

'Soft power' is a flawed tool in foreign policy, but a valuable form of global leadership

Soft power has been embraced by much of the world as an effective tool of foreign policy. David Ellwood traces its history and current use arguing that while its basic definition has not changed since it was coined by Joseph Nye, it now has different implications. He cautions that soft power is a flawed foreign policy tool, but is a valuable means for a state to define itself as a global leader.



As the use of military force to resolve disputes between nations becomes less plausible in most regions of the world, the struggle for influence intensifies. Among the consequences has been the rise to global fame of the concept of 'soft power', in theory a means to turn a country's attributes and achievements into a lever for gaining advantage in international power games of all sorts. Journalists and politicians have grabbed 'soft power' as a useful cliché, and cultural operators have used it to justify everything from the Olympic Games to student exchanges. The concept has taken on a life of its own.

It was discussed on BBC Radio 4 as an alternative to 'hard power' — military strikes — in the Syrian crisis. In the past few years the Chinese government has embraced it with passion. Russia has officially announced its belief in the concept as a foreign policy tool. The new President of Iran has taken to Facebook and said that his state should develop it. The EU, a soft power institution if ever there was one, can see its impact in the Ukraine. Nelson Mandela has been described by a former US Ambassador to South Africa as 'a master of soft power'. Perhaps Mandela is one reason why Google now offers 'about 224m' references to the phrase in mid-December, 2013, compared to 'about 167m' only three months ago!

The basic definition offered by the phrase's inventor, Joseph Nye of Harvard University, has not changed over time: 'soft power' works by the force of example, projecting the attractiveness of a nation's way of life, values, culture, historical experience to gain consensus and legitimacy. Ideally, says Nye, it should deliver specific results in foreign policy, act as an instrument for 'getting the outcomes you want'. As a former Assistant Secretary for Defense it's perhaps inevitable that Nye should see his creature this way. But plenty of people and institutions – from Mandela to the Churches, from universities to great sports clubs – possess this same form of power potential, as do the media in all their forms. The success of a brand measures the soft power attraction of a product or service.

But the spin Nye and others have put on the 'soft power' phrase has changed over time. Invented in 1990 as the Cold War came to an end, it paid tribute to the non-military forces which had presumably undermined the Soviet Union: the attractiveness of Western democracy, freedoms and life-styles. It also helped fill the ideological gap left by the end of anti-Communism. During America's heady 1990s, it celebrated the spread of the Internet and all the values and products associated with Silicon Valley. At the time of the Iraq war it was re-launched to fight anti-Americanism, and was much in view during the 2008 election campaign: candidate Clinton used it openly. The vast charismatic charge which built up around Barack Obama at that time seemed to say that America had found a way back to its traditional position of prestige, authority and consensual hegemony, at least in the West.



Joseph Nye at Chatham House in 2011 (Creative Commons BY-2.0)

Today Nye prefers the term ‘smart power’, to express an idea of synthesis between the hard and soft versions that States may deploy in given situations. When head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Joe Biden – the current Vice-President – ran hearings on ‘smart power’, and it was much in vogue in the early years of Hilary Clinton’s term as Secretary of State. In the Financial Times, Robert Cooper, a former senior EU diplomat, warned that all the soft power the EU can deploy in the Ukraine will be useless if it can’t be accompanied by a hard edge, though he did not specify what this hardness would consist of.

Leaving aside its glibness and air of casuistry, the ‘soft power’ concept is fundamentally flawed at just the point where Nye insists on its usefulness: as a tool of foreign policy. The more states attempt consciously to project the force of example they see in their nations and its ways, the more the rest will see manipulation and propaganda. Two US analysts who commented on the prospects for British foreign policy in a new book, *Influencing Tomorrow: Future Challenges for British Foreign Policy*, were happy to say that ‘the BBC may be a more effective tool of British foreign policy than the Royal Navy or the British Army’. But they also warned against the temptations and risks of leverage: ‘when you reach for the tool of soft power, you find it evaporates in your hand’.

In the American case in particular, the temptation seems to be to try to mobilize the charismatic nature of so many successful American inventions and people as though they are resources at the disposal of the state. But they are not; they are the values and products of that society in the most diffuse sense, and its creative industries in particular, with all their talent for absorbing and re-configuring the inventions of the world then re-launching them for a global market.

Today the experts know that the sources of power in the world are multiplying, and that force is only one of them. Diffused through so many channels today, soft power is best seen as the influence of culture in all its forms. Nothing like culture adds value – and values – to power. The key cultural power is the one which most successfully defines the content, direction and pace of change for the rest, and so presents itself as the leading model of modernity in any given era. This was the challenge of America to the world in the 20th century. Now others have understood this lesson, and are trying to join the competition. Hopefully it’s a contest for diversity, and not for supremacy.

This article first appeared at the [OUPblog](#).

Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: bit.ly/1eFfu1O

About the author

David Ellwood - University of Bologna

David Ellwood is an Associate Professor of International History at University of Bologna and Adjunct Professor in European-American Relations at Johns Hopkins University, SAIS Bologna Center. The fundamental theme of his research — the function of American power in contemporary European history — has shifted over the years to emphasize cultural power, particularly that of the American cinema industry. He was President of the International Association of Media and History 1999-2004 and a Fellow of the Rothermere America Institute, Oxford, in 2006.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP