

Smart Power or Wise Power?

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By Charles Strohmer

Time magazine's recent cover story on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and 'smart power' joins a growing consensus, at home and abroad, that U.S. foreign policy has softened considerably in recent years, therefore the world really ought to once again accept American leadership. There has indeed been some softening. Washington now enlists the cooperation of other nations much more intentionally than it did in the years following 9/11. But is this shift directed toward increased cooperation for the international common good? Or is it a just kinder, gentler way for America to have its own way in the world?

The phrase 'smart power' was coined by noted foreign policy theorist Joseph Nye, former dean of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and co-founder, with Robert Keohane, of the international relations theory of neoliberalism. But smart power must be understood as the outcome of a dialectic with two other kinds of power 'hard and soft' that has occupied Nye's life for more than twenty years. Nye coined 'soft power' twenty years ago, and the term is now a staple in the foreign policy lexicon.

For Nye, power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes you want, and you can affect others in three different ways: by coercion or threats (sticks), by payments or inducements (carrots), and by attraction (getting others to want what you want). The latter is what Nye calls soft power, which is based on the appeal of a nation's morals, values, and culture. His point being that the more you can get what you want through attraction, the less you have to spend on carrots and sticks. Hard power, for Nye, is military and economic power, and they can be very big sticks indeed. Nevertheless, soft power, like all power for Nye, is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes you want. Smart power combines the use of hard and soft, and in his 2010 book, *The Powers to Lead*, Nye discusses how to adjust hard and soft power skills into smart strategies.

In the Time cover story, Massimo Calabresi reports that Clinton has revamped U.S. foreign policy around smart power, as she promised during her confirmation hearings. But here's the rub: smart power is what a state makes of it, and for the United States nothing fundamental has changed in the direction of its foreign policy. America remains the alpha and omega of international relations in the world. As Clinton told Calabresi: 'One of the big questions that I certainly faced becoming Secretary of State is O.K. we are ready to lead. Are there others ready to be there on whatever we are seeking?' And in a sidebar to the cover story, Clinton noted that Libya, where U.S. hard power was used, 'gave us a chance to demonstrate what it means to really put together a strong commitment' led by the United States, make no mistake about that.'

Every U.S. administration, of course, employs its own diplomatic language for America as first and last in the world. For instance, in an article in *Foreign Affairs* when she was Secretary of State in the Bill Clinton administration, Madeleine Albright wrote: 'Much of our energy at the State Department is spent encouraging foreign powers to act for what we perceive to be the common good.' And she is noted for referring to America as 'the indispensable nation.'

What, then, has changed in the direction of U.S. foreign policy with the Obama administration? The methodology is now called smart, but what if an outcome wanted by the United States is not in the interest of the international common good and other states put their foot down? With a strategy of smart power it is still a short walk from the White House to the Pentagon.

We may be thankful that the Obama administration has been more critical of militarism than was Bush presidency its first four years. Smart power in the end, however, remains consistent with a long line of U.S. foreign policy methodologies whose direction is consistent with sustaining American hegemony, a mission that each White House, quietly or noisily, shapes according to its own lights.

Certainly America may lead. But so may other nations. All have contributions to make, not to American hegemony but to the international common good. On some issues America might lead. On other issues America might follow. If international relations of this sort became normative, it would be good America and for all nations. It would make them all nations exceptional, exceptional in

how they served each other more justly and peaceably. Call it wise power.

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