of influence. This case demonstrates that smart power can function through time-delayed influence, reinforcing its strategic rather than conceptual nature.

Taken together, these case studies demonstrate that so-called "smart power" does not constitute a distinct form of power. Instead, it reflects different strategic combinations of existing instruments, shaped by national contexts and policy objectives.

The Rise of Smart Power

In response to the limitations of both hard and soft power, Nye introduced the concept of smart power. Smart power refers to the strategic integration of coercive and co-optive tools to achieve foreign policy objectives effectively.⁸ The appeal of smart power lies in its pragmatism.

It acknowledges that neither hard nor soft power alone is sufficient in addressing complex global challenges. Instead, successful strategies require a careful combination of both. For example, the European Union is often cited as a model of smart power. It combines economic influence, diplomatic engagement, and normative power to shape international behavior.

Similarly, educational initiatives can simultaneously enhance soft power (through attraction) and hard power (through economic development and human capital formation).

In practice, smart power manifests through a wide range of instruments that blur the distinction between hard and soft power.

Education serves as both a soft and hard power resource. On the one hand, exchange programs foster goodwill and cultural understanding. On the other hand, they contribute to economic growth by developing human capital. As Raimzhanova notes, education creates "ripple effects" that extend beyond immediate participants.⁹

The global influence of film, music, and digital media demonstrates the power of cultural industries. Hollywood, Netflix series, and global music trends shape perceptions and narratives.

⁸ Richard L. Armitage Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (2007). "Smart Power and the U.S. Strategy for Security in a Post-9/11 World".

⁹ Raimzhanova, A. (2015). "Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart".

These industries not only generate economic benefits but also reinforce ideological influence.

Economic strength remains a crucial component of power. However, in the context of smart power, economic tools are often combined with soft power strategies. For instance, development aid, trade agreements, and technological innovation can enhance both attractiveness and coercive capacity.

Despite its practical relevance, smart power faces significant conceptual challenges.

First, it lacks clear boundaries. If smart power simply refers to the combination of hard and soft power, it risks becoming a tautological concept. All effective foreign policy strategies have historically involved some mixture of coercion and persuasion.

Second, smart power does not provide a distinct analytical framework. Unlike hard and soft power, which are defined by their mechanisms (coercion vs attraction), smart power is defined by its outcome (effective strategy). This makes it difficult to operationalize and measure.

Third, the concept overlaps with existing theories. As Barnett and Duvall argue, power in international relations takes multiple forms, including structural and institutional power.¹⁰ Smart power does not fully account for these dimensions, limiting its explanatory capacity.

Evolution or Rebranding?

The central question remains: *does smart power represent a genuine evolution in the theory of power, or is it merely a rebranding of existing ideas?* On the one hand, smart power reflects a real shift in how states approach international relations. The increasing importance of non-state actors, global networks, and intangible resources necessitates more sophisticated strategies. In this sense, smart power captures the complexity of contemporary global politics.

On the other hand, the concept does not fundamentally redefine power. Instead, it repackages the long-standing recognition that effective influence requires a combination of tools.

As such, smart power may be better understood as a policy framework rather than a theoretical innovation.

Conclusion

The evolution from hard power to soft power and ultimately to smart power reflects broader changes in the international system. While hard power remains essential, its limitations have led to the growing importance of attraction, legitimacy, and cooperation. Smart power attempts to reconcile these dimensions by advocating for a strategic combination of coercive and persuasive tools.

However, this article has argued that smart power suffers from conceptual ambiguity and analytical redundancy. Rather than constituting a distinct form of power, it is more accurately understood as a strategy for integrating existing forms of influence. Its value lies not in theoretical innovation, but in its practical applicability.

In the 21st century, power is increasingly multidimensional, networked, and diffuse.

Understanding its complexity requires moving beyond rigid categories and embracing a more holistic approach. Whether labeled as smart power or otherwise, the ability to effectively combine different forms of influence will remain central to success in international relations.

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