Soft Power: theoretical framework and political foundations

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Abstract

Although 30 years have passed since it was first formulated by the American political scientist Joseph Nye Jr, experts in international relations still debate on the contribution that soft power can give in foreign policy. This article aims to analyse the epistemological framework of soft power since its elaboration over the years till now. The research delves into two essential angles of soft power. The former is the study on the relevance of the concept of soft power in the current political dynamics. The latter is the definition of the idea of soft power with a focus on the evolution of such an idea since it was formulated by Joseph Nye Jr.

The academic debate around the concept of soft power can be summarised mostly around four points: (1) the definition of soft power, (2) the relationship between hard and soft power; (3) resources and behaviours generating soft power; (4) the actors involved, when we speak about soft power.

In the political debate of the last few years, some political scientists and practitioners have raised doubts about relevance and effectiveness of soft power in the current international political dynamics. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which is reshaping the global order, is demonstrating that deploying effective public diplomacy is still crucial in international relations.

Keywords: Soft power, foreign policy, public diplomacy

„Miękka Siła”: ramy teoretyczne i podstawy polityczne

Streszczenie

Choć minęło 30 lat, odkąd koncepcja „miękkiej siły" (ang. *soft power*) została sformułowana przez amerykańskiego politologa Josepha Nye'a Jr, eksperci w stosunkach międzynarodowych nadal debatują na temat wkładu, jaki *soft power* może wnieść w politykę zagraniczną. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu analizę ram epistemologicznych „miękkiej siły" od opracowania tej koncepcji na przestrzeni lat. Badanie obejmuje dwa zasadnicze aspekty „miękkiej siły". Pierwsze z nich to studium na temat znaczenia koncepcji „miękkiej siły" w obecnej dynamice politycznej. Drugą jest analiza definicji „miękkiej siły" z uwzględnieniem ewolucji tej idei od czasu jej sformułowania przez Josepha Nye'a

Debata akademicka dot. koncepcji „miękkiej siły" ogniskuje się głównie wokół czterech punktów: (1) definicja „miękkiej siły", (2) związek między twardą i miękką siłą; (3) zasoby i zachowania generujące „miękką siłę"; (4) zaangażowani aktorzy, gdy mówimy o „miękkiej sile".

W debacie politycznej ostatnich kilku lat niektórzy politolodzy i praktycy wyrazili wątpliwości co do znaczenia i skuteczności „miękkiej siły" w obecnej międzynarodowej dynamice politycznej. Jednak pandemia COVID-19, która zmienia światowy porządek, pokazuje, że stosowanie skutecznej dyplomacji publicznej jest nadal kluczowe w stosunkach międzynarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: „miękka siła", polityka zagraniczna, dyplomacja publiczna

Joseph Nye Jr coined the term *soft power* in his book *Bound to Lead...*(1990a), but several authors (Hunter 2009; Vyas 2010; Watanabe, McConnell 2008; Laskai 2013) stressed that looking at history, several practices predate the coining of this term. Nye Jr himself, in the foreword of the book *Soft power superpowers: Cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States* edited by Yasushi Watanabe and David L. McConnell, claims that despite the concept of soft power is recent, "the behaviour it denotes is as old as human history" (Nye Jr 2008a: p. ix). For instance, Alan Hunter (2009: p. 6) underlines that the concept of soft power has been a fundamental part of military thinking in China for over 2000 years. Moreover, he argues that the Chinese concept of *soft power* is characterised by two components: stratagems, mostly used in the military context and associated with Sun Zi and his work *Art of War...*(2007) and moral leadership, which roots are in Confucianism and the moral norms it promotes.

In the last few years, since J. Nye Jr formulated and refined the concept of soft power in his following works, such an idea has evolved and expressed more in detail. This result has been possible thanks to the contributions, analyses, and critics of several scholars, who starting from the works of Nye Jr, further elaborated on the concept of soft power. This article delves into two essential facets of soft power. The first aspect is the study on the relevance of the concept of soft power in the current political dynamics. The second facet is the definition of the idea of soft power with a focus on the evolution of such an idea since it was formulated by J. Nye Jr.

The relevance of the concept of *soft power* in the current political dynamics

Many authors have stressed that the concept of *soft power* has gained considerable popularity both at academic and non-academic level (House of Lords 2014; M. Li 2009: p. 1; Watanabe, McConnell 2008: p. xvii; Lee 2011: p. 11; Parmar, Cox 2010: p. 14; Melissen 2005, 2011). For instance, in the introduction of the book *Soft power superpowers: Cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States*, Yasushi Watanabe and David L. McConnell indicated the dramatic increase in terms of the number of searches on google as a numerical indicator to demonstrate the growing popularity of such subject in the last few years (Watanabe, McConnell 2008: p. xvii).

Why has the concept of *soft power* gained such relevance both among the academic and non-academic milieu? The main goal of this part of article is to explore the main

reasons explaining the growing interest of scholars, politicians, and decision-makers on the concept of *soft power*. Joseph Nye Jr and other authors, who have analysed such subjects, have identified trends and changes characterising current political, social, and economic dynamics, which explain the growing popularity of soft power.

A first change explaining the relevance of the concept of *soft power* is the dramatic change of international relations and, in particular, the different patterns characterising the interaction among international actors. As Joseph Nye Jr indicated in his work *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, the traditional approach viewing the relations among states as only a balance of power based on their military power is insufficient today (Nye Jr 2004: p. 5). The contemporary world is more complicated than in the past, where more actors are involved and take an active part in the dynamics of international relations. The emergence of new actors in the international arena has been defined first by Alice Amsden, the "rise of the rest", referring to emerging countries in international relations after the Second World War (Amsden 2001). Such a concept has been expanded by Joseph Nye Jr (2015) and other scholars (Riordan 2005: p. 187; House of Lords 2014: p. 25), referring to the growing role of non-state actors in the world governance.

If in the traditional conception of international relations, only states and international organisations were considered the unique actors in the international arena, over the last decades, other players have emerged and are playing a crucial role in the international relations. The new global players are multinationals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), terrorist groups, and in some instances, only individuals. The emergence of new actors has been facilitated by the progress in science and technology, defined by Nye Jr (2004: p. 22) as "democratizing technology", which reduced the costs of communication, transportation and made technologies (including military instruments) more accessible and cheaper for ordinary people, and now can be used not just by the states. Such facility, as access to powerful weaponry by ordinary people, has been defined by Nye Jr (2004: p. 24) as "privatization of war". Current terrorist threat, which is one of the main issues of the political agenda of states and international organisations, is probably the best example demonstrating such phenomenon.

Another trend, which is closely related to the increase of actors in the international arena, is the growing complexity of interactions among actors in the international relations and dispersion of power. Joseph Nye Jr (2004: p. 4) described such complexity as a "tridimensional chess game", wherein terms of military force, the world is unipolar (the U.S.) is the unique superpower), in economic issues, the distribution of power is multipolar; in transnational topics (climate change, international crime, terrorism, the spread of infectious diseases) power is distributed chaotically. More specifically, if in military disputes one player (the U.S.) is more influential than other nations, in the other dimensions (economics and transnational issues), power is broadly distributed among countries, and no one can prevail on the others.

A third trend explaining the growing role of *soft power* in the current international dynamics is the inadequacy of reliance only on military force in managing international relations. Philip Seib affirmed in the introduction of this book *Toward a New Public Diplomacy...,*

that hard power measures are not enough alone to solve conflicts (Seib 2009: p. viii). To demonstrate this, Nye Jr (2004: p. xi) and other authors (Herring, Rangwala 2006; Baker, Hamilton 2006; Watanabe, McConnell 2008: p. xxii) take as an example the US military campaign in Iraq. On such occasions, the *hard power* dominance of the United States only succeeded in removing Saddam Hussain, but it does not manage in establishing a functioning democracy and in defeating international terrorism. On the opposite, the threat of terrorism has increased in the last few years, and the position mostly oriented to hard power measures of the US had different effects, as demonstrated by in several pools indicating an increasing feeling anti-Americanism in several regions of the world (Watanabe, McConnell 2008: p. xxvii; M.Li 2009: p. 5; Nye Jr 2010a: p. 4). Also, terrorism is still perceived as one of the major threats for many countries.

In contrast to the US *hard power* policy, Ernest J. Wilson (2008: p. 99) affirmed that China, with its doctrine of "Peaceful Rise", consisting in avoiding the use of *hard power* instruments, is becoming more and more attractive to many countries in the world. The same principle has also been supported by Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004), who defined the Chinese rise of influence in the dynamics of the international relations as "Beijing consensus", and which is in antithesis with the unilateral, aggressive, and neoliberal policy of the United States defined as "Washington Consensus."

An important factor, which Nye Jr (2004) describes as an element undermining the utility of coercion in favour of persuasion, is the high costs related to the use of military means in the current world. Nye Jr states that this is post-industrial democratic countries, mostly focused on welfare rather than military glory, and for non-democratic countries, which might face setback embarking in military campaigns, such as the flee of investors from their nations (Nye Jr 2004: p. 20). This phenomenon is one of the reasons, which explains the interest of decision-makers, both democratic and non-democratic countries, in developing their public diplomacy instruments and soft power dimension to strengthening their position in the international arena.

An additional trend in the contemporary world, which makes *soft power* relevant, is the increasing importance of public opinion. The spread of democracy and IT revolution are two key factors, which have substantially contributed to strengthening the role of public opinion both at national and at the international level. As for the first factor, in the last decades, the number of democratic countries had increased as described by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993), when he talked about waves of democratisation. Information in the contemporary world can be transmitted faster and cheaper than in the past, thanks to technological discoveries, which have reduced the costs of communication. In such context, states pay more and more attention to public opinion, both of their countries and other nations. As Nye Jr indicated in his work *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*, emerging democracies such as Mexico and Chile, now matters in international relations, because they have some influence voting in the UN Security Council (Nye Jr 2004: p. 16). Governments of such countries should take into consideration the opinion of their citizens, when they make decisions, and unpopular policies can harm them.

An additional trend, supported by J. Nye Jr and E.Wilson, is that *soft power* is a crucial element in the contemporary political context to achieve goals more smartly. In such regard, Wilson affirms the world has become "smarter," meaning that goals can be reached more smartly (Wilson 2008: p. 113; compare: Nye Jr 2015). This phenomenon can be seen in different spheres, such as in technology and education. As for technology, hi-tech tools can be more effective than the traditional ones. For instance, if high-technology is applied to the military context, innovation and weapons can reach specific goals more efficiently and effectively than the traditional ones. The transformation from industrial to post-industrial economies implied that power increasingly rests on a nation's capacity to create and manipulate knowledge and information (Wilson 2008). Innovation and creativity are essential to boost all other sectors, including the military one. A final reason for the hunt for *smart power* today is that target populations themselves have become "smarter." Education is more accessible to everybody, also to those living in developing countries. These newly educated populations demand to be treated differently than in the past. The spread of democratic practices has meant that foreign leaders also have less leeway than in the past to act as American surrogates.

The academic debate on the concept of soft power

As Watanabe & McConnell stressed in the introduction of their work *Soft power superpowers: cultural and national assets of Japan and the United States*, the concept of soft power, in contrast with "clash of civilizations" theory of Hungtington or the "end of history" idea of Fukuyama, was less controversial and disputed by the scholars (Watanabe, McConnell 2008: p. xvii). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the formulation of such concept given by Nye Jr was entirely accepted by other authors and that there was not a debate in the scholar community around such subject. On the opposite, as seen in the previous paragraphs, the concept of soft power was not only highly relevant in the global political dynamics, but it has also been widely debated by scholars and practitioners. This part of the article aims to investigate state of the art on the concept of soft power, reviewing the main contributions of researchers, through the prism of aspects of soft power, objects of the academic debate. Such conceptual discussions on the topic of soft power include the next issues:

1) the definition, nature and essence of the concept of soft power (what is precisely soft power?);
2) the relationship between hard and soft power (what is the difference between them? when does soft power finish and hard power begin?);
3) the resources and behaviours generating soft power (what makes soft power?);
4) the actors involved (which actors are involved when we speak about soft power?).

1) The definition of *soft power*

Joseph Nye Jr defines *soft power* in his work *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than