
IN MEMORIAM

Joseph S. Nye Jr.: Complex Interdependence, Soft Power, and Effective Policy Action

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The sudden and untimely death of Joseph S. Nye Jr., on 6 May 2025, deprives the world of a brilliant analyst of world politics, an effective policymaker, and a source of inspiration and advice to generations of students. Nye was a leading analyst of the political implications of global economic interdependence and of what he called “soft power,” which he defined as “getting others to want the outcomes that you want.” He also served with distinction in the United States Government under President Carter and Clinton. His death leaves a gaping hole not only for his friends but for everyone who seeks wise counsel on foreign policy in these difficult and turbulent times.

Joseph Nye was a member of the board of editors of *International Organization* between 1968 and 1975, and again between 1979 and 1984; he was chair of the board of editors in 1973–74. During his time as chair, *International Organization* accelerated its move from being a little-known journal focused on international organizations to a major journal of international relations. Between 1968 and 1987 he was author or co-author of ten articles in this journal, and co-editor of a special issue of *IO* on “transnational relations and world politics.” He was my best friend and I will therefore, in the rest of this obituary, refer to him as “Joe,” which is truer to our deep personal as well as professional relationship. Quite apart from the merits and limitations of our scholarship, we certainly proved that meaningful personal ties can emerge hand-in-hand from joint professional work.

In the 1970s, economic transactions among wealthy democratic states expanded greatly, leading to situations of enhanced interdependence: economic outcomes in each country were the result not only of that country’s policies and its citizens’ actions, but also of other countries’ policies toward it. Joe and I analyzed the political implications of this interdependence. Drawing inspiration from Albert O. Hirschman’s book, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (1945), we argued in *Power and Interdependence* (1977) that asymmetrical interdependence is a source of power. That is, the less dependent state in a relationship can use its position as a source of political leverage against its counterpart. It can use this influence both bilaterally and in seeking to shape international institutions such as the

World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and trade organizations toward actions favorable to itself.

Showing that asymmetrical economic interdependence generates political power helped to connect international economic analysis, as in the work of Richard Cooper, with political analysis. It demonstrated that political scientists were not confined to their traditional subject-matter focused on issues of war, peace, and diplomacy, but could illuminate the politics of the world economy as well.

In the 1990s, Joe observed that influence in world politics was not directly correlated with material resources. Increasingly, in an age of mass communications and widespread popular participation in politics, the ability of states to achieve their objectives depended on what people around the world thought of them. States viewed positively by publics would have an easier time persuading other governments of the sincerity of their motives and therefore would be more able to build coalitions for objectives that they pursued. Because of the approval of publics at home and abroad, they would acquire “soft power.” Joe made this argument most systematically in *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (2004).

We encounter the concept of soft power almost daily in commentary on international affairs because it goes to the heart of how social interactions, and ideas, affect efforts by states, as well as non-state actors, to influence public and elite attitudes around the world. Democracies would seem to have advantages in wielding soft power, but China has been particularly quick to build on Joe’s ideas, without becoming democratic. Its Belt and Road Initiative, funding infrastructure projects in developing countries, can be seen as an attempt to generate soft power in the areas helped by these projects. So can its efforts to build attractive communications platforms, such as Tik Tok, that will be used by younger generations in wealthy countries.

The concepts of asymmetrical interdependence and soft power point in somewhat different directions in the contemporary world. Asymmetrical interdependence seems in the first instance to favor the United States in its attempts to coerce its trading partners: in all of its major trading relationships, the United States is less dependent than its partner. The “paradox of trade power” is that countries with trade deficits, such as the United States, thereby gain political advantage, because (as President Trump has shown) it is relatively easy to erect barriers to imports, thus hurting the economies of one’s trading partners.

Yet in the long run, threats and use of trade-based power drive large and powerful states such as China to protect themselves by becoming more self-reliant. In recent years, China has self-consciously developed capabilities to reduce its dependence on US markets and US technology. The more unreliable one’s trading partner, the greater the incentive to pay even a high price for self-protection.

Joseph Nye was born on 19 January 1937, in South Orange, New Jersey. He earned a BA, *summa cum laude*, in history, from Princeton University in 1958. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Exeter College, Oxford, and earned a PhD in Government at Harvard in 1964. He taught at Harvard for his whole career except for his stints in government and served as the dean of the Kennedy School of Government between

1995 and 2004, where he undertook a major initiative to expand the number of women on the faculty. In the United States Government, he was a deputy undersecretary of state under President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1979; chair of the National Intelligence Council from 1993 to 1994; and assistant secretary of defense for National Security Affairs from 1994 to 1995. In the latter role, he led the “Nye Initiative,” which re-set the US relationship with Japan and for which he received, in 2024, an award from the Japanese government.

In addition to his pioneering academic work on asymmetrical interdependence and soft power, Joe presciently argued in *Bound to Lead* (1990) that despite arguments about American decline, the United States would continue to be the leading state in world politics for the foreseeable future. Earlier, he did important work, with colleagues at the Kennedy School, on nuclear proliferation and, in *Nuclear Ethics*, on ethical aspects of nuclear strategy.

Joe also had a life outside of Harvard and Washington. He and his wife of sixty-two years, Molly Harding Nye, who died in November 2024, had three sons and nine grandchildren. They owned a farm in Sandwich, New Hampshire, to which they went often for relaxation. Not “rest and relaxation,” since Joe was a vigorous hiker and a dedicated and talented gardener, proud of his many awards for prize-winning vegetables at the local county fair. His guests were treated to displays of his woodsmanship, showing novices the evidence in the snow of an owl’s seizure of a rabbit, or the trail to a favorite spot hidden to naïve eyes. If they were willing to stand in a freezing river while Joe sought to outwit elusive fish, they joined him in fishing expeditions. He remained physically vigorous as well as cognitively sharp to the day he died, in Mount Auburn Hospital, Cambridge, Massachusetts. I will miss him for the rest of my life.

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