

THE EVOLUTION OF SOFT POWER IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES

ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ КОНЦЕПЦІЇ «М'ЯКОЇ СИЛИ» У ЗОВНІШНІЙ ПОЛІТИЦІ США

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Abstract. *This article examines the evolution of soft power in the foreign policy of the United States, focusing on the origins and development of this concept after World War II and exploring its role during the presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joseph Biden and Donald Trump. The study traces how soft power as a concept evaluated in the books of the American researcher Joseph Nye, explores how the "War on Terror" under George W. Bush shifted the balance toward hard power, diminishing the international attraction of the U.S., and triggered new forms of "soft-balancing" by other states. The Obama administration subsequently sought to revitalize America's image by restoring diplomatic outreach, promoting multilateralism, and prioritizing public diplomacy through digital platforms and renewed emphasis on shared values. The narrative continues into the Trump and Biden eras, marked by challenges from rising rival powers, global information conflicts, and the increased role of social media in shaping U.S. soft power effectiveness. The research analyzes the effectiveness and boundaries of soft power diplomacy, the attraction-coercion dialectics, and the ongoing relevance of American culture, technology, and democratic values to U.S. power maintenance. With comparative analysis and case studies, the article elicits trends, successes, and failures in American soft power from Bush Jr. to the present, offering a nuanced view of the policies, perceptions, and global impact of the United States.*

Keywords: *soft power, the United States, hard power, world politics, international relations, American foreign policy, global influence.*

Анотація. *У цій статті розглядається еволюція м'якої сили у зовнішній політиці Сполучених Штатів, зосереджуючись на витоках та розвитку цієї концепції після Другої світової війни та досліджуючи її роль під час президентства Джорджа Буша-молодшого, Барака Обами, Джозефа Байдена та Дональда Трампа. У дослідженні простежується, як м'яка сила як концепція оцінювалася в книгах американського дослідника Джозефа Ная, досліджується, як «Війна з терором» за Джорджа Буша-молодшого змістила баланс у бік*

жорсткої сили, змениуючи міжнародну привабливість США, та спровокувавши нові форми «м'якого балансування» з боку інших держав. Адміністрація Обами згодом прагнула відродити імідж Америки, відновивши дипломатичні контакти, сприяючи багатосторонності та надаючи пріоритет публічній дипломатії через цифрові платформи та відновивши акцент на спільних цінностях. Аналіз продовжується в епоху Трампа та Байдена, що позначена викликами з боку зростаючих суперницьких держав, глобальними інформаційними конфліктами та зростаючою роллю соціальних мереж у формуванні ефективності м'якої сили США. У дослідженні аналізується ефективність та обмеження стратегій м'якої сили, взаємодія між тяжінням та примусом, а також постійна актуальність американської культури, інновацій та демократичних ідеалів для підтримки впливу США. За допомогою тематичних досліджень та порівняльного аналізу стаття висвітлює закономірності, успіхи та невдачі американської м'якої сили від Буша-молодшого до сьогодення, пропонуючи нюансований погляд на політику, сприйняття та глобальний вплив Сполучених Штатів.

Ключові слова: м'яка сила, жорстка сила, світова політика, міжнародні відносини, зовнішня політика США, глобальний вплив.

Introduction. The evolution of soft power in the foreign policy of the United States reflects a profound transformation in how global influence is conceived and exercised. For much of the early 20th century, particularly during and between the two World Wars, U.S. foreign policy predominantly relied on hard power—military might and economic sanctions—to shape international outcomes. However, the turbulent aftermaths of these conflicts and the shifting dynamics of the Cold War era prompted the gradual recognition that influence through attraction, persuasion, and cultural appeal holds enduring strategic value. This realization was crystallized by Joseph Nye in 1990, who conceptualized “soft power” as the ability to achieve goals through legitimacy, values, and appeal rather than coercion or payment.

Since then, the U.S. has utilized soft power through cultural diplomacy, humanitarian aid, educational exchanges, and the promotion of democratic ideals to complement its hard power capabilities. These tools have played a pivotal role in shaping alliances, fostering international cooperation, and maintaining America's global leadership position. Yet, the course of American soft power has not been linear; it has experienced peaks and valleys shaped by different administrations, global events, and public perceptions.

The second presidency of Donald Trump marked a dramatic shift, characterized by a diminished emphasis on soft power and a preference for transactional and coercive tactics. Trump's “America First” approach, withdrawal from key international commitments, and rhetorical alienation of allies significantly undermined the United States’ attractiveness and legitimacy on the world stage (Jones, 2019).

Studying soft power remains crucial as it provides a theoretical framework to understand the full spectrum of international relations beyond brute force. In an increasingly interconnected world, where culture, information, and values have immense sway, soft power is indispensable for effective diplomacy and global leadership. For the United States, integrating soft power into foreign policy alongside hard power—an approach often termed “smart power”—is essential to rebuilding trust, addressing shared global challenges, and maintaining a competitive edge in a multipolar world.

So, studying the evolution of U.S. soft power from the era of the World Wars to the Trump’s administration offers valuable insights into the changing nature of influence and underscores the importance of continued attention to soft power as a cornerstone of American foreign policy.

The purpose of the study. The purpose of this research is to explore the evolution of soft power as a core element of U.S. foreign policy. The research aims to trace how the United States has used soft power alongside hard power to shape its global role, to examine the theoretical basis and practical usage of soft power across different geopolitical contexts.

The methods. This study employs a qualitative historical analysis approach to examine the evolution of U.S. soft power as a key element of American foreign policy.

Main results of the research. Soft power as a distinctive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence, has been an important element of American foreign policy since the 20th century.

In its early foreign policy, the United States had primarily relied on military strength and economic influence. The devastating impacts of I and II World Wars shifted attention to more moderate politics such as the Marshall Plan that helped in rehabilitating Europe and spread U.S. ideals and prosperity. The United States spent billions of dollars in war-torn Western Europe to prevent its fall into the sphere of influence of the Communist Soviet Union. The Marshall Plan had three components: humanitarian relief, such as food and medical assistance; technical counsel on reconstruction of devastated infrastructures, such as transportation and communication systems and public utilities; and outright grants of money.

Cultural diplomacy, such as music, film, educational exchange, and foreign broadcasting, was a primary tool for counteracting Soviet influence in the Cold War era. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, American liberalism, which advocates for democracy and free-market philosophies, has spread extensively in a number of areas (Lee, 2025).

Joseph Nye initially proposed the theory of “soft power” in his book “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” in 1990 (Nye, 1990) and consolidated it in “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” (Nye, 2004).

This concept was a kind of answer to the question of what the foreign policy of the United States should be after the victorious victory in the confrontation with the USSR. The conclusion reached by J. Nye was that the traditional force component of the foreign policy of the modern superpower should be significantly transformed towards more active involvement in the foreign policy strategy of non-violent forms of influence.

The term “soft power” itself takes the researcher beyond the framework of traditional approaches. The use of attractiveness, sympathy, transformation of desires, interests and motivations of other actors presupposes the variability, subjectivity of reality and, above all, the ability to change this reality by imposing one's own ways of understanding and evaluating it. Soft power is the ability to change the behavior of others not by direct compulsion, but by spreading one's values to them.

At the same time, it is necessary to underline, J. Nye doesn't abandon the realistic vision of world politics as a predominantly force-based process. However, being one of the founders of neoliberalism, he sees peculiarities brought by the evolution of international relations to world politics. Among them are the complications of the structures of political interaction, the expansion of the range of its elements, as well as the change in the means by which actors achieve their goals in the international arena. Such changes inevitably and significantly expand the concept of “power”. Within the framework of the proposed theory, the priorities and motives of international actors, or rather, the ability to influence them indirectly, play a decisive role (Nossel, 2004).

Primarily Soft power is the ability to make one's own interests, through their moral/cultural appeal, the interests of others; thus facilitating the achievement of political goals. Power resources in this case will include culture, political values, and the moral basis of a state's foreign policy. The spectrum of force actions is often depicted by soft power theorists as a segment, at the endpoints of which are marked “coercion” and “involvement” as extreme cases of force action; as the transition from the former to the latter, the form of force changes from hard to soft. The resources on which soft power relies include the values processed by the state, the standards of its domestic policy, and the prevailing forms of conducting foreign relations. The power of a state, from this perspective, is determined by its ability to develop and disseminate its own values, culture, and ideology; participation in the creation and maintenance of international regimes and organizations that will facilitate such dissemination; development of standards and norms of international behavior; the attractiveness of one's own society for immigrants, etc. Criteria by which the soft power of states can be measured will include, for example, the number of exported films, music discs and books and the size of the audience that watches, listens to or reads them; the number of foreign students; the number of tourists; the number of Nobel Prize winners, etc. Of course, these criteria are not strict, and there is no direct connection between these quantities and the effectiveness of foreign policy; but they allow us to capture such a rather vague phenomenon as the “international authority” of a country. The use of soft power, whether conscious or not, creates an image of the state in the world, collective ideas

about its possible intentions and desires. From them, public opinion is formed in different parts of the world regarding the desirability or undesirability of the state's global leadership, the impact of the increase or decrease in its role in international affairs, the acceptability of the role of a peacemaker or mediator. In other words, the world does not simply assess the material capabilities of the state, as realists once advised, but also perceives the sincerity and usefulness of its intentions to use them (Nye, 2023).

After 9/11, U.S. foreign policy reverted to hard power: military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq discredited world perspectives on U.S. legitimacy and moral leadership. The practice of torture, secret detentions, and bulk surveillance damaged American soft power, diminishing the U.S.'s long-established image as a beacon of democracy and human rights. The Bush Doctrine right of the United States to engage preemptive war against states that pose a potential or perceived threat to US security, eclipsed the importance of soft power in American thinking and internationally. The Bush doctrine favored hard power by the use of the military, going against the tradition of depending upon soft power by cultural appeal, diplomacy, and moral authority. Preventive war and unilateralism undermined the legitimacy and moral stature of the United States in the international community, leading to American values and the democracy model being less appealing - ingredients that make up soft power. The emphasis on military operations and interventions lowered the possibility of cultural diplomacy, international collaboration, and the development of long-term alliances which were typically characteristic of American soft power. At the same time, nonetheless, it needs to be stressed, the democratic aspect of this doctrine kept strengthening the appeal of American ideals but through military actions and violent deeds, typically leading to elicited resistances and a blackening of the United States reputation. With its focus on preventive war and unilateral use of force The Bush Doctrine has limited and weakened the effectiveness of US soft power, emphasizing the role of hard power in foreign policy. It has led to a decline in trust in the US as a moral leader and has diminished its cultural and ideological appeal in the world. (Hallams, 2011).

The victory of the Democratic Party's representative, B. Obama, in the 2008 presidential elections resulted in radically different assessments of the future of the United States' foreign policy. The new administration declared its priority of a radical change in foreign policy, known as the "reset of international relations". Under the presidency of Barack Obama, soft power occupied a significant place in the foreign policy of the United States and was one of the key elements of his strategy. Obama sought to rebrand America, as he aimed to restore international trust by means of diplomacy, dialogue, and international cooperation with other countries. Obama introduced the concept of "smart power", which was the application of hard (military) and soft (diplomatic, economic, cultural) means of influence, focusing on dialogue and multilateral solutions but leaving the possibility of using force in reserve. The Obama administration was translated into soft power, which manifested itself in the following ways: easing sanctions and relations with countries, namely negotiations and the nuclear agreement with Iran, shuttering Guantanamo prison and ending the policy of torture, making America a more respectable nation in terms of human rights, giving priority to international cooperation, membership in international organizations, solving global issues with international cooperation, remolding war on terror strategies, using the "light trail" — deploying special forces and drones instead of massive occupation, securing cultural and political engagement with the Muslim world. At the same time, limited military action remained a tool, but with decreased emphasis and an increasing use of soft power and diplomacy. The desire for multilateralism and peaceful resolution of conflicts (e.g., attempts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict peacefully) was one of the manifestations of soft power.

Thus, under Obama's foreign policy, soft power fueled efforts to restore US global power through showcasing the charm of American values, diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and cultural exchange, as opposed to the use of harsh force by his predecessors (Havrylenko, 2015).

Donald Trump came to power on January 20, 2017. President Donald Trump's foreign policy approach significantly impacted U.S. soft power, generally marked by a decline and recalibration rather than continuation or emphasis on traditional soft power strategies. Under "America First" policy, Trump prioritized U.S. national interests, unilateralism, and bilateral dealings over multilateral cooperation. This approach often meant the U.S. moved away from global consensus and international institutions in favor of what was perceived as more direct national benefit. The administration

withdrew the U.S. from major international agreements and bodies, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), UNESCO, and the United Nations Human Rights Council. Trump's administration made deep cuts to programs and organizations traditionally viewed as the backbone of American soft power, like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Voice of America, the Peace Corps, and the National Endowment for Democracy.

The Trump administration did not prioritize the application of soft power as its core strategy. Trump's foreign policy also favored the hard power mechanisms like economic coercion (threats of tariffs) in lieu of attraction-based influence, and instead of deep cultural or ideological engagement, chasing down a personalized transactional diplomacy. This realignment undermined traditional soft power leverage in global affairs.

While many analysts view Trump's approach as divisive or undermining of U.S. soft power, others argue it is a reorientation aimed at prioritizing tangible national interests and results and fewer traditional ideological appeals. This view regards Trump's steps less as abandonment and more as a political adjustment against a changing global landscape, albeit with great tolls on American future influence (Knigge, 2017).

Briefly, Donald Trump's foreign policy in his first presidency was an age of decreased attention and deliberate diminution of American soft power, characterized by the decline of diplomatic and aid infrastructure, adopting hard power and transactionalism, and communications that insulted key allies and portions of the global public. This decline weakened America's conventional attractional instruments and cultural extension, and created opportunities for geopolitical rivals.

On January 20, 2021 the democrats got back to power when Joseph Robinette Biden became the 46 – th president of the United States under the slogan “America is back”. Focusing on rebuilding alliances and recommitting to multilateral institutions, early in his presidency, he rejoined the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization and sought to work closely with the European Union and other global partners to tackle common challenges like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biden's foreign policy stressed democracy and human rights, seeking to restore America's moral leadership by placing these issues at the forefront of diplomacy, especially in regions like the Middle East and Asia. He has placed new emphasis on public diplomacy, supporting civil society, and “lifting people up around the world”. The administration's rhetoric centers on “relentless diplomacy” instead of military intervention. Biden prefers negotiation, coalition-building, and conflict resolution through dialogue over unilateral force.

While emphasizing soft power, Biden hasn't hesitated to use economic sanctions and other “smart power” instruments against adversaries like Russia and China, especially regarding human rights abuses and territorial aggression—but these are framed within broader diplomatic strategies.

Thus, Biden's strategy involved engaging global publics, supporting vaccine donations, fostering educational exchanges, and investing in international organizations to improve America's image abroad. In the Middle East and Gulf, Biden aimed to recalibrate U.S. relations by weighing American values (democracy, human rights) against security and economic interests, moving away from an exclusive focus on military ties and arms sales (Seymour, 2021).

Trump's second presidency and recent foreign policy decisions—including the pause on foreign aid, the closure of USAID, condemnation of vital programs for health, education and civil society, attacks on American universities, media and the judicial system, restrictions on international students and an assertive approach to negotiations—have raised questions about the trajectory of U.S. soft power. Donald Trump has already done more damage to the United States' image and influence than in the four years of his first term. Trump's emphasis on military spending alongside his decline in soft power is seen by many political analysts and researchers as damage to the global perception of the United States (Munos, 2024)

However, as Joseph Nye acknowledged, the U.S. soft power has experienced cycles historically and while Trump had damaged trust in the U.S., there is a probability that the U.S. will recover some of its soft power after Trump's presidency.

Restoring American soft power, as Joseph Nye suggests, necessitates a number of significant strategies aimed at the restoration of moral authority, attractiveness, and legitimacy. J. Nye stresses that U.S. soft power is inextricably founded upon liberal values of freedom, equality, rule of law, human rights, democracy, inclusiveness, pluralism, free trade, and humanitarianism. To restore soft power, America must adhere to and uphold these values at home and consistently in foreign policy, avoiding selective application or hypocrisy undermining credibility. Moving away from the “America First” transactional approach toward greater international cooperation and respect for allies is critical. J. Nye stresses the importance of alliances, dialogue, and multilateral institutions in establishing trust and complementing U.S. power. Humanitarian assistance, education, and cultural exchanges are key instruments of soft power. Continuing and funding such initiatives strengthens global perception of the U.S. as a positive force. Sustaining academic freedom, open media, and civic debate is key in demonstrating U.S. values and preserving its attractiveness internationally. J. Nye particularly underlines that ethical values should guide foreign policy along with realistic interests, defending national identity and legitimacy in the international realm. Combining soft power with credible military and economic strength under a strategy of “smart power” helps balance influence and deterrence effectively. Leading global efforts on issues such as climate change, pandemics, and technological governance (e.g., AI regulation) can enhance the U.S.’s image as a responsible and cooperative global leader. Even though, J. Nye acknowledged the restoration of American soft power will take time and requires consistent, long-term commitment beyond political cycles. Positive shifts, such as President Biden’s emphasis on alliances and multilateralism, signal potential recovery but skepticism remains about future political shifts. Restoring U.S. soft power means reaffirming and exemplifying values that attract admiration, rebuilding cooperative international relationships, supporting global public goods, and integrating moral considerations in policy while effectively wielding both soft and hard power elements (Le Monde, 2025)

Conclusions. The gradual development of U.S. soft power demonstrates how the country has adapted its approach to global influence, from the alliances and crises shaped during the World Wars to the complex diplomacy of the twenty-first century. By means of soft power strategy, the United States projected its influence through values, diplomacy, and engagement instead of force. It was, however, largely buried under an overwhelming reliance on hard power in the form of military and economic coercion. The late twentieth century, however, saw the emergence of soft power, primarily in the form of attraction, legitimacy, and culture, advanced by J. Nye to the U.S. hegemony.

During the Cold War and post-Cold War decades, the United States capitalized on culture and educational institutions, provided humanitarian aid, and engaged in multilateral alliances to strengthen its image in the world. All of these served to build a reservoir of soft power that, to a significant degree, aided the U.S. in sustaining its global leadership. It is worth noting, however, that this development had its ups and downs. American administrations wielded soft power differently, and combined with the international conflict, diplomacy, and events at the time, the perception of soft power was constantly shifting.

The Trump administration represented a watershed marked by an explicit diminishing of soft power in favor of coercive “hard” approaches and transactional diplomacy. Trump’s “America First” policy, cuts in foreign assistance, dismantling of key institutions like USAID, and alienation of traditional allies diminished America’s appeal and legitimacy worldwide. Nye and others have pointed out that such neglect of soft power eroded America’s global standing, destroyed trust among allies, and marred diplomacy. But this same period also highlighted the enduring importance and resilience of soft power: despite setbacks, long-term U.S. influence is inextricably tied to the wellsprings of attraction, cultural appeal, and credible diplomacy.

Soft power research remains essential since it encompasses important aspects of how nations achieve influence without focusing solely on power or economic coercion. In an interdependent and globalized world where information, culture, values, and legitimacy shape political outcomes, soft power provides a theoretical framework to understand and construct successful foreign policy that resonates with different audiences. For America, the integration of soft power and hard power in a “smart power” strategy offers a way to regain credibility, influence global cooperation on global challenges, and preserve its strategic position in an increasingly multipolar world.

In short, soft power is not only a theoretical construct; it's central to enduring American foreign policy. Its development over the course of American history reminds us of the importance of staying committed to values, alliances, cultural exchange, and moral leadership, in conjunction with military and economic strength. The events of two World Wars, the Cold War, and the Trump presidency most clearly demonstrate that America's future influence hinges on a delicate balancing of attraction and coercion—making soft power a necessary component of that balance.

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