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Review

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Soft Power and Great-Power Competition:
Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power between the United States and China

By Joseph S. Nye
Springer, 2023, ix + 208 pages, $43.61, ISBN (eBook): 9789819907144

Reviewed by Fevzi Kırbaşoğlu, Karadeniz Technical University



The book, *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China*, by Joseph S. Nye, is the fifth volume in the series *China and Globalization*. This series examines China's role in global security, economy, governance, and development from a broad perspective. It analyses the shifting balance of power within the international system, the transformation of institutional structures, and the dynamics of the multipolar world order.

The transformation in the global balance of power and China's growing influence requires a reassessment of the concept of power in the context of international relations literature. This book, which includes essays on the post-Cold War period by Nye, one of the leading theorists of the concept of soft power, and the transcript of an online interview conducted with Nye as part of the "China and World" webinar series organized by the Center for China and Globalization in 2021, provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the changing global dynamics.

The main purpose of this book is to analyze how the U.S., an established power, and China, a rising power, deploy soft power in a manner that extends beyond the conventional domains of power (military and economic). Furthermore, the book seeks to elucidate the nature of the competition between these two powers in this domain. The book consists of four main parts. The initial section of the book examines the theoretical framework of soft power and power shifts in the 21st century. The subsequent section analyses the deployment of soft power by the U.S. in foreign policy, with a focus on the Obama and Biden Administrations. The third part analyses China's global rise and the strategies employed by Xi Jinping during his tenure as the country's leader. The fourth part evaluates U.S.-China relations from a soft power perspective and examines the economic interdependence, competition dynamics, and potential for cooperation between the two countries. The author posits that competition between major powers can result in not only conflict but also collaboration through a process known as cooperative rivalry. In particular, the argument is made that positive sum game-like gains may be achievable in resolving current international problems, including pandemics, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and cyber-terrorism.

Soft Power and Great-Power Competition makes a significant contribution to the epistemological and methodological framework of the series. While other works in the series, such as *Enhancing Global Governance in a Fragmented World* and *The Future of China's Development and Globalisation*, adopt a knowl-

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edge production process focused on governance and development, this book broadens the epistemological spectrum of the series by producing knowledge from the perspective of the concept of power. The book presents a comprehensive and systematic analysis of soft power's theoretical evolution and practical applications. It provides a theoretical foundation for the descriptive approaches adopted in other works within the series.

From a methodological point of view, the book represents a significant contribution to the series, addressing important gaps in the existing literature. While the other volumes in the series tend to adopt a more China-centric approach to the analysis, the book utilizes a comparative methodology in examining the relations between the U.S. and China over the past three decades. It contextualizes the analysis from other works focusing on modern developments, such as *The Asian 21st Century* and *The Ebb and Flow of Globalisation*.

One of the original contributions of the study is the development of the concept of cooperative rivalry. This conceptual framework offers an analytical approach beyond the binary oppositions presented in works such as *Consensus or Conflict?* Furthermore, the detailed analysis of smart power and smart competition provides a comprehensive understanding of strategic thinking, a key aspect the series lacks. This conceptual richness and analytical depth are due to the author's mastery of the discipline. Nye's academic background and extensive knowledge of the literature on IR are evident in his comprehensive and multifaceted analysis of power relations. By situating the economic and diplomatic analyses of the other works in the series within a comprehensive framework encompassing diverse dimensions of power relations, the book enhances the thematic depth of the series by examining contemporary transnational issues in the context of power relations. Furthermore, it presents tangible recommendations for surmounting the Thucydides Trap, which refers to the risk that parties may be drawn into conflict if a rising power threatens an established power. Nye emphasizes that U.S.-China relations should be managed within a framework of managed strategic competition to avoid historical destructive patterns. In this context, Nye's proposals go beyond the theoretical framework and offer concrete policy recommendations. Nye argues that the solution to common global problems should extend past a positive-sum competition approach. Indeed, he states that China and the U.S. cannot tackle climate change or pandemics alone; these problems can only be solved through cooperation supports this approach. Nye also argues that economic and ecological interdependence can be the basis for stability rather than conflict and that face-to-face meetings and cultural exchanges at the leadership level should be increased.

In addition to the theoretical and analytical contributions, the book's original approach to institutional analysis is also worthy of note. The analysis of the future of the liberal international order and the processes of institutional transformation represents a significant contribution to the field of institutional analysis, filling a gap that has been identified in other works in the series. In particular, the comparative analyses of the periods under the presidencies of Biden, Trump, and Obama facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of institutional change. The book's multidimensional contributions demonstrate its significant impact on the series at the practical and strategic levels.

Soft Power and *Great-Power Competition* is comparable to similar works in the existing

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literature, especially Graham Allison's *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Unlike Allison's thesis of rivalry between the U.S. and China leading to inevitable war, Nye makes a rather optimistic argument that this rivalry can be tamed through the use of soft power and a cooperative rivalry strategy. In contrast to John Mearsheimer's realism-based approach in his 2001 book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Nye's emphasis on soft power suggests the potential for a more cooperative approach to international relations.

In particular, the analyses undertaken in this book on soft power theory, the dynamics of the U.S.-China rivalry, and the changes within the global balance of power might be a useful reference for policy practitioners, academics, and students alike. This book also focuses on geopolitical issues such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.' transformation of soft power policies. Insights that may advise future policy decisions, especially for those involved in international security and diplomacy.

While the analyses presented in the book are, for the most part, comprehensive and in-depth, there are nevertheless a few limitations. Firstly, Nye's emphasis on the significance of soft power, while insufficiently addressing the role of hard power, represents a fundamental shortcoming in his analysis. In this context, the thesis that the rivalry between China and the U.S. can be managed through soft power is an overly optimistic assessment, particularly in light of the military tensions in the South China Sea and the strategic disputes over Taiwan. However, given the thorough exploration of Chinese soft power strategies, the lack of empirical evidence of their success is surprising. Certainly, a more careful look at China's soft power projects in Africa and its influence in the Asia-Pacific region would have added greater depth to the analysis in the book.

Conversely, a more comprehensive analysis of the literature on the decline of U.S. soft power, particularly in the context of the Trump presidency, represents a significant omission in the historical overview presented in the book. Furthermore, the study's narrow geographical focus on the U.S.-China dynamic has resulted in a lack of examination of the impact of other global actors, including the European Union, India, and Russia, on this competition. Furthermore, predominantly author-originated sources have prompted criticism that the work fails to represent a range of academic perspectives adequately.

The timeliness of the data used in the book is another important point. Since the book relies on data from before 2020, there are many gaps in analyzing the changing world order, at least in the post-COVID-19 world. In this regard, a deeper analysis could have added much greater value to the study concerning understanding contemporary applications and implications of soft power.

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