
Soft Power – The Underestimated Strategy for Global Influence

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of soft power, developed by American political scientist and scholar Joseph Nye. Since its development by Nye thirty years ago, this theory has been tested and challenged. Soft power, which considers culture and political values to be just as important as military tactics in international relations and political strategy, has borne the effects of globalization, the Information revolution, and the rise of China. As a result, liberal democracies are beginning to doubt its power and efficiency while autocracies are distorting its mechanisms to expand their global influence. This article will explore the challenges soft power faces in the context of globalization and what that means for the ever growing friction between the liberal world order and the increasing impact of autocratic powers, namely through their manipulation of 'sharp' power. With the rise of populism in liberal democracies, China and Russia's vaccine diplomacy in developing countries, and the trade war between the United States and China, one may wonder to what extent soft power may decide the outcome of this twenty-first century ideological battle between liberal capitalism or state-driven global cooperation. As things stand, the sphere of influence is teetering East. For liberal values to survive, the West will have to

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strengthen its economic and political alliances, accept that globalization cannot be undone but adjusted, and use every soft power tool available in its arsenal, whether public or private.

INTRODUCTION

Almost twenty years ago, the American political scientist and scholar Joseph Nye pointed out that, “[t]raditionally, victory went to the country whose armies won. But in a global Information Age, victory also depends upon whose story wins.”¹ On its face, this observation seems almost obvious. One only needs to take a look at the United States’ crumbling international reputation during the Trump presidency or the glowing perception of Australia and New Zealand over their handling of the Covid-19 crisis to endorse this assertion.² However, upon further reflection, Nye not only confirms the significance of image as a political strategy, but also suggests that despite increased global integration and interdependence, nations are still drawn to asserting their sovereign power over one another. In other words, the rules of the game may have changed, but the game is still very much the same. Opposing ideological forces do remain. The battleground, however, isn’t as clear cut as it was in the latter-half of the twentieth century, when capitalism and communism duked it out on the world stage. Globalization and the Information Revolution converged to throw a curveball at the Westphalian understanding of non-interference and independent sovereignty, and nations are adapting to this permeable landscape in a myriad of strategic ways. One of these strategies is soft power.

Soft power, coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead*, is the “ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment.”³ It is the international relations approach to the oft-mentioned “carrot and stick” metaphor. If military action and economic sanctions are the armaments of a nation’s hard power, then culture, political values, and foreign policy are the instruments of its soft power.⁴

Soft power does not only fall under the purview of state actors. It is carried out by non-state actors as well. Brexit, Netflix, Amazon, and Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy all represent facets of this type of power; some in more subtle and unwitting ways than others. All of these seemingly different undertakings create the image a country will present to the world. If hard power are the fists, soft power is the face. This notion, by virtue of globalization and the advancement of technology, is everywhere and knows no borders, despite attempts by some nations to quash it, such as China’s policy of digital nationalism erected by its “Great Firewall.”⁵

And depending on its form, it is welcomed with skepticism or resentment, similarly to the effects of globalization. This article will explore the challenges that soft power faces in the context of globalization, and what it means for the ever-growing friction between the liberal world order and the rising influence of autocracies. Whether it is the rise of populism in liberal democracies, China and Russia's vaccine diplomacy in developing countries, or the trade war between the United States and China, strategic battles are always ideological, and one may wonder to what extent soft power may influence these outcomes.

This article will first establish the theoretical framework of Nye's soft power theory and discuss its relevance within the current context of globalization. It will then explain its shortcomings through the lens of international trade and its use by autocratic regimes. Finally, this article will assess the impact of soft power in the hands of non-state actors.

THE THEORY EXPLAINED: SOFT POWER AND GLOBALIZATION

Soft Power Defined

Soft power appears to be an oxymoron. How can power, which yields an image of force and coercion, be soft? Power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. It doesn't exist only in its "hard" and tangible form of military might and economic threats, but can be abstract, based on ideas and values. In a way, through his idea of soft power, Nye deftly reconciles two contending schools of thoughts in international relations: realism and idealism. While the former insists on a "struggle for power...which results in a condition of permanent conflict between States,"⁶ the latter is less cynical, and believes that entente is achievable through cooperation and attraction.⁷ With soft power, the political struggle to protect national interests is a constant reality. However, sovereign goals achieved through diplomatic means are generally perceived by the public as being more legitimate than those carried out by force: "Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state or a non-state actors can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If a culture and ideology is attractive, others will more willingly follow."⁸ Nye, however, does not discount the effectiveness of hard power and posits that states need both types to succeed. In fact, the ability to combine the two into an effective strategy is what Nye, and later Hillary Clinton, referred to as "smart power."⁹

Soft power has always existed: from the influence of Greek philoso-

phers to the ancient Silk Road trading route, to the cultural exchanges between Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in the 1930s. However, its current philosophical and political understanding rests with Joseph Nye, who conceptualized and described this antediluvian practice in part to bolster America's morale in the 1980s and to apply the term to the staying-power of the liberal democratic regime and its values. At the time, academic and political chatter presaged the decline of the United States, fearing it could not compete with the tech-savvy innovations coming from Japan and the Soviet Union's military might. Nye disagreed with this somber narrative and contested it by proving that American culture was still a powerful comparative advantage, whether it be Hollywood or its top-grade and innovative universities or other non-state actors. His theoretical justification for not giving up on the United States rested in its soft power potential.¹⁰ If both Americans and people around the world still believed in the "American Dream," then America was doing something right.

In essence, soft power only *works* if the global perception of a given country yields positive results. Case in point: the United States. The Pew Research Center polled thirteen nations in 2020, asking if they had a positive image or not of America. The results were poor, plummeting to thirty-

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one percent for France and twenty-six percent for Germany, from sixty-two percent and seventy-eight percent, respectively, twenty years earlier.¹¹ The latest vertiginous dips were likely due to the presidency of Donald Trump and America's handling of the Covid-19 crisis.¹² Soft power is weakened if a

nation chooses to abandon its commitments to cooperate with others, as when the the Trump administration World Trade Organization's (WTO) blocked the nomination for the appellate body and withdrew the United States from the Paris agreement on climate change. No amount of Netflix original programming or global partnership programs offered by universities will prove fruitful for U.S. foreign policy objectives as long as the global perception is one of incoherence, incompetence, and unwillingness to collaborate. As American University's Rhonda Zaharana aptly stated: "A country's conduct in global affairs carries the most weight."¹³ Nye's theory cannot work without legitimacy, and this concept will be discussed below, with regard to China's billion-dollar "One Belt One Road" project.

Soft Power in the Throes of Globalization

Now that the concept has been explained, the question remains—does soft power actually work? If soft power is, in fact, the “ability to shape the preferences of others,”¹⁴ then globalization is the ideal litmus test to validate Nye’s theory. If countries trust one another, the more likely it is then that they will cooperate, trade, and deal amongst each other. But, what exactly is globalization? Globalization is the economic process behind the movement of services, people, and goods across borders. The European Union’s Schengen Area, which allows the free movement of all of these things, is globalization. The relocation of automobile factories from the United States to Mexico is globalization. The import of Japanese electronics is globalization. Past mere definition, this article will focus on its social and political implications. Like many other economic terms before it, globalization is not perceived by the general public and governments as a whole concept, but rather the sum of many parts: a system molded by capitalism, liberalism and multilateralism. For its detractors, globalization is Frankenstein’s monster at play, ravaging national sovereignty and the fabric of society. For its proponents, it is the result of discovery; a source of richness. It is Schumpeter’s “creative destruction,” whereby professions and sectors are uprooted as a necessary evil to make way for more competitive and innovative industries. In other words, it is the economic process of doing away with the old to make room for the new.

Globalization is both an economic reality and a theoretical concept, encouraging integration and cooperation, and is thus intrinsically linked to soft power. As Jessica Julia McGill Peters states in her dissertation on “American Cinema as Cultural Diplomacy,” “scholars have now demonstrated that the processes involved with globalization—such as increased communication—have led not only to further interactions among different societies, but also to growing interdependence between their nations.”¹⁵ In other words, nations around the world have no choice but to mind their soft power mechanisms and polish their brands, because as a consequence of globalization and the Information revolution, they are all reliant on one another, for better or for worse—and everyone is watching. Therefore, a nation’s model of society, its political values, its commitment to economic development, and its openness to other cultures, are all scrutinized on the world stage. The way they handle their internal affairs will have repercussions on their international standing and ability to make and maintain alliances and economic relationships.

History illustrates that soft power has always played a crucial role in an ever-increasing inter-dependent world. At the onset of the Cold War, the United States launched the European Recovery Program as a means to aid a devastated Western Europe, but also to convince “the European public that the ‘American way’ of individual freedom, efficient productivity, and consumerist abundance was the means to achieve progress for all. The culture of everyday life therefore became the battleground between different ideologies of capitalism and communism.”¹⁶ An economically viable Europe was in the United States’ best interest, as its recovery would mean a revived trading partner and an ally against the Soviet Union. This economic diplomacy project was followed by increased exports of Hollywood movies and music into the newly formed European Union, which subconsciously shaped how Americans would be perceived by their European counterparts. For a long time, this worked—if Francis Fukuyama’s pivotal 1992 work, *The End of History and the Last Man* is any indication.¹⁷ As the Berlin wall crumbled, so did Communism, thus clearing the path for the Liberalism victory tour. As Eric Li writes in *Foreign Policy*, “[i]n the quarter-century that followed Nye’s conception of soft power, world affairs played out within the broad contours of his predictions. After the United States won the Cold War, American liberalism enjoyed unparalleled appeal around the world. Everyone wanted to vote, everyone wanted jeans, and everyone wanted free speech—so much so that the political theorist Francis Fukuyama coined the phrase “the end of history” to capture the idea that the whole world was careening toward a political endpoint already reached by the West.”¹⁸ The proof was in the pudding: between the 1980s and 2010s, “the number of liberal democracies grew from around 100 to close to 150. The number of free market capitalist economies, based on rankings published by the *Wall Street Journal* and the Heritage Foundation, grew from 40 to close to 100.”¹⁹

However, in the past decade, soft power globalization has been *non grata* for many, as the rise of populist parties in Europe, Brexit, and the Trump presidency have illustrated. As mentioned in the 2019 *Soft Power 30* ranking, “[g]lobali[z]ation and technology are experiencing an intense backlash as political movements rail against international trade, capital, and people.”²⁰ As stated above, all battles are ideological, and the Cold War arm wrestle of capitalism and communism has shifted in scale and in meaning. Today, globalization is either embraced (even with caution and corrections) or rejected. As Nikil Saval, the American magazine editor and political activist, has aptly observed: “Economists who were once ardent proponents of globalization have become some of its most prominent critics. Erstwhile

supporters now concede, at least in part, that it has produced inequality, unemployment, and downward pressure on wages.”²¹ For the economic sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, the market is not a strong enough shell to support the speed at which soft power globalization is advancing.²² In other words, consumerism, the wide array of choice in price and product, is not enough to sustain a population’s satisfaction.

This backtrack is not simply structural, but foundational. Since the previously-growing number of liberal democracies have not prevented the rise of autocracies, the world’s leading democracies are now facing a major crisis of faith. This crippling realization has led, as political scientists Jessica Ludwig and Christopher Walker point out, to a withdrawal of the West from the competition in the sphere of ideas: “the democracies have been slow to shake off the long-standing assumption, in vogue from the end of the Cold War until the mid-2000s, that unbridled integration with repressive regimes would inevitably change them for the better, without any harmful effects on the democracies themselves. But as globalization accelerated and integration deepened over the past decade, the authoritarians survived, and their ability to penetrate the political and media space of democracies has become progressively stronger.”²³ Where will soft power go now, if liberal democracies cannot agree on their belief system anymore? Since nature abhors a vacuum, autocracies and non-state actors have picked up the soft power slack, as will be discussed later in this article.

The Downside of Soft Power? A Look At Cultural Imperialism

Meanwhile, if soft power is to retain its legitimacy as an effective strategy, it must be understood by its recipients (e.g. people, cultures, and governments). As stated earlier, non-state actors such as corporations and individuals are as much representatives of soft power as state entities. Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals overseas may consider McDonald’s and Facebook to embody the “Americanization” of their societies. The fear of one culture dominating another through its influence and economic prowess is what academics call “cultural hegemony” or “cultural imperialism.” This concept is not new. The Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, argued in the early twentieth century that “culture and the media exert such a powerful influence on society that they can actually influence workers to buy into a system that is not economically advantageous to them.”²⁴ If one sets aside the Marxist element of Gramsci’s argument, this concern of one culture asserting its power over another is defensible. In other words, take away the class struggle element, and Gramsci is concerned

over the insidious probability of cultural domination. The French and the Canadians have gone so far as to refuse to negotiate cultural goods such as films in their trade treaties with the United States, while other nations are demanding the protection of their indigenous peoples and knowledge through international legislation and declarations, such as those promulgated by the World Intellectual Property Organization or the United Nations. However, it is worth asking whether these measures have shielded sovereign nations from cultural infringement. As the continued success of Hollywood and American programming illustrates, the answer is likely no. Still, it is interesting to observe how some nations have chosen to embrace the staying power of pop culture by creating their own, like South Korea and the global phenomenon that is K-pop and K-dramas. The strength of such an export may offset the overwhelming influence of American culture or carve out a solid place right beside it – as the Bollywood phenomenon in India has demonstrated.

At “The Next Decade of Soft Power,” a conference held in 2019 at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School, Northwestern Professor Erik Nisbet argued that politicians, non-state actors, and academics should focus more on the demand side of soft power than the supply side.²⁵ Soft power actors should pay close attention to how their cultures are being understood and received, instead of solely focusing on the product or action itself. This could ease the tension around feelings of resentment or hostility towards imposing powers and prove to be financially and politically rewarding. As the Australian researcher Terry Flew explains it,

“the risk of expanding initiatives in fields such as international broadcasting and film co-production with little attention being given to reception contexts of cross-cultural communications is that nation states will be committing significant resources to these cultural initiatives to little tangible effect, as has arguably been occurring with the international expansion of CCTV services [Chinese broadcaster] by the Chinese Government over the last decade, at least in advanced industrial nations.”²⁶

In other words, countries should learn to “know their audience.” This maxim is true for both states and non-state actors, because if the former fosters a policy goal, corporations often “drive the evolving framework” in which the said goal is practiced.²⁷ Netflix is just a streaming service, but it represents globalism, cultural diversity, and openness—values that America (with the potential exception of the Trump presidency, in the opinion of the author) has long championed. That being said, the streaming plat-

form must learn to adapt to the cultural imperatives and sensibilities of every nation it chooses to market to—hence its substantial co-production project proposals. In a recent article published by *The Economist* on the power of Netflix in the European Union, the magazine points out how the streaming platform went from 75% American original content in 2015 to 50% today. The reason for this shift? In order to operate in the EU, 30% of Netflix’s catalogue must hail from the member states.²⁸ This company, which represents American cultural influence, is demonstrating that its survival is based on its *global* success, and integrating other cultures into its business model.

If soft power is perceived as cultural imperialism, then it will be relegated to the realm of propaganda, and will wither. There is a fine line between soft power and propaganda, and a good reputation and credibility go a long way in convincing populations that they are not actively being manipulated. Again, the United States remains a stellar example. In the past twenty years, its reputation has fallen in the eyes of many governments and populations. First came the Iraq War, followed by the 2008 financial crisis, and then Trump’s 2016 election -- the

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pinnacle of America’s reputational demise. Today, American leadership is not seen as a global good. This negative perception may change over time, but it is the situation the U.S. government must currently contend with. America’s one advantage in regaining credibility might be the fact that it is constantly watched. As the American columnist and academic Walter Russell Mead opined in the *Wall Street Journal*, “America is the world’s biggest billboard. Nothing that happens here stays here; everything spreads. If Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality spring up in Minnesota, protesters in Lagos, Nigeria, take note. If U.S. rioters start demolishing Confederate memorials, statues of slave traders go in the river in Britain...For good or for bad, the U.S. matters.”²⁹

However, eyes everywhere are also attentively watching the United Kingdom or China. For example, the world is paying attention to how the British monarchy will weather the storm of Brexit, just as it is watching how China will attempt to spin its poor treatment of Hong Kong protestors and the Uyghurs. Lest we forget, the power element in Nye’s theory of soft power exists only insofar as there is attraction. As he wrote, “Soft power is not merely an influence...It is also the ability to attract, and attraction

often leads to acquiescence. Simply put, in behavioral terms, soft power is attractive power.³⁰ Hence, it cannot be reduced to simple power dynamics of the strong versus the weak; it is far more complex. Attraction is an implicit pull that cannot be willed. Therefore, the tendency to consider power as a dichotomic struggle is a fallacy. Soft power isn't always in opposition to other forms of power, such as hard power—more often than not, they reinforce one another. The following section will illustrate this point through the lens of globalization's lead instrument: international trade.

SOFT POWER CHALLENGED: THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE ARENA

The Soft & Hard Power Hybrid of Trade Agreements

There is no greater proof of the image crisis between soft power and globalization in liberal democracies than the standstills in the multilateral trade arena and the recent failure of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. On the multilateral front, the World Trade Organization remains in an extended deadlock since the halt of the 2006 Doha round negotiations, when the European Union and the United States refused to back down on agricultural subsidies and the increased liberalization of regulation standards.³¹ This trade conflict is more social and political than economic—liberal democracies agree that developing countries should be given the opportunity to export their products and services into developed economies, but not at the risk of threatening the high social, environmental, and labor standards those developed democracies embody and wish to champion. As a result, protectionist policies have sprouted in the past decade, namely in the United States, which have provoked similar retaliatory measures across the globe.

How does soft power influence trade? For one, according to Andrew Rose, professor at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, a nation's soft power has a measurable effect on its exports: "countries that are admired for their positive global influence export more, holding other things constant. The result is economically and statistically significant."³² Rose tested his model during Trump's presidency and found that "[his] unpopularity outside the U.S. dampen[ed] the demands for U.S. exports."³³ President Trump's protectionist trade policies, though geopolitically strategic with regard to China, hindered the United States' relationship with its allies, specifically Canada and the European Union. Viewed through the lens of hard and soft power, trade agreements are a hybrid of both: economic inducement and political attraction. Through

deeper economic integration, a nation's values and desires can seep into the psyche of the importer's society. In layman's terms, for example, importing French Bordeaux and brie to Malaysia could over time awaken interest in the nations' humanist and universalist values, thus making it not only easier for French companies to do business in Malaysia, but also for the French government to count Malaysia as a strategic ally. However, the diffuse effect of "creating general influence"³⁴ is never a given, as opening up trade relations with China in 2001 has soberly proven.³⁵

Moreover, trade deals will always be a sensitive subject because beneath the "legalese" of trade regulations, there is the intangible underbelly of sovereignty, identity, and values. For example, the primary reason for Norway's refusal to join the European Union rested on fishing rights and the Norwegians' cultural and economic attachment to their fisheries. Brexit negotiations stalled over the thorny issue of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy, which regulates member states' fishing quotas. Finally, as mentioned above, the Doha round came to a halt because the United States and the European Union refused to budge on the subsidizing of their agricultural industries. A nation's foods and beverages can be a representation of its soft power. France ranks at the top of the *Soft Power 30 Ranking* in part due to its unparalleled restaurants, food, and wine.³⁶ Agriculture is not just a matter of sustenance or a sector of the economy, it speaks to a nation's story and to its *savoir-faire*. In other words, what a nation chooses to protect in global trade is a question of strategy, priority, and identity. Nations are becoming more fearful of trade, as it ultimately forces them to relinquish control over their own narrative.

The proof of this is that, in the past five years, the United States—international trade's greatest proponent—has reversed its policy and exercised hard power mechanisms in its trade relations: it applied economic sanctions against Chinese strategic industries (e.g. Huawei) to prevent intellectual property theft, which could threaten both American commercial competitiveness and its national security. Yet, the soft power of liberalized trade and market access for foreign companies did not convince China, who is economically thriving under its state-controlled market economy. Did this mean soft power has failed? No, it simply means that it was not sufficient on its own and hard power had to intervene. Joseph Nye never claimed that soft power was self-sustaining. Hence, he developed the term "smart power" (the hard/soft power hybrid) after the deterioration of the situation in Iraq following the 2003 American invasion.³⁷

The Dangers of Abandoning the Trade Arena

Nonetheless, the European Union and the United States should lead by example if they wish to continue defending the soft power of liberalized trade. This was the idea behind the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which would have complemented NATO on the economic front. According to French researcher and scholar Michael E. Lember, signing TTIP would have been the next step for the transatlantic geopolitical space, a strengthened strategic alliance, with its own brand of soft power (democratic values such as freedom of expression and a liberal economy) and hard power (NATO), thus creating a transatlantic “smart power.”³⁸ As things currently stand, Trump-era retaliatory tariffs on European food and wines, in answer to “unfair” aircraft subsidies of Airbus, the European aerospace corporation, are hindering goodwill and trust among the two superpowers, creating a rift that can only profit Russia and China, if it weakens the transatlantic relationship.³⁹

On its face, the link between trade and soft power may appear tenuous, but the former is a major instrument of the latter. Healthy trade relationships engender good foreign policy relationships, which serve soft power objectives. This is even more true for the European Union, which, without the United States and the NATO alliance, would not have any military defense to speak of. However, TTIP failed because of an ever-growing distrust, especially in the European Union, of the global system and free trade. As stated above, soft power will not work if its recipients do not buy what they’re being sold. In the EU, there is a real fear that globalization will erode high levels of protection for consumers, the environment, and society at large. With regard to TTIP,

“there was a strong conviction [especially in Germany] that TTIP would negatively impact employment and labor market conditions, consumer protection, environmental and social standards, and regulatory sovereignty in general. The perceived positive effects of economic growth, international competitiveness, and global influence were not enough to compensate for these negative side effects.”⁴⁰

This campaign was heavily bolstered on social media by anti-TTIP interest groups in German speaking countries.⁴¹ However, interestingly enough, the “simultaneously negotiated CETA was met with considerably less hostility in most EU states.”⁴² If we are to believe Professor Andrew Rose’s study mentioned above on positive perceptions and global influence, then the hostility towards TTIP and its ultimate failure can be linked to EU members’ dislike and distrust of President Trump. Meanwhile, the

success of CETA, the comprehensive trade agreement between Canada and the EU, is partly the result of goodwill and confidence in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who fully supported and promoted the deal.

Furthermore, if suspicion of trade deals is to subside in liberal democracies, then they should practice what they preach and provide transparency. Anthony Gardner, former U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, explains how during the negotiations, the U.S. reluctantly gave access of TTIP texts to national governments and parliaments in order to explore trade-offs. This backfired. As Gardner later stated, “we should have realized earlier, however, that these arguments would sound like a rejection of accountability and generate considerable ill will among senior European officials. To the wider public, we appeared to be negotiating ‘back room’ deals as though we had something to hide.”⁴³

The Information Revolution has shaken how much of a grasp nations have on their soft power mechanisms. In 2004, Joseph Nye wrote that the explosion of information due to technological advancements had created, “the paradox of plenty,” whereby “when people are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting them, it is hard to know what to focus on.”⁴⁴ Hence, an overwhelming amount of social media posts disparaging the TTIP deal mixed with a lack of transparency on the part of negotiators severely weakened the agreement. This lack of informational understanding by officials, topped off by the marred reputation of President Trump, dealt the final blow. Nye explained that, “reputation has always mattered in political leadership, but the role of credibility becomes an even more important power resource because of the paradox of plenty. Information that appears to be propaganda may not only be scorned; it may also turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a reputation for credibility.”⁴⁵ Now, more than ever, liberal democracies must act together to promote their values through the soft power of trade. However, they must focus their attention on the priorities of their partners, as well as their own, if they are to counter the “sharp power” in the hands of autocratic governments.

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SOFT POWER IN NEW HANDS: THE “SHARP POWER” OF AUTOCRATIC REGIMES AND THE STAYING POWER OF NON-STATE ACTORS

Soft Power vs. Sharp Power

Soft power is subtle, while sharp power is insidious. If the former's goal is to attract and persuade nations through unfettered access to a myriad of voices and opinions in films, television, university exchange programs and broadcast channels, the latter is focused on garnering support through one narrative and one only: the State's. The government controls every single aspect of its countries' narrative. Sharp power, coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy, is the “deceptive use of information for hostile purposes.”⁴⁶ It is a form of hard power, which “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.”⁴⁷ While soft power is out in the open, sharp power lurks in the shadows. Similar to “smart power,” sharp power is a hybrid of both soft and hard power. However, the key difference is *how* the soft power is used. Sharp power is a state-sanctioned tactic to influence through covert means. The state's goals are never transparent nor straight-forward.

Though it is the method of choice of autocratic regimes today—namely China, Russia and Turkey, to name a few—this cloaked maneuvering is not new. During the Cold War, for example, the United States had the CIA covertly fund and support the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anti-communist advocacy group,⁴⁸ while the KGB planted false information that the United States created AIDS as a result of government experiments with biological weapons.⁴⁹ As Mark Twain aptly observed, history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

Scheming and spreading disinformation may be unoriginal, but both happen today at a speed that raises concern. One only has to observe how quickly Russia was able to mobilize trolls and botnets to tamper with the 2016 U.S. election, or how easy it was for China to keep the lid on the Covid-19 crisis for the first couple of months before it spread across its borders. For these regimes, soft power mechanisms do not need to be synonymous with openness and transparency. This distorted conception of Nye's theory is not just about brand promotion, but also protecting it by tarnishing the brands of others.

First, let's take a look at China's efforts to wield its soft “sharp” power around the globe. According to George Washington University's David Shambaugh, Beijing spends ten billion dollars per year on its soft power

instruments.⁵⁰ The first to speak on the subject of *ruan shili* (soft power) in China, was President Hu Jintao—though the idea is markedly attributable to the Chinese general and philosopher Sun Tzu.⁵¹ Joseph Nye even quoted the military expert in his book, *The Power to Lead*, in 2008. Nye observed that Sun Tzu “had concluded that ‘the highest excellence is never having to fight because the commencement of battle signifies a political failure.’”⁵² President Hu also extolled soft power’s virtues, which his successor, Xi Jinping, has continued to promote. Since China’s way of doing politics is controversial to many states and individuals, especially in liberal democracies, its “soft-power strategy focuses mainly on promoting its culture and trying to give the impression that its foreign policy is, for such a big country, unusually benign.”⁵³ One of these “benign” projects is the establishment of some 500 government-funded “Confucius Institutes” in 140 countries, which “offer language classes, host dance troupes and teach Chinese cooking.”⁵⁴ Beijing also sponsors Chinese New Year celebrations around the world. These efforts of cultural promotion seem innocuous enough. However, some institutes have come under the scrutiny of the U.S. government and advocacy groups, like Human Rights Watch, for imposing censorship on subjects such as Taiwan and the Tiananmen Square protests. As a result, some Confucius Institutes have been closed.⁵⁵ Evidently, there is a fine line between soft and sharp power, and efforts to quash or dissimulate information in order to pedal propaganda is that line.

China’s sharp power efforts are most clearly observed in its “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which promises massive investments in infrastructure across Asia, the Middle East and Africa. On its face, the project appears to be purely an economic ambition. However, these large investments come with tight purse-strings attached. Beijing is banking on these financed nations to defend China against sanctions for human rights violations and to block international demands for more transparency in its business dealings with states and corporations. In the past decade, Beijing has built and financed railways in places like Ethiopia and Kenya to reach their ports, which are being refurbished to support China’s goal of controlling critical global supply chains to redirect international trade flows. To facilitate these projects and create “goodwill” among these nations, the Chinese are building Mandarin schools and opening offices of their media agencies, Xinhua, the state-run news agency, and China Global Television Network, its broadcaster, to help sell their polished, yet disputable, message of prosperity without colonial ambitions.⁵⁶ Yet, as Terry Flew points out in his research on China’s international media expansion and soft power, “in the field of global news and information, CCTV (now China Global Television

Network) is available in many parts of the world and in multiple languages, but struggles to get significant audience reach even among the Chinese diaspora, due in part to the difficulties it faces in establishing its structural independence from the government when contrasted to the leaders in international news such as BBC and CNN.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is evident that not everyone is buying Xi Jinping's "we come in peace" image. A short documentary on China's business dealings in Kenya shows growing frustration among local populations as Beijing and the Kenyan government continue to deal and decide policy behind their backs.⁵⁸ Kenyans want roads but they also want respect. As *The New York Times*' Joseph Goldstein remarked, "as the country embraces China's expanding presence in the region, many Kenyans wonder whether the nation has unwittingly welcomed an influx of powerful foreigners who are shaping the country's future—while also bringing racist attitudes with them."⁵⁹ Among African populations, there is a growing concern over exploitative labor practices and discrimination.⁶⁰

Still, China can turn its image around if its vaccine diplomacy goes as planned. Xi Jinping's "Health Silk Road" plan intends to win soft power points in Africa by delivering low-cost Covid-19 vaccines across the developing world.⁶¹ The Chinese technology giant Alibaba is working with Ethiopian Airlines to deliver millions of doses to the continent.⁶² According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "early deliveries and commitments show the ties China has built around the world, including in places that its trillion-dollar Belt and Road infrastructure project and other investments from hydro-power to mining have reached. Countries using Chinese vaccines have pledged their support of China's global interests."⁶³ Vaccine diplomacy is a massive soft power play, which, if successful, will tip the scales in favor of "savior" nations. As things stand, China and Russia come off as knights in shining armor for developing nations, while the United States and the European Union appear to be self-serving hoarders.⁶⁴ Soft power is a matter of perception and credibility, and when lives are at stake, whoever sweeps in is considered the victor. One only needs to look at Europe's perception of the United States in the aftermath of World War II and the financial aid it provided through the Marshall Plan. The *appearance* of selflessness goes a long way in a nation's global perception and the strategic rewards that come along with it (e.g. trade partnerships, military presence abroad, use of natural resources, etc.).

Meanwhile, Russia, with its Russia Today news channel (RT), may not be changing hearts and minds with regard to its image, but it is successfully wielding its "sharp power" to instill doubt in the populations of liberal democracies. According to Walker and Ludwig, "sharp power

enables authoritarians to cut into the fabric of society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions. Russia has been especially adept at exploiting rifts within the democracies, including promoting narratives in Central and Eastern European countries that aim to undermine support for the EU and NATO.”⁶⁵ In other words, Russian officials “realized that they could achieve their objectives by making democracy appear relatively less attractive.”⁶⁶ Researcher and scholar Kathryn E. Stoner succinctly depicts Russia’s “sharp power” strategy:

“In the past few years, Putin’s Russia has become adept at the use of its soft power in support of anti-liberal values. Conservative societies in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, sub-saharan Africa and Latin America are the most receptive. Many in these countries see Putin as a socially conservative alternative to American and European hedonism, permissiveness and ‘political correctness.’ Russia’s message has been pushed worldwide through Russia Today, Putin’s global television mouthpiece, and through its sister radio network, Sputnik. Russia has also used its “sharp power” to penetrate information environments in other countries, including cyberattacks, like the recent offensive against the U.S., and disinformation campaigns intended to sow confusion about the divide between truth and fiction.”⁶⁷

So, while China is off trying to sell its brand of disinformation through its institutes, media and news outlets, Russia is using the same tactics to discredit the brand of liberal democracy. This, in essence, is sharp power.

Finally, another less publicized example of sharp power is Turkey. President Recep Erdogan is pushing his global “soft power” through a mosque-building campaign, most notably by converting the Hagia Sophia Byzantine-style museum into a mosque. Mosques are also being planned in Venezuela, France, and Cuba, while the one being built in Tirana, Albania is slated to be the largest in all the Balkans.⁶⁸ On its face, religious competitiveness is not new. It is a foreign policy strategy, which falls into the remit of soft power, according to Joseph Nye’s definition. However, this article argues that Erdogan’s mosque initiative belongs to the sharp power school of strategy for the simple reason that its goals are covert. The Diyanet, a Turkish government body, runs 900 of Germany’s 2,400 mosques, and recent investigations have brought to light its political agenda, despite its claims of neutrality. For example, *Der Spiegel* reported “some DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) imams led prayers supporting Turkey’s military incursion into Syria’s Afrin Region.”⁶⁹ Meanwhile, a number of imams in Germany were investigated for spying

on followers of Fethullah Güllen, the preacher whom Ankara is blaming for the attempted coup against Erdogan in 2016.⁷⁰ Where there is a willingness to suppress political dissent and pluralism, we can no longer speak of soft power. There is an underlying philosophical imperative of liberty to soft power, which sharp power does not include, as the purely state driven machinations above illustrate.

What Russia, China, and Turkey fail to understand is that soft power is not a weapon to be used at the discretion of their respective governments. It is an amalgamation of political strategies and individual decisions. With soft power, a country is not simply one voice, but a cacophony of voices, each with their very own vision of what their nation is and should be. As Ludwig and Walker explain, “China and Russia have trouble generating their own soft power precisely because of their unwillingness to free the vast talents of their civil societies.”⁷¹ In fact, when Nye explains soft power, “he suggests that governments could not manufacture it.”⁷² Civil society, corporations, individuals, universities, pop culture, Hollywood—these are the keepers of soft power. A top-down approach will not yield any return on investment in the domain of soft power. The latter is both horizontal and cyclical. As Nye observed, soft power “is not the possession of any one country, nor only of countries.”⁷³ When vaccine diplomacy wears off, as the effects of the Marshall Plan did, what will autocracies stand on to preserve their goodwill abroad?

The Impact of Soft Power in the Hands of Non-state Actors & the Rise of Digital Diplomacy

As a result of the Information Revolution of the past thirty years, we have seen the gradual devolution of power from states to non-state actors such as corporations, NGOs, civil society, institutions, and populations. In 2017’s *Soft Power 30* report, researchers observed that, “the ongoing devolution of power away from national governments effectively means the ability of non-state actors to engage in international debates and ultimately shape the outcomes of global affairs.”⁷⁴ One need only look at the

Black Lives Matter movement, Greta Thunberg’s climate campaign, or the Hong Kong protests to witness the impact non-state actors have had in using digital networks to shake up the “old hierarchies when it comes to campaigning,”⁷⁵ thus opening up new avenues other than traditional government-sanctioned diplomacy.

The nexus of non-state actors and digital diplomacy is powerful and should not be underestimated by any government, whether autocratic or democratic. While public diplomacy is about “handling relationships between a state and its foreign publics,”⁷⁶ digital diplomacy is anyone’s game. Non-state actors can shape global preferences and move the needle on diplomatic issues and objectives through communication technologies such as Twitter and Instagram. In fact, these groups have an advantage over states: their objectives do not necessarily have to be weighed against geopolitical and strategic considerations, and they are not subject to hierarchical sanctions. Hence, speed and flexibility are on their side. As the *Soft Power 30* report has observed, “individuals can now quickly mobilize to take action as well-organized single-issue pressure groups. Consumers are able to quickly organize boycotts of products or demand changes to regulation. Individual citizens can also apply pressure on their municipal and regional leaders to take action on transnational issues.”⁷⁷

Joseph Nye’s research does indeed demonstrate how effective soft power can be when its source is “independent of government and large corporations whose communication is often perceived as propaganda.”⁷⁸ An open, arbitrary distribution of information appears to yield far more credibility to the general public than when it is packaged and concentrated by a limited source. This is the downfall in China’s “soft power” strategy according to Nye:

“China does not yet have global cultural industries on the scale of Hollywood, and its universities are not yet the equal of America’s, but more important, it lacks the many non-governmental organizations that generate much of America’s soft power. Chinese officials seem to think that soft power is generated primarily by government policies and public diplomacy, but much of America’s soft power is generated by its civil society rather than its government.”⁷⁹

Despite the ever-growing impact of non-state actors on influencing and attracting soft power through freedom of expression and debate on communication platforms, there is still the concern of the “paradox of plenty.” With such an influx of information coming from all directions, how is the public supposed to sift through it? What happens if the public can no longer distinguish fact from fiction? As Dr. Jay Wang of the

University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy warns us: "the information cacophony and silos in the digital space have exacerbated our incredulity and distrust. And the excess of political rhetoric through these channels of communication makes the public's existential fear more vivid and visceral."⁸⁰ If soft power in the hands of any entity, governmental or other, is to survive, then trust needs to be re-established. As mentioned above, this all comes down to credibility, as ultimately, the public is the final arbiter on whether soft power is good or bad – a positive influence or pernicious propaganda .

CONCLUSION

Whose credibility is the strongest nowadays? As globalization has propelled economic, political, and cultural integration, soft power remains a powerful identity marker for nations to distinguish themselves. One can

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..... argue that while autocracies are offensively building their narrative, liberal democracies seem to have forgotten theirs. Speaking about America, former U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands, Cynthia Schneider, observed the irony that "the country whose number one export is cultural products and whose popular culture permeates the world is struggling to define itself."⁸¹ This comment can arguably be extrapolated to include most liberal democracies, who today are on the defensive, entrenched in a domestic and international "mea culpa" tour for their harmful role in globalization, colonialism, and global warming, among other things. This is not to say that self-reflection is not necessary, especially when populations are expressing their frustrations. Yet, autocracies are using this moment of vulnerability and withdrawal to strategize and expand their spheres of influence. While the East is busy externally strategizing, the West is reckoning with its own age of discontent. No amount of soft power will counterbalance this unless liberal democracies have the courage to defend their values at home and abroad, while strengthening their international partnerships, namely through trade, investment, and development aid. Australia is paving the "smart power" way in the Pacific by increasing its economic and military cooperation with India and Japan. Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan are all teetering on the brink of revolutionary freedom, hence why liberal democracies should not shy away from their soft power convictions,

including: freedom of expression and the marketplace of ideas, transparency, governmental accountability, and cultural diversity.⁸²In the end, the winning story is the one with nothing to hide.*f*

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