

Approaching Power and Understanding Leadership through The Lens of Joseph Nye

by JOSÉ LUIS VALDÉS-UGALDE¹

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH NYE²

Dear Professor Nye: Thank you very much for accepting this interview with *Norteamérica*. As you are aware, our journal is a trilingual Mexican academic journal on regional studies, committed to the study of North America and the world, distributed and read both in the three NAFTA countries and in Europe and Latin America. For our readers concerned with the state of world affairs, it will be of great interest to have the insights of one of the most renowned analysts and prolific writers on international and regional affairs. I am sure that this interview is going to be widely read by our public. Thank you very much for your kindness in responding to the following questions.




What is your diagnosis of the current state of world affairs in terms of the use of power?

JN: Power always depends upon context, and in today's world, power is differently distributed in different contexts. In the dimension of military relations among states, the distribution of power is unipolar. No state can equal the U.S. In the dimension of economic relations among states, the distribution of power is multipolar, because Europe, Japan, and China can make effective demands on the U.S. In the realm of transnational relations

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such as pandemics, climate change, and so forth that cross borders outside the control of governments, power is chaotically distributed, and it makes no sense to speak of unipolarity, multipolarity or hegemony. Many of the greatest challenges we face are now emerging in this transnational dimension.


 What is the place of soft power in a non-state-based conflict as it has been established by the strategy of the war on terrorism?

JN: Soft power is the ability to obtain one's goals through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Many non-state actors such as NGOs have primarily soft power. Other non-state actors such as al Qaeda combine hard and soft power. Bin Laden attracts his followers even if he repels others. A strategy to defeat terrorism must be based on an attractive narrative to counter the terrorists' narrative. Success depends not simply on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins.


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 Considering that security threats may be threats to identity, have U.S. security strategies actually safeguarded American identity? Is Islam a threat in this sense?

JN: Islam is not a threat to American identity. We are a nation of immigrants built upon the strength of unity in diversity. Muslims can be good Americans. But to the extent that fear makes us turn inwards or to categorize Islam as a threat to our identity, we damage ourselves.

 You have defined security as "the absence of threat to core values".³ Can you elaborate further on this important idea?

JN: Security involves many dimensions beyond just the absence of physical damage or bodily harm. It means the ability to live by constitutional and humanitarian values that are central to our identity. Fear can lead us to damage those values. Terrorism is like ju jitsu. The smaller actor uses the strength of the larger against himself. If terrorism generates fear that leads us to undercut our own values, we become a threat to our own security and they win.

 What is the current nature of U.S. power and leadership? Has soft power been abandoned by Washington? Is the United States

³ As stated by Nye on the panel "Globalization, Security and Contemporary Conflict", 49th Annual ISA Convention "Bridging Multiple Divides", San Francisco, Calif., March 26-29, 2008.

facing a crisis of hegemony? What is the combination of soft and hard power that would provide “the solution” for the United States if it wants to be repositioned as an actor with renewed legitimacy?

JN: Ironically, the Bush administration has tried to use the soft power of values such as freedom and democracy as expressed in his second inaugural address, but the administration has not understood the ways in which its practice at home and its hard power actions such as the invasion of Iraq undercut its appeal to values. Soft power depends on the perceptions of others, and that requires listening and understanding how our messages will be heard by others. One can hope that changes in policy under a new administration may help to restore some that lost soft power.



What do you mean when you state that the United States is losing the battle because of ideas? Is it related to the Krauthammer “new unilateralism” idea of the latest U.S. adventures?⁴

JN: Krauthammer coined the term “new unilateralism” in 2001. The argument was that with the end of the Soviet Union, no country could balance American power. We could decide what we thought was right and others had no choice but to follow. This was a profound misunderstanding of the nature of power in today’s world as described in my answer to the first question. Without legitimacy in the eyes of others, our actions consumed rather than produced soft power.



To what extent can ideology work as a negative resource of soft power?

JN: When ideology blinds one to the effects of one’s actions and to how they are perceived in the eyes of others, ideology destroys rather than produces soft power. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction. When an ideology takes account of the needs and

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⁴ Krauthammer’s concept of “new unilateralism” makes reference to the form of realism that is clear in its determination to self-consciously and confidently deploy U.S. power in the pursuit of global ends. It is noteworthy that the new unilateralism defines U.S. interests far beyond narrow self-defense. The new unilateralism argues explicitly and unashamedly for maintaining unipolarity, for sustaining the United States’ unrivalled dominance for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, Krauthammer cautioned that the only way to retain global U.S. pre-eminence is to prevent “gradually transferring power to multilateral institutions as heirs to American hegemony”. See Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest*, vol. 70, winter 2002, pp. 5-17.

desires of others, it may produce soft power. If it neglects their needs or perspectives, it may have negative effects. Bush's proclaimed "freedom agenda" sounded good to Americans, but was seen as hypocritical and a diversion in much of the Muslim world.



In the May-June 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, in your article "The Decline of America's Soft Power" and in your book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, you stress the attractiveness of the United States as a reflection of its soft power. Can you contextualize the idea of "power flowing from the attraction" in the current state of affairs of the U.S. global leadership?

The resources that produce soft power for a country are its culture (where it is attractive in the eyes of others); its values (when they are not undercut by contradictory actions that appear hypocritical); and its policies (when they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others).

JN: The resources that produce soft power for a country are its culture (where it is attractive in the eyes of others); its values (when they are not undercut by contradictory actions that appear hypocritical); and its policies (when they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others). Polls show that the U.S. has lost attractiveness in many countries. Fortunately, when asked, respondents reply that it is American policies (what we do) that are unattractive, not our culture and values (who we are). Since policies are easier to change than values or culture that means that it is possible to recover the loss of attractiveness.



The Report of the *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, states that the "United States must become a smarter power by once again investing in the global good."⁵ Is the global good genuinely compatible with U.S. principles and interests in world affairs? Are there still consolidated global public goods?

JN: Smart power is the ability to combine hard and soft power into an effective strategy. All states pursue their national interest, but national interests can be defined in different ways. Certain global public goods such as a freedom of the seas, a stable climate, or an open international economic system are difficult to produce unless the largest country defines its national interest in a way that helps to produce them. To the extent that the U.S. is able to do so, it is better placed to achieve goods for Americans that are also good for others. That also produces soft power.

⁵ For Joseph Nye, the concept of global good entails providing the things that people and governments want in all quarters of the world but cannot attain in the absence of U.S. leadership. See Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (co-chairs), *A Smarter, More Secure America: Report of the CSIS Commission on Smart Power*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2007.



Since the publishing of *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, leadership has been a concept that has been gravitating at the core of your academic insights. What is the state of the global leaderships?

JN: Leadership means more than giving commands or orders. As I argue in my new book *The Powers to Lead*,⁶ it also means attracting others. This is particularly true as networks replace hierarchies in post industrial societies. Leadership requires the combination of hard and soft power. The U.S. has become too enamored of hard power in recent years, and has to recover its capacity to use soft power as well.



China is beginning to look like the embodiment of the new pattern for worldwide leadership and, I would add, a leadership carried out with elements of relatively soft power. Are China's hard power resources undermining its prosperous future as a new leader? Is China using its power resources smartly?

JN: China is paying much more attention to soft power than it used to. (Hu Jintao, President of the Popular Republic of China, stressed this point in the seventeenth party congress last year.) This is a smart strategy for a rising power. It helps to remove the sense of threat that might make other states balance against it. But China faces limitations in its pursuit of soft power. So long as its political system depends upon repression at home, it curtails the cultural freedoms that have made Hollywood or Bollywood effective. And when it uses force, as in the case of Tibet, it hurts its image and attractiveness abroad.




What is the role of emerging countries such as India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa in the accommodation of global leaderships?


JN: As emerging countries gain in power, they will properly insist upon a greater voice and participation. It would be good to revise the membership of the UN Security Council, but this has proven difficult (not least because of jealousies among emerging countries.) At a minimum, the G-8 should be expanded to a G-14 (based on a dynamic criterion like GDP) in which all continents can be represented, and yet action can be negotiated.

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⁶ Joseph Nye, *The Powers to Lead*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.


 After the 9/11 terrorist attacks a feeling of a vacancy of hemispheric leadership has prevailed in Latin America. Is this feeling a translation of the actual state of affairs? Nowadays, in the absence of U.S. leadership, this empty space seems to be fragmentarily filled by different state actors such as Venezuela and Brazil, and to a lesser extent by Mexico. Is Washington interested at all in participating in Latin American affairs?

JN: The best way to handle the rise of Brazil and Venezuela is to pay less attention to Venezuela and more attention to Brazil. We should show that friendship with the U.S. produces more for people than does Chávez' populist rhetoric in Venezuela. Ironically, President Bush came into office committed to paying more attention to the hemisphere. In that sense, Mexico and Latin America were among the greatest victims of 9/11 and the diversion of attention to the Middle East.

 In part as a result of the above, the level of complex interdependence between Mexico and the United States has been critically limited rather than encouraged. Can Mexico transform this situation and turn it into a "smart" scenario? Has this situation harmed NAFTA's future in any way? Do you envision a Latin America that is more integrated with Europe or relatively dependent on the U.S.?

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JN: It is healthy for Latin America to have good relations with Europe, but the US and Latin America will remain interdependent. NAFTA recognizes this interdependence. Mexico can help to make NAFTA work effectively, which requires recognition of the need to make sure that those in both countries who are left behind by market forces nonetheless can benefit from market integration.

 If the "UN is more an instrument of its member states than an independent actor in world politics", it can be argued that it has been a misused soft power resource of every single member and a misunderstood hard power resource for the Security Council's permanent members. Do you agree?

JN: Many people ask about difficult problems "why doesn't the UN solve it?" The answer, of course, is that the UN is us, the member states. It can do little more than the consensus of states allows. When actions are stymied by ideological and rigid bloc differences, member states, whether rich or poor, undercut the potential of the UN.



Whether the leader is *transformational* or *transactional*,⁷ none guarantees any success in the pursuit of the national interest. What is actually the purpose of a leader in international relations?

JN: Leaders are constrained by the international structure that they inherit, but they still have choices in how they define their national interests and choose to act. For example, if Al Gore had been president in 2001, my guess is that he would probably have used force against the Taliban government that had supported al Qaeda. I doubt that he would have invaded Iraq as George W. Bush chose to do.



At the end of the Bush administration, what is your evaluation of its handling of power? Are there any consequences of the *transformational* character of the Bush presidency for the international system?

JN: Bush saw himself as a transformational leader, but lacked the contextual intelligence to make his transformation of the Middle East positive and effective. The lessons of the Bush experiment is that a leader must understand the culture, distribution of power, flows of information, and timing of events to be effective in transformation. I regard Bush as a failed transformational leader.



The renewed role of military force in international relations has brought realism back as a valid theoretical paradigm for explaining international relations and the alleged privatization of war. Why?

JN: Realism has always been an essential part of wisdom in understanding international relations since the days of Thucydides or Machiavelli. But classical realists never neglected the role of ideas as many modern academic realists have. People are moved partly by the sword, but also by words. With the rise of transnational terrorism and the privatization of war, classical realism is becoming more relevant than ever.

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⁷ A transformational leader is the kind that can change what would otherwise be the course of history. Nye argues that this type of leadership induces followers (by empowering and elevating them) to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the higher purposes of the group that provides the context of the relationship. Transformational leaders mobilize power for change by appealing to the followers' higher ideals and values rather than their baser emotions. In contrast to the transformational, transactional leaders rely on individual interests and work on the basis of rewards, creating concrete incentives to influence followers' efforts. See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Powers to Lead*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

I remain relatively optimistic about the capacity of the United States to recover its soft power. In the 1970s, the U.S. was very unpopular because of the Vietnam War, but recovered its soft power after it changed its policies.

If the American elections lead to a change in the substance and style of American foreign policy, I think it is possible that we may recover our soft power again.



If it is true that non-state actors “do not replace the State but make it more crowded”,⁸ what is the future of the role of the state when it comes to the preservation of security?

JN: The nation state is likely to remain the dominant institution in most peoples’ lives for some time to come, but in the age of the internet and transnational communications, people will also be caught up in webs of loyalties and interest that criss-cross states. Moreover, hackers and cyber warriors can carry out anonymous attacks that affect citizens’ security but which are hard to identify and deter. States will find their task of providing security more difficult.



In your view are there any substantial differences in the foreign policy platform of any of the two parties running for the presidency in the U.S.?

JN: The Republicans and Democrats share more values than not. At the same time, Republicans generally tend to place more emphasis on ensuring security through hard power than the Democrats do. They also tend to place more faith in unrestrained market forces than Democrats do. But these tend to modest differences of degree rather than major differences of kind. There is a bipartisan feeling of the need for change from the past eight years.

In conclusion, I remain relatively optimistic about the capacity of the United States to recover its soft power. In the 1970s, the US was very unpopular because of the Vietnam War, but recovered its soft power after it changed its policies. If the American elections lead to a change in the substance and style of American foreign policy along the lines suggested in the bipartisan Smart Power Commission Report that Richard Armitage and I co-chaired for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (available at that website),⁹ I think it is possible that we may recover our soft power again.



We would like to thank Professor Nye for responding to our questions, which, as stated above, will be received by our readers with great enthusiasm.

⁸ As stated at the aforementioned panel at the 49th Annual ISA Convention.

⁹ See footnote 5.