



DEFINITION OF THE TERM "POWER" IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SOFT AND HARD POWER

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***Annotation** This article analyzes the concept of “power” in international relations theory, focusing on its two main forms — “soft power” and “hard power.” The study explores how realism and neorealism interpret the essence of power and its role in competition and pursuit of national interests among states. The views of Joseph Nye on “soft power,” as well as those of Henry Kissinger and Kenneth Waltz on “hard power,” are compared to highlight their theoretical and practical significance. The paper also discusses how the combination of soft and hard power strategies has become a defining feature of modern international politics, determining states’ influence, image, and security in the globalized world.*

***Keywords** international relations, concept of power, soft power, hard power, realism, neorealism, Joseph Nye, Henry Kissinger, Kenneth Waltz, diplomacy, globalization, political influence, international security.*

Introduction

In this article, the concept of “**power**,” which occupies a central position in the theory of international relations, as well as its forms — “**soft power**” and “**hard power**” — are analyzed in detail.

In international relations, power is defined as the **ability of one actor** (a state, an organization, etc.) **to influence the behavior of another participant**. This concept can be based on various sources such as **economic, military, political, cultural, and informational** resources.

The article also examines the essence of power within the schools of **realism and neorealism**, highlighting its role in competition and the struggle for interests

among states. As the classical realists rightly noted, the notion of “power” is one of the **fundamental analytical categories** in the study of international relations.

Primarily, the study compares **Joseph Nye’s theory of “soft power”** with the views of **Henry Kissinger** and **Kenneth Waltz** on “hard power,” showing the **interconnection between these two concepts** in contemporary international politics. The article reveals the importance of the interaction of soft and hard power strategies in the **foreign policies of states in the era of globalization**, emphasizing their role in determining international prestige, security, and spheres of influence. It should be noted that the terms “**power**,” “**soft power**,” and “**hard power**” play a significant role in understanding and analyzing the relations among states in the international system.

Main Part

The terms “**power**,” “**soft power**,” and “**hard power**” occupy a significant place in international relations, helping to analyze and understand interactions among states. In this context, **power** represents the **ability of one actor (a state, organization, etc.) to influence the behavior of another**. Power may derive from **economic, military, political, cultural, or informational** sources. As classical realists have rightly pointed out, the concept of power is a key analytical category in the study of international relations.

Based on Joseph Nye’s book *Soft Power*, several types of power can be distinguished:

1. **Hard Power:**

- Refers to the use of military and economic tools to influence the behavior or interests of other states.

- **Examples:** Military force, economic sanctions, or financial incentives.

2. **Soft Power:**

- Refers to the ability to shape the preferences and outcomes of others through **attraction and persuasion rather than coercion**.

- **Examples:** Cultural influence, political values, and diplomacy.

3. **Smart Power:**

- Represents the **combination of hard and soft power strategies** to achieve goals more effectively.
- **Example:** The use of diplomacy supported by economic or military strength.

Even in the writings of **ancient and medieval authors** such as the Greek historian **Thucydides** and the Renaissance philosopher and diplomat **Niccolò Machiavelli**, power was regarded as a fundamental element of the international system. If we turn to the founders of the **realist approach** in international relations theory — **Hans Morgenthau** and **Alan Taylor** — power, in their interpretation, reflects the struggle for leadership and security among nation-states. They saw this as achievable through the **principle of the “balance of power,”** that is, the pursuit of politics from a position of strength. In general, from the realist perspective, the struggle for power among states is a **natural condition of international relations**, in which states rely solely on themselves.

Thus, **realists** understood power primarily as a **means of achieving national interests, ensuring survival, and competing with other states**. Accordingly, **Hans Morgenthau** described international relations as a field of intense confrontation among states, where the goal is to **increase one’s own power** and **reduce the influence of others**. The paradigms of power developed in parallel with the historical evolution of the international system, reflecting the character of each era’s global environment. Over time, supporters of the **theory of relative power**, who opposed realism and neorealism, criticized this concept, significantly influencing the emergence of numerous alternative doctrines in modern scholarship.

According to this view, *“power can encompass everything that establishes and maintains control of one person over another — from physical coercion to the subtlest psychological connections through which one mind directs another.”*

Another prominent representative of realism, **Henry Kissinger**, developed his views under the influence of studying the “**European balance**” policy of the early nineteenth century. He argued that *peace cannot be ensured without balance, and justice cannot be achieved without self-restraint*.

Contributing to the development of international relations theory, Kissinger distinguished between two similar terms — “**balance of power**” (discussed earlier by Morgenthau) and “**balance of forces**.”

He applied the first term to the **historical period before 1918**, and the second to the **1990s relations between Germany and its European neighbors**, which were characterized by unstable “relations of influence.”

Furthermore, the American scholar had the opportunity to apply his theoretical insights in **high-level government practice**. His preference for **power relations over ideological orientations** was reflected in his readiness to exploit the **Sino-Soviet split** in favor of U.S. national interests, normalize relations with Beijing, and restore mutual cooperation.

In the **second half of the twentieth century**, globalization processes encouraged scholars to develop **new approaches** to understanding the phenomenon of power.

Both researchers and political elites became increasingly aware of the growing role of **international and non-governmental organizations** as well as **transnational corporations**.

This led to a renewed interest in **liberal ideas** within academia and the emergence of their new interpretations — **neoliberalism** and **transnationalism**.

The theorists of these two currents (e.g., **R. Keohane, J. Nye, J. Rosenau**) drew, on the one hand, from the ideas of **classical liberalism** — such as **John Locke’s concept of natural rights** and **Immanuel Kant’s vision of civil society** — while on the other, they introduced **new principles** that became the foundation of modern international theories.

Among these were: the belief in the **right of the global community to use force** to promote democracy; the **replacement of nation-states by transnational systems** (ranging from institutions and organizations to terrorist networks); the **erosion of sovereignty**, the **principle of free trade**, the **idea of global civil society**, the **Washington Consensus**, **Milton Friedman's monetarism**, and the **principle of new interventionism**.

The leading representatives of neoliberalism, **Robert Keohane** and **Joseph Nye**, proposed the concept of “**complex interdependence**” to describe the international political landscape that had formed in the second half of the twentieth century. In this concept, the authors discussed the strengthening of transnational ties and the growing interdependence between societies. This process indicated that although the use of military power and the balancing of interests among participants remained important in international relations, their significance was gradually diminishing.

When analyzing **Hans Morgenthau's** views, Keohane noted that Morgenthau's interpretation of international relations as a struggle for power lacked conceptual clarity. He emphasized that Morgenthau did not distinguish between **power as a resource** (based on material and non-material factors) and **power as the ability to influence the behavior of others**. According to Keohane, if we proceed from the latter definition, the question arises: “*What determines human behavior — more tanks, higher economic productivity, or a more attractive ideology?*”

Another representative of neoliberalism, **James Rosenau**, argued that nation-states no longer play a central role in global governance and that their place has been taken by private sector actors and non-state entities. This transformation challenged the traditional realist notion of the **balance of power**, which focused primarily on states, as it failed to take into account the growing impact of transnational relations. Advocating for human freedom, rights, civil society, shared values, and the

democratization of international institutions, liberals and neoliberals did not exclude the use of power, but exercised it in a form different from that of realists.

However, in this work, we will focus on **two main forms of power** — the theories of **hard power** and **soft power**.

The term “**soft power**” was first introduced by **Harvard University professor Joseph Nye** in his 1990 book “*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power.*” Later, he developed this concept further in his 2004 work “*Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.*” According to Nye, soft power is not about achieving one’s goals through coercion or pressure, but through **attraction and persuasion**.

The key principles of soft power include:

1. **Cultural influence:** promoting one’s culture, art, literature, music, and other forms of cultural expression to create a positive image of the country and attract others.
2. **Values and ideals:** advancing values such as democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights to attract supporters abroad and shape public opinion.
3. **Diplomacy and communication:** building friendly relations, participating in international organizations, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation through cultural exchanges and educational programs.

Based on these principles, a state may organize cultural festivals and exhibitions to showcase its traditions and heritage or provide foreign students with opportunities to study in its universities and experience its culture. Likewise, hosting sports events and providing humanitarian assistance can also serve as effective tools of soft power diplomacy.

By contrast, the concept of “**hard power**” refers to the use of **military and economic strength** to achieve political objectives in international relations. This concept is opposed to soft power, which relies on cultural, ideological, and diplomatic influence.

Realism and **neorealism** are two main theories in the study of international relations that interpret the role and significance of hard power differently. In this paper, we will examine how realists and neorealists perceive hard power, what arguments they use in its justification, and how their views differ.

Realism is one of the oldest theories of international relations, with roots tracing back to thinkers such as **Thucydides**, **Niccolò Machiavelli**, and **Thomas Hobbes**. Realists emphasize that the international system is **anarchic**, meaning there is no central authority to regulate relations between states. In such conditions, states must rely on their own capabilities to ensure survival and security. Therefore, **hard power** remains a necessary means to achieve these goals.

Realists view states as the main actors in international relations, whose primary objectives are survival and maximizing power. Under anarchy, states must be ready to defend their interests through military and economic strength. One of the central concepts of realism is the “**balance of power**.” States strive to maintain equilibrium to prevent dominance by any single state or group of states. Hard power plays a vital role in maintaining this balance — for example, by forming military alliances or strengthening armaments to deter potential aggressors.

The idea of hard power is also closely related to **neorealism**, whose main principles were formulated in the late 1970s. In his seminal work “*Theory of International Politics*” (1979), **Kenneth Waltz** provided a clear explanation of why hard-power-based foreign policies remain prevalent in global politics.

Like the realists, Waltz argued that the international system is **anarchic** — there is no overarching authority capable of enforcing binding rules among states. As he wrote, while in domestic politics there exists a recognized “supreme judge” such as a state or government, the international realm lacks such an authority. Drawing on **individualism** and **materialism**, neorealism emphasizes that states, first and foremost, act to secure their survival. Moreover, the pervasive uncertainty about other actors’ intentions leads to a gradual buildup of military capabilities.

Neorealists, like realists, believe that the **structure of the international system** determines state behavior, not domestic characteristics. Under conditions of anarchy, states act within certain structural constraints, and **hard power** remains a vital tool for survival.

Although realism and neorealism share many fundamental assumptions, their approaches to hard power differ in several ways:

- **Focus on structure:** Neorealists emphasize the structure of the international system, while realists focus more on the behavior of individual states.

- **Role of domestic factors:** Realists take into account internal factors such as political systems, economies, and culture when analyzing the use of hard power, whereas neorealists consider these secondary compared to structural limitations.

- **Strategies of hard power:** Realists see hard power as a tool to achieve concrete political goals — expanding influence or protecting interests — while neorealists view it as a mechanism for maintaining stability and balance in the international system.

Unlike soft power, **hard power** has deep historical roots. It manifested in the earliest conflicts between states and in the worship of might. Until the end of the 20th century, the effectiveness of hard power was rarely questioned, and it remained a dominant concept in the foreign policy of major powers. Its advantages include **quick results** and **clear implementation schemes**, while its disadvantages involve **high costs** and **instability of influence** due to resistance from the target entity.

In “*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*,” Joseph Nye compares the global distribution of power to a **three-dimensional chessboard**. The first level represents **unipolar military power**, the second **multipolar economic power**, and the third an **infinite number of non-state actors and individuals**.

In the new historical era, the evolution of hard power has been shaped by the transformational processes of the world community and the emerging legal order — a pattern clearly observed in the case of the United States. It was in the U.S. that the

concepts of **hard, soft, and smart power** were first developed and introduced into political practice. During the **Cold War**, the bipolar world system led both superpowers to intensify their armament race. However, unlike the Soviet Union, which pursued military buildup at the expense of other industries, the U.S. began to rely increasingly on its **cultural strength**. This strategy proved effective, and in the 1990s Joseph Nye described the phenomenon as **soft power** — the ability to achieve similar results not through economic coercion, military force, or blackmail, but through the **attractiveness of culture and ideology**.

Joseph Nye did not stop there, as the international situation was changing so rapidly that it required a re-evaluation of hard methods and their adaptation to new conditions. As a result, we increasingly encounter terms such as *humanitarian intervention*, *humanitarian war*, and *the fight against aggression*. From the above, it can be concluded that hard power cannot be completely abandoned, since it ensures the firm implementation of one's will and often requires significantly less time. The key factor here is to ensure the acceptance of such interventions by the broader public.

The justification for the revival and renewal of hard power is also linked to the current uncertain state of the democratic project. For several decades, democratic principles have held a central position in world politics. The success of democracy has largely been associated with high economic performance, human potential, and living standards. However, over time, the global structure has changed, become more complex, and polarized. The new challenges faced by the so-called “end-of-history” states, described by **Francis Fukuyama**, compel all participants in the world political process to reconsider and improve relations among themselves.

After numerous experiments in various parts of the world, it has become clear that democracy is no longer universal. In each specific case, externally imposed and often alien principles undergo transformation and eventually adapt to the historical forms of governance characteristic of a particular country. For example, as the

Canadian political scientist **P. Dutkiewicz** writes, the post-communist state, “after undergoing a series of experiments from above, has increasingly revealed itself as part of the Western ‘terrifying’ category — political nihilism — where ‘everything is permitted’ dominates.”

In later periods, this phenomenon manifested itself in the *symbiotic relationship between nominally legal institutions and organized crime*, which together evolved into a powerful political actor.

As noted earlier, the concept of a foreign policy based on hard power is an integral part of **neorealist theory**. The main postulate of neorealism is the security and sovereignty of the nation-state within the framework of the constant international disorder that **Thomas Hobbes** once described as “the war of all against all.” Such a situation compels states to increase their military potential and conduct a cautious foreign policy.

In the era of globalization and porous borders, international relations face numerous challenges originating from both state and non-state actors, forcing national governments to adopt stricter policies to protect their culture, identity, and values.

Changes in the global order have not eliminated hard power; rather, in the 20th century, it began to incorporate elements of soft power and to borrow its advantages. A vivid example of this is the military’s public statements favoring the resolution of conflicts not through armed means, but through diplomatic channels. The modern arsenal of hard power may now include instruments of *public diplomacy*.

Despite the modern emphasis on the primacy of individual rights over state sovereignty, the use of hard power in new forms has gained momentum — primarily through the imposition of economic sanctions, conducting military exercises, expanding armaments, developing new weapons, and enlarging military alliances.

Official statements rarely emphasize aggression or militarism; instead, they stress “*mutual cooperation, strengthening friendly relations (for example, through*

joint military exercises), and contributing to world order and security.” On one hand, this seems paradoxical: the more weapons states accumulate, the more balanced the global situation appears to be. For example, if a country possesses nuclear weapons, there is little reason to attack or threaten it. On the other hand, the widely recognized principle of the *rule of law* serves as a deterrent to potential aggressors, as such norms have already become deeply embedded in the minds of millions and represent a significant political force in the information age.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *soft power* is about attracting and persuading other countries through culture, education, diplomacy, and values. Although this method has existed throughout human history, it took on its modern form in the 20th century. The advantage of soft power lies in its relatively low cost and its long-term influence. For example, the cultural influence of the **United States** or Japan’s technological achievements have spread globally.

Hard power, by contrast, involves the use of military force, economic pressure, and direct influence to compel other states to act in accordance with one’s interests. Historically, this method has been widely applied in inter-state relations because it produces quick and concrete results. However, hard power is costly and often ineffective in the long run, as it tends to provoke resistance and dissatisfaction.

Both *realism* and *neorealism* play an important role in understanding the significance of hard power in international relations. Both theories emphasize that in conditions of anarchy, states are compelled to rely on their military and economic strength to ensure security and achieve political objectives. However, their approaches differ: realists focus more on the actions of individual states, while neorealists concentrate on the structure of the international system.

In today’s world, *hard* and *soft power* complement each other. For example, the United States influences the world not only through its military strength but also through Hollywood, universities, and cultural exports. Similarly, China reinforces

its economic and military power with cultural and diplomatic initiatives. Modern states protect their interests and exert influence globally by effectively combining both approaches.

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