

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #7

JOSEPH NYE ON TEACHING AMERICA TO BE MORE BRITISH

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

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JOSEPH NYE ON TEACHING AMERICA TO BE MORE BRITISH



Theory Talks proudly presents a *Talk* with Joseph S. Nye Jr., the scholar behind the popular concept of 'soft power', by which he adds a dimension to the classic realist notion of 'hard', or military, power. Being one of the top-ten most influential IR-scholars in the world, Nye continues to criticize American unilateralism as simply not the right way to survive: in an increasingly interdependent world, even 'success in the War on Terrorism depends on Washington's capacity to persuade others without force', and, as Nye constantly argues, that capacity is in dangerous decline. In this *Talk*, Joseph Nye subsequently argues why the future of international politics lies in cooperation, and why the US can learn from 19th century Britain.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR?

One of our biggest challenges is understanding the way the information revolution is affecting power, and the way the world is changing from simple inter-state politics to global and world politics. This was caught by the rationalist/constructivist debate at the end of the Cold War, and the reaction against simple materialist definitions of power that underlay what structural realists such as Waltz considered "theory of international politics." This does not mean that the nation-state or realist theory is obsolete, but it does mean that the stage of world politics is becoming more crowded with extra actors, the distinction between domestic and international is not so neat, and the politics of transnational relations and complex interdependence need an understanding of liberal and constructivist approaches as well as classical realism.

What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I have challenged what philosophers call the "concrete fallacy" in the definition of power by introducing the concept of soft power. If power is the capacity to affect others to get the outcomes one wants, you can do it with material sticks and carrots (coercion and payment), but also by affecting the preferences of others and attracting them to want what you want. I call this 'soft power'. Classical realists like Machiavelli and Morgenthau understood this dimension, but in its search for parsimony, structural realism settled on a truncated and impoverished materialist view of power. In my work with [Robert O. Keohane](#), I explored different models of power and

interdependence including the mixed coalitions typical of the ideal type we labeled '[complex interdependence](#)'. I have applied this approach to current policy issues as well as theory.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I came into IR through a side door, so to speak. I was interested in how economic rationality and political ideology interacted in the structuring of markets in newly independent Africa. I did my dissertation in Africa on "Pan Africanism and East African Integration." (Today it might be called constructivist analysis.) I came into IR through regional integration theory, and that led to broader work on transnational actor and interdependence. A spell in the State Department dealing with nuclear proliferation led to a book on called *Nuclear Ethics* (1986), which also discussed arms control and the future of American power. It may seem a winding path, but the guiding thread was my curiosity.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

I argue in my text *Understanding International Conflicts* (1997), that students should have a good grounding in realism, liberalism, and constructivist approaches. Then find some puzzles or interesting anomalies and see how the theoretical approaches can be combined with empirical investigation to illuminate the problem. Keep going back and forth between theory and history, and beware of the tendency to elegance that leads many in the field to say more and more about less and less.

In what kind of international world do we live?

We live in a hybrid world. Part of our positive and normative world is Westphalian and based on sovereignty, and part is post-Westphalian in which transnational actors and the norms of international humanitarian law transgress sovereignty. Both are likely to persist for decades, so good positive and normative analysis will have to be able to account for both.

Keeping in account this configuration, how do you see the near future?

In interstate relations, we are seeing a gradual movement of power that is often summarized as the "rise of Asia." Some see this as American decline, but as I argued in *Bound to Lead* (1990) and *The Paradox of American Power* (2003), I think this is mistaken: I have argued that power resources depend upon context, and that there are three quite different contexts in world politics, something like a three dimensional chess game.

- On the top board of military relations among states, the world is still unipolar and I do not see China, Europe or others surpassing the US in the near future.
- On the middle board of economic relations among states, the world is already multi-polar.

- On the bottom board of transnational relations that cross borders outside the control of governments – pandemics, climate change, transnational terrorism – power is chaotically distributed.

These issues can only be dealt with by cooperation among governments, and which is why the US, even as an undisputed military hegemony, cannot go at it alone.

Who should respond to the increasing scarcity of natural resources, states or the international society?

As the most powerful country, the United States should define its national interest broadly to include the provision of global public goods (as I spell out in *The Paradox of American Power*) much as Britain did in the 19th century.

In the 21st century, no one state can handle these issues alone, and it will be important to develop a broad range of more effective international institutions. This raises a number of interesting and difficult issues about participation, accountability and democratic theory within international institutions.

Joseph S. Nye Jr., University Distinguished Service Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, is also the Sultan of Oman Professor of International Relations and former Dean of the Kennedy School. He received his bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Princeton University, did postgraduate work at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship, and earned a PhD in political science from Harvard. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and Deputy Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology. In 2004, he published *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics; Understanding International Conflict* (5th edition); and *The Power Game: A Washington Novel*.

Related links

About Nye

- [Joseph Nye's faculty profile at Harvard](#)
- A 1998 [interview](#) with Joseph Nye by Harry Kreisler, *Conversations With History* (1998)

Nye's work

- Read Nye's monthly comments on (international) politics and leadership [here](#) (available in English, Spanish, French and other languages)
- Read Nye's article *Farewell to Arms Control* (*Foreign Affairs*, 1986) [here](#)
- Read Nye's influential Foreign Policy article *Soft Power* (1990) [here](#) (pdf)

- Read Nye's article *Think Again: Soft Power* (Yale Global, 2006), in which he reviews his 1990-concept of 'Soft Power', [here](#)
- Read a review of Nye's 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* [here](#)
- Read Nye's observations on the implications of soft power for the contenders in the US presidential race [here](#)