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“The One Belt, One Road Initiative” between Hard and Soft Chinese Power (the Theoretical Considerations of Joseph Nye)

Abstract

China's One Belt, One Road economic initiative is an important global process, believed by many scholars to have the potential to reshape the power relations between great powers. American political scientist Joseph Nye has recognized the two-sided nature of the Chinese initiative and pointed out that it has the overtones of both, soft and hard power. Proceeding from Nye's observation, this paper presents an overview of his latest work on these issues. The main assumption is that the concepts of soft and hard power, as well as the strategy of smart power, can help shed light on the One Belt, One Road Initiative and the totality of the relations between the United States and China from a new perspective and unlock greater potential for understanding their relationship.

Keywords:

hard power, soft power, strategy of smart power, One Belt, One Road Initiative, United States–China Relations

INTRODUCTION

China's One Belt, One Road economic initiative is a potential framework for economic cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and over 65 countries at the moment. As the initiative is expected to have positive but also likely negative effects, it has attracted considerable attention

from experts, scholars and the general public. The academic study of social phenomena and processes entails the application of theoretical concepts. Since the One Belt, One Road Initiative is most commonly examined from the perspective of power relations, these theoretical concepts were deemed the most adequate for the current study. U.S. scholar Joseph Nye is one of the most prominent theorists of power in the field of international relations and security studies and his concepts of hard and soft power and his strategy of smart power emerge as the most logical and theoretically most appropriate framework for studying China's economic initiative. This paper will therefore examine the viewpoint and theoretical contribution of Joseph Nye, the manner in which he examines the One Belt, One Road Initiative and the arguments he puts forward.

THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER AND THE STRATEGY OF SMART POWER

Power is undoubtedly one of the most important, if not *the* most important concept for explaining the actions of states in international relations. There are various approaches in the attempts to delineate the concept of power due to its complexity as a social phenomenon. Different scholars define its meaning, scope and indicators in different ways, but they all agree on its significance for studying the foreign (and other) policies of states, especially the foreign policies of regional and global powers.

One of the leading scholars of power in international relations is certainly Harvard University professor Joseph Nye. The concept's complexity has prompted Nye to make a very apt comparison that "Power, like love, is easier to experience than to define or measure", but also to emphasize that these characteristics make it "no less real" – on the contrary, power is very real (Nye, 2004: 1).

Joseph Nye is, nevertheless, far better known in the field of international relations for drawing a distinction between hard and soft power and for his strategy of smart power. This former Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, who has held numerous positions related to national security in the administrations of presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, first introduced the concept of soft power in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. In *Bound to Lead*, Nye points out that power has another dimension apart from military and economic power that we can think of as *soft power* or as something opposite to *hard command power*, which is most commonly

associated with tangible resources such as military and economic strength¹ (Nye, 1990: 32).

Nye takes the concept of soft power one step further in his 2002 book *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, where, in an attempt to explain U.S. foreign and security policy in new international circumstances, he essentially proposes a new kind of diplomatic and security strategy, according to which the U.S. should rely more on soft power resources. Noting the increase in American power, "including our ability to influence others", since the beginning of the 21st century, he essentially refers to an increase in the U.S.'s soft power (Nye, 2002: xiii). Nye, therefore, considers economic and military power to be segments of hard command power, which can influence other states to change their positions, and describes this as the "carrot and stick" policy, in which military threats are the stick and economic incentives represent the carrot. In contrast, he points out the possibility of exercising power indirectly, which could bring the U.S. the desired outcomes in world politics because other countries would want to follow it, because they would admire its values and try to imitate it, hoping to achieve its level of prosperity and openness (2002: 8).

Elaborating on the concept of soft power, he points out that soft power is founded on the ability to set a political agenda that will reshape the preferences of other states and that such an agenda, which attracts other states, is as important as the ability to force them to change using military and economic means (2002: 9). Most simply put, Nye defines soft power as an aspect of power that leads to "getting others to want what you want" and "co-opts people rather than coerces them" (2002: 9).

With regard to the structure of the international world order, the distribution of power and the issue of polarity, Nye believes that relations between states can be represented "in a pattern that resembles a complex three-dimensional chess game" (2002: 39). From this vivid perspective, military power relations are played out at the highest level of the game, where the U.S. has, according to Nye, established absolute domination, creating a unipolar international structure. Economic power relations are conducted on the middle chessboard, where the U.S., Europe and Japan account for two thirds of world product and where they, together with China (which, as Nye emphasizes, has the potential to become the leading player at the beginning of the 21st century), make up a multipolar system. Finally, on the

¹ Interestingly, Nye speaks of "resources like military and economic strength", which is somewhat illogical and theoretically inconsistent because the concept of strength is entirely autonomous in international relations and security studies and is largely unrelated to the concept of power.

bottom chessboard and beyond the reach of specific governments, there are transnational relations, established by non-state actors. According to Nye, these include actors ranging from transnational companies whose capital exceeds the national budgets of some states to typical terrorists or hackers conducting cyberattacks. Since power is so widely dispersed at the bottom level, Nye argues that it is pointless to speak of unipolarity, multipolarity or hegemony at this level (2002: 9).

Nye's theoretical propositions received even greater attention from scholars and the general public after his highly influential book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* was published in 2004. In *Soft Power*, Nye refines his idea of soft power as the power of a state to attract and persuade through the attractiveness of its culture, its political values and its practical policies (rather than through military coercion and economic incentives). The legitimacy accorded by others to the state's practical policies is seen as confirmation that the state's soft power has increased (Nye, 2004: x). After the publication of this volume, soft power became a legitimate term in the study of international relations as well as in contemporary political discourse.² There is (at least) one more reason why Nye's book is important. In it, Nye coins a new term to explain how to better "combine our hard and soft power", naming it *smart power*³, and points out that the success of American foreign policy will depend on its ability to advance its understanding of the role of soft power and develop a better balance of hard and soft power (2004: 32, 147). With this in mind, it is very important to emphasize that smart power is not a new dimension power, but a better combination of hard and soft power.

In his later work, Joseph Nye designates this attempt at "learning better how to combine" hard and soft power as "an integrated strategy that combines hard and soft power" (Nye, 2009: 163).⁴ Since a strategy is intended to

² The term "soft power" (and "smart power") was frequently used in the statements and releases of former U.S. president Barack Obama and former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton. It is also used in the conclusions from the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 2007, where president Hu Jintao employs the term to highlight the significance of culture in the promotion of Chinese soft power.

³ This term is also attributed to Suzanne Nossel, who criticizes the foreign policy of George W. Bush's administration in an article titled "Smart Power" and argues that "Smart power means knowing that the United States' own hand is not always its best tool: U.S. interests are furthered by enlisting others on behalf of U.S. goals, through alliances, international institutions, careful diplomacy, and the power of ideals" (Nossel, 2004: 138).

⁴ It is especially interesting that in the 2009 article Nye claims that he coined the term "smart power" in 2003 "to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy" (Nye, 2009: 160) (likely because the term *soft power* is attributed to other authors as well).

establish a link between means and an outcome, which requires clear goals, resources and tactics, Nye argues that “a smart strategy” should provide answers to five key questions: 1) What goals or outcomes are preferred? 2) What resources are available and in what contexts? 3) What are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence attempts? 4) Which forms of power behavior are most likely to succeed? 5) What is the probability of success? (Nye, 2011: 208–9).

It is important to note that Nye does not provide a ready-made recipe or a universal model for how states should act if they wish to employ such a strategy and that he is somewhat vague in suggesting that each state should use the “smart strategy” to devise its own “strategy of smart power” (by setting goals, assessing resources and the ways of directing those resources towards other actors, conducting tactical assessments of the potential of certain approaches in the use of power (i.e. of different combinations of soft and hard power) and assessing the probability of success).

Finally, Nye developed the concept of soft power and the strategy of smart power in order to explore U.S. foreign policy and even legitimize its leading position, but also in an attempt to formulate recommendations on practical politics for the U.S. administration (Nye, 1990; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2009; 2011). However, he takes none of the attempts at recommendations on practical politics in the U.S. further than stating that “it is about finding ways to combine resources [of hard and soft power] into successful strategies in the new context of power diffusion and the ‘rise of the rest’” (Nye, 2011: 208).

The concept of soft power and the strategy of smart power were initially developed as a framework for prescription i.e. for formulating recommendations on American foreign policy, not as a mean of analyzing and explaining the actions of the U.S. in the international arena. We should not overlook Nye’s practical political engagement in three U.S. administrations. Nye nevertheless believes that the concept of soft power and the strategy of smart power are not limited to the U.S. and that they could be used to study the foreign policies of other states (2011: 210).

Based on these propositions, this paper analyzes China’s global One Belt, One Road Initiative employing Joseph Nye’s theoretical approach, the standpoint and arguments of the famous Harvard University professor and the central proposition that he has used the concepts of hard and soft power and the strategy of smart power, which have brought him great fame and recognition, in examining this phenomenon. The paper therefore predominantly draws on the work of the U.S. scholar.

THE ONE BELT, ONE ROAD INITIATIVE
IN THE THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS
OF JOSEPH NYE

The initiative currently includes more than sixty-five countries or two-thirds of the globe and around 4.5 billion people. This is a primarily economic initiative, which is planned to include massive infrastructure investments in Asia, Africa and Europe and the construction of sorely needed highways, railroads, oil and natural gas pipelines, ports and power plants. It should also encourage Chinese companies to invest in European ports and railroads, since “the Belt” is intended to stand for a large network of highways and railroads, while “the Road” refers to sea routes and the network of ports located on those routes (Lipovac, 2017: 194).

Ever since Chinese president Xi Jinping unveiled the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, known today as One Belt, One Road, on diplomatic visits in September and October 2013, China’s major economic initiative has been attracting the attention of political scientists and numerous scholars and researchers of international relations and security studies. Leading scholars in these fields are reevaluating and reconceptualizing their viewpoints and ideas in relation to the initiative, which appears to be without precedent in human history.

All prominent scholars and renowned professors from around the world have examined the One Belt, One Road Initiative (henceforth: the Belt and Road Initiative) in their recent work. It is quite symptomatic that U.S. scholars inevitably examine China’s economic initiative in the context of U.S.–China relations and China’s potential to generate a great deal of power in the near future and jeopardize the global position of the U.S. This is true regardless of the line of thought they belong to (Mearsheimer, Walt, Schweller, Kissinger, Brzezinski, and even liberal scholars such as Doyle and Zakaria).

Joseph Nye takes this approach as well, reducing the initiative to the U.S.–China rivalry and examining China’s potential to generate a great deal of power through it. Nye’s approach is specific, however, in that it primarily employs the theoretical framework devised by Nye himself, mainly the concept of soft power and the strategy of smart power. According to Nye, the Belt and Road Initiative is “China’s Big Bet” because it “will provide China with geopolitical benefits as well as costs” (Nye, 2017b). This is why he mostly refrains from predicting its final outcome and says that it remains to be seen whether the Belt and Road Initiative will be a global game changer in power relations, alluding primarily to the relationship between the U.S. and China (Nye, 2017b).

Significantly, Nye emphasizes that the Belt and Road Initiative also serves to promote Chinese economic and political power across the globe (Nye 2017e). According to Nye, China plans to lend more than a trillion (i.e. one million million) U.S. dollars to the rest of the world in the coming decade, to be invested in infrastructure projects, while the U.S. is decreasing its aid programs and its contribution to the World Bank.⁵ This prompts Nye to pose a rhetorical question: Are the alarmists right that China is winning the geopolitical card game with a declining U.S.? (Nye, 2017e).

To such a simplified dilemma Nye provides an even simpler and colorful reply, presenting the U.S.–China relations as a poker game where an objective observer from Mars looking at each player’s hand would bet on the U.S. because it holds four aces that Nye believes will outlive the Trump administration (Nye, 2017e). He then completes the picture by describing each of the four aces as one of the advantages that, Nye believes, the U.S. holds over China. The first ace is the geographic factor because “the U.S. is surrounded by oceans and neighbours that are likely to remain friendly, despite Donald Trump’s mistaken policy of undercutting the North American Free Trade Agreement”, while China borders fourteen countries and has territorial disputes with India, Japan and Vietnam, which is limiting its soft power according to Nye.⁶ The second ace is energy and Nye points out that the U.S. seemed hopelessly dependent on energy exports merely a decade ago. However, the possibility of shale oil extraction has turned the U.S. from an importer to an energy exporter. The reports of the International Energy Agency, cited by Nye, indicate that entire North America should become self-sufficient in terms of oil in the coming decades. China, on the other hand, is becoming increasingly dependent on oil imports from the Middle East, which are mainly transported by tankers travelling across the South China Sea, where the U.S. has military bases.

Nye believes that this sort of vulnerability leaves China with three options: 1) to avoid a naval conflict with the U.S., which would disrupt the supply line, 2) to build a natural gas pipeline and increase its dependence on natural gas from Russia, 3) to decrease its dependence on fossil fuels and introduce emissions quota on engines with internal combustion. He notes that China is investing heavily in the third option, but that it will take dec-

⁵ Regarding the U.S.–China economic rivalry, Nye brings up an interesting piece of information that there are currently almost 100 states whose largest economic partner is China, while for the U.S. this is true in 57 states (Nye, 2017e).

⁶ China also has territorial disputes with the Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia and certain islands in the South China Sea and the Republic of China (Taiwan), which China considers to be its territory.

ades to fully overcome this vulnerability. The third ace in the U.S.'s hand, according to Nye, is trade. Due to their great economic interdependence and inspired by Cold War strategies, Nye presents the potential economic war between the U.S. and China as "mutually assured economic destruction". He argues that a "trade war" the White House occasionally brings up would inflict tremendous damage on both the U.S. and China. As a supporter of the U.S., he nevertheless notes that China is more dependent on the U.S. and that it would have more to lose in such a war. He even cites the Rand Corporation's assessment that the U.S. would lose 5% while China would lose 25% of its GDP in case of a non-nuclear conflict in the South China Sea. Finally, the fourth ace in the U.S.'s hand is the U.S. dollar, given that around 64% of total global reserves are held in U.S. dollars, while only 1.1% of reserves are held in the Chinese RMB. Despite the fact that the Chinese RMB became the fifth currency used by the International Monetary Fund in 2016 and despite China's substantial economic growth, the stability of the Chinese currency and the expectations that this will increase the impact of the RMB as a global currency, Nye emphasizes that the credibility of a reserve currency essentially depends on the market economy, honest government and the rule of law and that China is lacking in these areas (Nye, 2017e).

Nye reinforces the rather banal thesis that U.S.–China relations resemble a game of poker in which the U.S. has four aces with the statement that "a reckless player can misplay a strong hand", alluding to the current U.S. administration (Nye, 2017e). This is the second time Nye has emphasized that the cards will outlive the Trump administration and that those who are proclaiming Pax Sinica ("Chinese peace") and the end of "the American era" should take into account the four power factors – the four aces in the U.S.'s hand – underlined by Nye.

In an interview for the Chinese news agency Xinhua in Washington last November, however, Joseph Nye tones down this rhetoric to an extent by saying that it is unlikely that Americans and the Chinese will have negative perceptions of each other if they have closer ties and understand each other (Nye, 2017d). In the same interview, he describes the relationship between the U.S. and China as "one of healthy competition but also cooperation" and argues that it goes against human nature for the two sides to agree on everything as well as that the issue of "other people's intentions" is often exaggerated so that we see other as enemies "when they don't have to be enemies" (Nye, 2017d). At this point, he introduces the concept of soft power, describing it as the capability to attract. If China became more attractive in the eyes of the U.S. and the American people and the U.S. became more attractive in China's eyes, it would be a win-win situation, where both par-

ties would benefit (Nye, 2017d). Joseph Nye also believes that if the U.S. and China did not cooperate on issues such as financial stability, climate change and the fight against terrorism, both countries would suffer the consequences. This is why Nye presents the cooperation between the two countries as a choice, but also “a necessity if we’re going to achieve what we want” and points out that the relations between the U.S. and China over the past five years (a period which coincides with the first term of president Xi Jinping) have been far more positive than negative (Nye, 2017d).

In an interview to the same news agency in New York a couple of months earlier, Joseph Nye also underlines that great progress has been made in the cooperation between the U.S. and China on issues of climate change and cyber security in the past few years, which proves not only that the U.S. and China have a strong, mutually beneficial partnership, but that this cooperation helps promote world peace, stability and development. This is why Nye believes it is vital for the U.S. and China, two of the world’s strongest economies, to maintain close bilateral cooperation, especially in view of Brexit, the revival of populism, antiglobalism and trade protectionism (Nye, 2017a).

The Belt and Road Initiative, Nye believes, represents a framework for international cooperation which China could use to become “a global public good builder” if it uses its financial resources to develop infrastructure (in other countries) to everyone’s benefit (Nye, 2017d). In Nye’s view, these public goods are beneficial for both China and the U.S., but also for other states and this is a win-win strategy for everyone in terms of public good production and global public good production. Consequently, Nye suggests that the U.S. should work with China on the initiative and adds: “I don’t see any reason why the United States can’t have cooperation with China on many of the types of projects which will go into One Belt One Road [OBOR]” (Nye, 2017d).

The same, though somewhat toned down, view is echoed in Joseph Nye’s subsequent work, published by U.S. media. For example, he points out that, if China decides to use its surplus financial reserves to promote international trade and build infrastructure to help poor countries which are a part of the Belt and Road Initiative, all of that could, in Nye’s view, be considered “a global public good”. Nye also makes a characteristic remark that “Marco Polo would be proud” if he could see the initiative unveiled by Chinese president Xi Jinping (Nye, 2017c). Nevertheless, the influential American scholar adopts a firmer stance for his American readership, stressing that Chinese motives are often not purely benevolent. Given that China has invested its foreign exchange reserves into U.S. Treasury bonds, purchasing U.S. debt, despite the fact that it makes more economic sense

to invest in profitable business, Nye argues that the Belt and Road Initiative should enable the redistribution of massive Chinese foreign exchange reserves from low-yield U.S. Treasury bonds to infrastructure, which brings significantly higher yields and creates new markets for Chinese goods. Nye substantiates the logic of investing in infrastructure by referring to the well-known idea that it is a way of drumming up business for China's cement and railroad companies and enabling Chinese goods to reach other markets as infrastructure is built in less accessible areas. In what could be considered Nye's characteristic style, he poses another rhetorical question: But is the initiative more public relations smoke than investment fire? (2017c).

Though such a question may have an appealing ring to it, it does not narrow the research focus to specific issues in or a specific dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative. It remains unclear whether the purpose of the question, which is ambiguous above all else, is to suggest that China's initiative is merely intended to divert the public's attention from other issues, that promoting a positive image of oneself is more important than real investment or whether its purpose is to legitimize existing economic relations, which China can certainly be satisfied with, to ensure or even enhance the current rate of economic growth or, in fact, none of the above.

Even the way in which Nye answers the question is not particularly helpful. Citing texts from the *Financial Times*, he points out that investments in the Belt and Road Initiative were lower in 2016 than the year before, "raising doubts about whether commercial enterprises are as committed as the government" (2017c).

In the same text and citing the same source, however, he notes that five trains full of Chinese goods leave for Germany each week, while only one train with cargo returns (2017c). On the one hand, this serves to illustrate the significant disproportion in foreign trade between China and Germany as well as other European countries, while on the other it highlights the downward trend in the value of the business and investments generated in the Belt and Road Initiative. Nye, however, fails to answer his own question directly. Finally, he generates additional confusion by citing an article in the *Financial Times* according to which the Belt and Road Initiative is "unfortunately less of a practical plan for investment than a broad political vision" (2017c). Nye's viewpoint regarding the Belt and Road Initiative therefore remains unclear, as do the aspects of the initiative that he might consider to be the most relevant.

Tensions and conflicts in Central Asia could, Nye argues, also jeopardize the megalomaniac projects, since India cannot be content with China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, while Russia, Turkey and Iran (each) have a different agenda for Central Asia regarding China. Nye there-

fore finds the Belt and Road Initiative – the vision of Chinese president Jinping – impressive, but also wonders if it will become a grand strategy (2017c).

In this respect, Nye voices a certain kind of skepticism about the fact that China is relying on the old geopolitical proposition by Halford Mackinder, who believed that those who controlled “the Heartland” (the central area of Eurasia) would control the whole world. Instead of employing this “strategy”, Nye points out that the U.S. adheres to the standpoint of 19th century U.S. admiral Alfred Mahan, who placed importance on naval power and believed that those who controlled the “Rimland” (the areas at the borders of Eurasia) would control the entire world.

Nye goes on to explain how George Frost Kennan adapted Mahan’s Rimland strategy and developed his own Cold War strategy of “containment” of the USSR. In this strategy, the islands of Great Britain and Japan and the Western European peninsula are key allies of the U.S. along the Eurasian Rimland, which promote U.S. interests in terms of the global balance of power. This strategy, Nye believes, has been employed by the Pentagon and the State Department to this day, except that they direct little attention to Central Asia (2017c).

Although he emphasizes that a lot has changed in the era of the Internet, Nye nevertheless believes that geographical factors continue to matter, despite the alleged decline in the importance of physical distance. He reminds that in the 19th century, the greatest geopolitical rivalry revolved around the “Eastern Question” i.e. around who would rule the territory of the waning Ottoman Empire. For this reason, Nye recalls the great infrastructure projects of the time, such as the Berlin–Baghdad railroad, which exacerbated the tensions between the great powers. This leads Nye to pose another characteristic rhetorical question: Will those geopolitical struggles now be replaced by the “Eurasian Question?” (2017c). At this point, Nye offers a considerably simplified account of China relying more on Mackinder and Marco Polo in the Belt and Road Initiative, while the U.S. continues to rely more on Mahan and Kennan. At the same time, the policy of the U.S. is not to contain China – China is creating the issue on its own by engaging in self-containment (2017c).

Regardless of the strategic differences between the U.S. and China, Nye believes that the U.S. should support China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Citing former U.S. World Bank representative Robert Zoellick, Nye argues that if China is contributing to global public goods, the U.S. should help China become a “responsible stakeholder” and that the Belt and Road Initiative can enable U.S. companies to benefit from Chinese investments. The potential is certainly there, but Nye intentionally leaves the matter un-

resolved and poses an unanswered question in lieu of a conclusion: A more difficult question is whether the US can live up to its part (2017c).

Examining the current and expected economic effects of infrastructure investments in poor countries which are a part of the Belt and Road Initiative, Nye reminds that there is always the danger of unpaid loans and debt in large infrastructure projects that exceed the needs of poor countries, described by Nye as “white elephants” (2017c). A port in Sri Lanka is a case in point, cited by Nye to show the other side of the coin. A few years ago, the large Hambantota port in Sri Lanka was officially opened for business. It is estimated that the project to build the port cost between 1.1 and 1.3 billion U.S. dollars. It was built by Chinese construction companies with a loan from Chinese banks. Since the port failed to generate profit and repay loans after it was opened, the Sri Lankan government offered to sell 80% of the port to Chinese partners, but the offer fell through due to protests by unions and opposition parties. Last July, a 99-year concession of property rights was granted for 70% of the port, with Sri Lanka retaining 30%. Sri Lanka’s prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, said that the concession would enable debts to be repaid, that Hambantota would become the main port in the Indian Ocean and that the surrounding area would become an industrial and economic zone, which would contribute to Sri Lanka’s economic growth (The Financial Times, 2018).

Nye later writes that this ambiguity is what gives the Belt and Road Initiative the characteristics of both soft and hard power. China’s economic success generates both hard and soft power so the Belt and Road Initiative can sometimes be perceived as benign and attractive (the characteristics of soft power). However, the example of the Sri Lankan port reveals a different side to the initiative (Nye, 2018). This is a key reference, where Nye directly relates the Belt and Road Initiative to the theoretical concepts that he is best known for. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on the relationship or the potential that these concepts could have for shedding light on the economic initiative. This demonstrates the research consistency typical of almost all his work, in which he develops or “uses” the concepts of hard and soft power and the strategy of smart power but provides only elementary and superficial insight into the subject matter and its various aspects (the power of the U.S., China or another great power, or, in this case, the potential of the Belt and Road Initiative to generate power for China), without attempting to delve deeper into the heart of matter.

All this creates the impression that Nye does not have a consistent point of view on U.S.–China relations. When giving interviews to American newspapers and magazines, he uses harsher rhetoric and emphasizes the rivalry between the U.S. and China, with the former inevitably prevail-

ing (Nye, 2017b; 2017c; 2017e). In interviews to a Chinese news agency (Nye, 2017a; 2017d), his rhetoric seems to lose its edge – he refers to the Belt and Road Initiative as a win-win strategy and places great emphasis on the importance of cooperation between the U.S. and China in the initiative. In interviews to Chinese media, Nye either withholds his views on various contentious issues in China’s domestic or foreign policy or these views are not reported. Either way, Nye gives quite simple and at times banal explanations and bizarre illustrations as if addressing the average or below-average American or Chinese reader and expresses only the opinions that those readers can understand, that they might expect, or might want to hear, and that they can easily concur with. This is why Joseph Nye’s views resemble populist statements by politicians aiming to be understood by the largest number of potential voters and to have those voters agree with them rather than well-founded and systematic analyses by researchers seeking to present objective findings independent of what the audience expects or wishes to hear.

CONCLUSION

China’s One Belt, One Road economic initiative is a central topic in contemporary international relations and a major global process with the potential to reshape the relations of great powers. As a highly important and current topic, it is often politicized and treated with a degree of subjectivity, which is why U.S. scholars regularly analyze this topic in the context of U.S.–China relations and China’s ability to generate additional power capacities, while inevitably favoring the U.S. With this tendency in mind, this paper analyzed the approach and arguments of U.S. political scientist Joseph Nye, anticipating that Nye would analyze the initiative by applying the theoretical concepts that he is best known for: the concepts of hard and soft power and the strategy of smart power. Contrary to these expectations, however, Nye’s treatment of the concepts is fragmentary. He argues that the manner in which the unpaid debts to Chinese creditors for the revitalization of the Sri Lankan port were resolved and the subsequent 99-year concession granted on the port reveal the ambiguous nature of the One Belt, One Road Initiative, drawing the conclusion that the initiative has the characteristics of both hard and soft power (Nye, 2018). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on this claim and fails to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic in his subsequent work. Instead, he merely raises the possibility of applying these concepts in the analysis without delving into the heart of the phenomenon.

Despite his fairly vivid comparisons and analogies, where he likens the relations between the U.S. and China to a game of poker in which the U.S. holds four aces (Nye, 2017e) or reduces the Belt and Road Initiative to a “Marco Polo strategy” and the relations between the two powers to the ideas of Mackinder and Mahan (2017c), Joseph Nye fails to demonstrate the expected systematic approach and advance well-founded arguments and merely offers fanciful ideas, oversimplifying the analyzed phenomenon to the point where it becomes simplistic and even banal. Nevertheless, even such an approach could prove to be useful if it encourages other scholars to examine China’s economic initiative by employing Nye’s concepts of hard and soft power and the strategy of smart power.

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