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Soft Power and Morals in U.S. Foreign Policy

A Discussion with Dr. Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Abstract

On Thursday, June 10, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA hosted a virtual event, “Soft Power and Morals in U.S. Foreign Policy,” featuring remarks by Dr. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, and former Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School. Dr. Nye explained how soft power and moral considerations can be factors in the formulation of foreign policy. He put forth the idea that moral values help to inform the national interest by telling us who we are and what we stand for. For this reason, moral values should be considered alongside pragmatic economic and geopolitical concerns in the creation of foreign policy. In the Q&A following his remarks, Dr. Nye provided insight on how soft power will play a role in determining the way Japan and the United States relate to China, concluding that the relationship will be one of “cooperative rivalry.”

This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, academia, and think tanks, along with former and current leaders of both the U.S. and Japanese business and government. Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President at Sasakawa USA, facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A.

From Retreat to Reengagement in Global Issues

U.S. President Joe Biden recently embarked on the first foreign trip of his presidency to attend a series of meetings with European allies and partners at G-7, NATO, and U.S.-European Union summits, leading up to a highly anticipated meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin scheduled for June 16. This trip marks an important step towards reengagement with allies and partners abroad. As Dr. Akimoto highlighted in the introduction to the event, internal political turmoil and economic difficulties have engendered a general reluctance amongst the American people and politicians to engage in foreign issues while dealing with such pressing domestic concerns. Dr. Akimoto remarked that the retreat of American leadership from the international stage presents its own set of dangers to the safety and financial well-being of Americans and their allies abroad. Considering this context, Dr. Nye affirmed that now is a critical time to reassess how the United States employs soft power and moral considerations in the pursuit of its foreign policy and, ultimately, the national interest.

Defining “Soft Power”

Dr. Nye began his remarks with the definition of “soft power,” a term which he coined in the late 1980s to mean the ability to exert influence through attraction rather than coercion or payment. He identified three sources which a country can draw soft power from: its culture (when it is attractive to outsiders), its political values (when it consistently upholds them), and its policies (when they are viewed by others as legitimate).

Soft power is dependent on how one is perceived by others. Therefore, it can be augmented through altruism and diminished by purely self-interested behavior. As an example of this, Dr. Nye pointed to the sharp contrast between former President Trump’s transactional, “America First” foreign policy, and President Biden’s focus on multilateralism and alliances. President Trump’s approach presumes that the national interest is distinct from—and at times, may be in opposition to—the interests of U.S. allies and partners abroad. In contrast, President Biden’s foreign policy asserts that the national interest can be defined more broadly when soft power is taken into consideration. Rather than being diametrically opposed, the desire to protect American interests and the desire to exhibit moral values abroad can combine synergistically, yielding positive outcomes for the United States while garnering admiration from its allies and even its rivals.

Morals as Part of the National Interest

As an example of how moral values can be a factor in foreign policy, Dr. Nye cited the Marshall Plan, a program enacted by President Harry Truman in 1948 which provided over USD 15 billion to help Western European nations rebuild their economies after World War II. European allies had suffered great economic losses and were concerned about having to repay loans to the United States as they had been made to do after the first World War. Rather than collect on these debts, however, President Truman created the Marshall Plan which devoted 2% of U.S. GDP to assisting European nations in their economic recovery and set up a multilateral framework to let them decide how the funding would be allocated. Altruism was certainly not the only reason behind Truman's policy; Dr. Nye pointed out that curtailing the spread of Communism was another clear motivation for it. Yet the net effect was mutually beneficial to Americans and Europeans, and it exemplified how acts of goodwill could yield their own kind of power by changing foreign perceptions of American moral values.

The same could be said of President Joe Biden's recent announcement that the United States will purchase 500 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to donate to COVAX, the organization jointly led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the World Health Organization which aims to accelerate the development and equitable distribution of COVID vaccines across the globe. President Biden's recent gesture comes after the United States has already pledged to donate 80 million vaccine doses by the end of June. Donating these doses when approximately 40% of Americans have yet to be vaccinated may seem counter to the national interest, but Dr. Nye argued that there are four strong reasons why President Biden's action is in fact supportive of American interests.

Firstly, new variants developing in unvaccinated populations in countries less equipped to manage the pandemic will eventually make their way back to the United States. Thus, it is in everyone's best interest to curtail the spread of new strains of the virus. Secondly, many Americans feel moved to provide aid to those who are suffering. This humanitarian urge is itself part of America's moral fabric, and so it is worth upholding. Thirdly, donating vaccines increases soft power by presenting the United States as a country with benign intent. Finally, there is a geopolitical motivation to compete against nations like Russia and China which are also offering aid (and thus procuring influence).

Making Three-Dimensional Moral Judgements

Dr. Nye then introduced the framework which he used to compare the ethics of various U.S. Presidents' foreign policies in his book, *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*. For each president, he suggested looking at the actor's intentions, their means of implementing the action in question, and finally, the consequences (or if unknown, the probable consequences) of said action.

According to this framework, Dr. Nye determined that Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and George H. W. Bush had some of the most ethical foreign policies of the presidents since 1945. Presidents Johnson, Nixon, George W. Bush, and Trump earned the lowest ethics scores. Dr. Nye continued by acknowledging that it is often difficult to make contemporary judgements on historical issues and stated that all moral judgements should consider the wider context of the action in question. Rather than being the sole guiding force in foreign policy decision-making, morals should be considered as an additional factor to be weighed against geopolitical and economic concerns.

As an example of how morals can be incorporated into foreign policy decisions, Dr. Nye cited President Biden's response to the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Whereas President Trump's hyper-realist response was to avoid action that might destabilize the United States' tenuous relations with the Saudi government, President Biden took this as an opportunity to assert American humanitarian values by declassifying a 2018 U.S. intelligence report on the incident which implicated the Saudi crown prince in Khashoggi's murder. President Biden has faced criticism for not going far enough to assert the importance of human rights in this case, but Dr. Nye suggested that his response exemplifies how morals can be one of many factors taken into consideration in foreign policy decisions. What might seem like a noncommittal response can instead be viewed as a tempered reaction that is consistent (at least in face-value) with American morals while accounting for strategic concerns.

To conclude, Dr. Nye reiterated that moral values have a significant and substantial role to play in American foreign policy formulation. Exhibiting consistent adherence to a set of moral values can augment a country's soft power, which in turn can help it to pursue the national interest while leaving the door open for future cooperation.

Moderated Q&A with Attendees

Following Dr. Nye's remarks, Dr. Akimoto opened the Q&A with a brief comment on the applicability of soft power in the Asia-Pacific region, where the competition for economic and strategic influence is in many ways a competition of attractiveness between the American model of governance versus the Chinese model.

Prescriptions for Foreign Policy Towards China

The first question was asked by Mr. Daniel Russel, Vice President for International Security and Diplomacy at the Asia Society Policy Institute. Mr. Russel wanted to know what kind of practical prescriptions Dr. Nye could offer for foreign policy towards China using his three-dimensional framework of moral values. Dr. Nye responded by first reiterating that values are one of many interests which should be considered in policy formulation; in the case of China, the geopolitical and economic interests of the United States' key democratic ally, Japan, must also be factored into the discussion. When addressing human rights concerns in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, policies will have to balance assertion of American values with cooperation on global issues like climate change. Dr. Nye added that so far, the Biden administration appears to be on the right track to achieve this balance.

Causes of Renewed American Soft Power

The next question came from Ambassador Melanne Verveer, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and member of Sasakawa USA's Advisory Committee on Projects. Ambassador Verveer noted that according to a recent Pew survey, the United States' image has improved dramatically amongst Europeans and Asians. She asked Dr. Nye how certain U.S. policies on issues such as climate change might be contributing towards America's renewed attractiveness abroad. Dr. Nye replied that he is pleased to hear the results of this survey, which are consistent with his remarks on soft power. He cited President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord in 2017 and the World Health Organization last year as examples of how purely self-interested foreign policy could harm the nation by undermining alliance relationships and eroding trust. By immediately rejoining these institutions and indicating his general support for alliances, President Biden has been able to restore American soft power.

The Residual Effects of Trumpism on Soft Power

Dr. Akimoto then introduced a question from Mr. Eric Melby, Partner at the Scowcroft Group. Mr. Melby's question concerned the extent to which President Biden's efforts to restore American soft power will be limited by foreign concerns that the Republican Party remains fettered to Trumpism and will regain control of one or both Houses of Congress as early as next year. He asked Dr. Nye what advice he would give to President Biden as he faces inevitable skepticism in Europe during his upcoming meetings. Dr. Nye first stated that the restoration of American soft power will certainly take time, even if some sources like the Pew survey mentioned by Ambassador Verveer indicate the beginnings of a positive trend. He cited his own anecdotal experiences speaking with European colleagues who are concerned that President Trump, or a similar figure, might rise to power again. The restoration of trust will depend not only on President Biden, but on the American body politic and how its actions shape the perception of American political and moral values overseas.

Dr. Akimoto followed up on this response with a question about how this might apply to the United States' soft power in Asia. Dr. Nye responded by saying that there seems to be a more bipartisan consensus in the United States regarding the rise of China as a powerful competitor in the region. The consensus amongst Americans regarding China strongly reaffirms the centrality and importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance. While issues of trust may be more difficult to resolve in Europe, the threat of China and North Korea and the presence of shared democratic values indicate that the United States and Japan will face significantly fewer struggles in this regard.

Navigating Relations with Non-Democratic Nations

Next came a question from Mr. Yoso Furumoto, Washington Bureau Chief of The Mainichi Shimbun. Mr. Furumoto suggested that by promoting a dichotomy between autocracy and democracy, President Biden might be inadvertently aligning Russia with China. He asked how the United States might go about cooperating with non-democratic states like Vietnam and Myanmar to maintain a strategic balance in Asia. This question was later echoed by Ms. Aiko Doden, Senior Director at NHK, who asked whether an apparent inability to influence major actors in Myanmar would undermine the United States' stature and values.

Dr. Nye responded by saying it is important to consider the context of relations with these countries not only in the present, but also in the near future. China and Russia may currently have a shared interest in limiting the United

States, but in the long-term, it seems unlikely that the two would form the kind of alliance exhibited in the 1950s. Realpolitik issues such as skirmishes on the Siberian border will limit the extent of cooperation between the two countries.

Regarding the difficult case of Myanmar, Dr. Nye acknowledged that condemnation for the junta's human rights abuses and the overthrow of the country's democratically elected government must be weighed against the need to maintain some relations due to competition with China. In Vietnam, the United States has been able to work closely with the government despite its undemocratic nature. Dr. Nye concluded his answer with a reminder that values might not always be the primary interest in these relationships, but they should be given serious consideration alongside economic and geopolitical interests.

China's Limited Soft Power

Dr. Akimoto then introduced a question from Mr. Yoichi Kato, Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research. Mr. Kato stated that China does not seem to be interested in a benign hegemony that legitimizes itself by getting respect from smaller states. He asked Dr. Nye if there is any way for the United States and other democratic partners to change this dynamic by challenging or overpowering China with more hard or soft power. Dr. Nye responded that the United States holds a major advantage over China because of the attractiveness of the American democratic model which encourages open discussion and freedom of individuals. Additionally, he describes two factors which limit the extent of Chinese soft power: firstly, their insistence on tight party control over all aspects of civil society, and secondly, their territorial disputes with neighbors like India, Japan, and Vietnam. Outside the Asia-Pacific region, Chinese business investments in Europe have been held back by the human rights abuses occurring in Xinjiang province.

Relationship Between GDP and Soft Power, Vis-à-vis China

Next came a question from Ambassador Tamaki Tsukada, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Japan in Washington, D.C. He noted that economists predict the United States will be overtaken by China in terms of GDP and asked Dr. Nye to what extent this might weaken American soft power in Asia and globally. Dr. Nye replied that China does derive soft power from its economic successes, and this can counterbalance some of the negative attention it receives. However, he expressed doubt that this would be enough to completely overtake the United States in the competition for soft power. Despite its growth in GDP,

China will remain behind the United States in terms of per capita income. Other factors like population stagnation and dependence on imported oil will also stand in the way of further economic growth in China.

The U.S.-Japan Alliance's Collective Soft Power

Dr. Akimoto next combined two questions from Mr. Weston Konishi, Senior Fellow at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, and Ms. Shihoko Goto, Deputy Director for Economics at the Wilson Center. He asked Dr. Nye if soft power can have bilateral or multilateral dimensions, and whether differences in values between the United States and Japan can diminish the alliance's ability to project soft power. Dr. Nye affirmed that while there may be differences between how the United States and Japan initially respond to moral issues, such as human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the two countries still maintain shared economic and geopolitical goals which encourage a high degree of cooperation. Dr. Nye continued by saying that the alliance between the United States and Japan—in addition to creating its own unique influence—has augmented the individual soft power of both countries. This applies to multilateral contexts as well, such as the G7 and the Quad. Additional cooperation between the United States and Japan to address issues like COVID-19 and development in Southeast Asia could further strengthen the alliance's collective soft power.

The Japanese Brand of Soft Power

An anonymous attendee asked Dr. Nye what he perceives to be the hallmarks of Japanese soft power diplomacy. Dr. Nye responded that soft power comes not only from government, but from civil society. He acknowledged that Japanese traditional culture has been widely admired for centuries, and that modern cultural phenomena like anime and well-known franchises such as *Pokémon* continue to captivate people the world over. He also pointed out that Japan's humanitarian efforts through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have bolstered the country's perception abroad. In a broader sense, the high level of functionality, efficiency, and safety experienced in Japanese society on a day-to-day basis has garnered Japan a great deal of admiration abroad.

“Cooperative Rivalry” With China

To close, Dr. Akimoto asked Dr. Nye whether he believed the evolving nature of the U.S.-Japan alliance in response to China could undermine Japan’s peaceful image in the region. Dr. Nye replied that while there are certainly humanitarian and security factors which compel the United States and Japan to take a competitive stance towards China, we must acknowledge the ecological interdependence of all three nations when addressing issues like climate change, environmental degradation, and the depletion of natural resources. He called China’s relationship with the United States and Japan one of “cooperative rivalry.” In this regard, the strength of the U.S.-Japan alliance will be mutually beneficial to both countries, as it will increase opportunities for collaboration and competition with China. Dr. Akimoto concurred with this statement and thanked Dr. Nye for his timely and wise remarks. Dr. Akimoto reiterated that he looks forward to working with Dr. Nye as a member of Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA’s Advisory Committee on Projects.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Dr. Nye, the Q&A participants, and attendees for their insightful discussion on soft power and morals in U.S. foreign policy.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

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