

## The Myth of Soft Power in Asia

Written by Eunsun Chang and Nagyong Kim

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EUNSUN CHANG AND NAGYONG KIM, MAY 24 2016

From cultural icons such as Adele and the Avengers to groundbreaking inventions like the iPhone and Facebook, the widespread nature of American culture confirms its robust soft power that contributes to the overall U.S. influence and dominance in global affairs. Together with traditional military and economic power called hard power, the natural blend of America's hard and soft power allows the United States to strengthen its superpower status.

The rise and spread of the online world has accelerated the emergence of soft power influence. Unlike the physical, tangible sources of power such as the military, weaponry, size of territory, and population, intangible assets such as culture, ideological values and new ideas have started to become more influential. An increase in interconnectivity across the globe makes different cultures more accessible and convenient to garner. A 21<sup>st</sup> century superpower must not only possess the tangible "hard power", but also have influential culture including music, movies, customs, and other forms of the arts, lifestyle, and entertainment.

The concept of soft power traces back to the works of Hans Morgenthau and, more recently, to Joseph Nye, when the United States was viewed as an "over-stretched empire." In the 1980s, the U.S. share of global production fell from 33% in 1950 to 23%. Its share of world exports dropped from 17% in 1950 to 10% in 1988. Most importantly, however, its share of monetary reserves dropped from 50% to 9%. It was indicated that already half of the U.S. citizens perceived a decline of power of America.

Nye argued the "yardstick" had been changed. He underlined that American influence will continue through utilization of soft power, although the United States may lose its hard power supremacy. Nye defined soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments." Soft power, according to him, "is not just a matter of ephemeral popularity; it is a means of obtaining outcomes the United States wants by affecting behavior without commanding it." Nye further elaborated that soft power arose from "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." Through this, Nye opens a possibility where future conflicts may involve minimal use of the more violent hard power, and rather the use of less tangible but more psychological influence of soft power.[1]

Nye argued that development of soft power is a critical component because states need to rely on various forms of power in post-Cold War international relations with intensified economic interdependence and multi-dimensional dynamics. Power diffusion and transition has led to a decrease in hard power and, at the same time, an increase in soft power. Nye further argued that countries could no longer rely solely on money and military forces to address other countries. Other scholars, such as James B. Steinberg, supported this idea by asserting that diplomacy has evolved to be more implicit through means of attraction and persuasion.[2]

Given that the interconnectivity within the international community will grow at an incessant rate, it raises several questions. Will soft power be able to replace hard power in the pursuit of national interests? Will it build a solid foundation for countries to form a security community based on shared identity? Will soft power allow the United States to overcome the continuous rise of China, check the Russian intervention in the Crimean Peninsula, and stop the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)? Unfortunately, global phenomena elucidate that there are inherent limitations to soft power, despite the novelty of the idea.

This study starts with a question as to why American soft power fails to effectively deal with its major rivals such as

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China and Russia. Soft power fails to be a major diplomatic tool of the U.S. foreign policy in dealing with Russia's intervention in Crimea and the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, conflicts rooted deeply in history, culture, and nationalism, portrayed by East Asian countries, further underscore a flaw in soft power influence. As a result, this study indicates that soft power, unless blended appropriately with hard power, cannot insert influence in international relations and serve as an effective diplomatic tool.

## **Interdependence & Democratic Values Not Sufficient for Soft Power**

The enlargement of NATO from a military alliance into a security community has been one of the most popular subjects in theoretical studies. Realists viewed the enlargement of NATO as a deterrent measure against a weakened Russia that would soon re-emerge back to its superpower status. Constructivists viewed the enlargement as a process of international socialization based on liberal democratic values and norms. In the process, there evolved an identity-based behavioral expectation of "we-ness" which would define national interests and priorities.[3] For their part, liberalists posit that economic interdependence constrains states from using force against one another because trade generates economic gains, which in turn produce the anticipation that a military conflict would disrupt trade gains.[4]

All multilateral efforts to promote security cooperation in Northeast Asia have ultimately failed to create a security community like that of NATO. The Four Party Talks; the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) between the United States, Japan and South Korea on North Korean nuclear issues; the Six Party Talks; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) between Central Asian countries led by China and Russia; and the web of alliance led by the United States have all shown how difficult it is to create such a community in Northeast Asia.[5] The Four Party Talks designed to include all four parties in the Korean War, namely the United States, China and two Koreas, lasted three years before it ended without generating any feasible agreement in 1999. The Six Party Talks has failed to generate any outcome toward peaceful solution of the North Korean nuclear stalemate for thirteen years.

Theories on international relations tend to take unconditional and general applicability for granted and neglect history and domestic politics of Asia.[6] Economic interdependence hardly seems to promote institutionalized security cooperation. As the diplomatic tension over the issue of 'comfort women' demonstrates, trade between Seoul and Tokyo constantly fails to remove historical distrust. The historical legacy of Japanese colonialism still functions as variations from what liberal theories predict.[7]

Propositions of democratic peace bear inherent fallacies. The inclusion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cases makes the validity of democratic peace less convincing. By including the 19<sup>th</sup> century cases, democratic peace tacitly admits those countries that legalized opium trade, are regarded as democratic countries. In addition, they did not bestow voting rights for women and most of them legalized slavery. Thus, democratic peace could be understood as the result of incomplete theorization by "self-righteous westerners preaching the virtues of democracy in places they neither understand nor respect." [8]

It has been mentioned that interdependence between states is a core element in the process of establishing soft power. Theoretical flaws embedded in liberalist theories also indicate limitations of soft power as a foreign policy tool. Commercial liberalism, along with democratic peace, does not present itself as a plausible guidance for soft power to emerge as the major source of influence. Institutional liberalism shows why soft power fails to induce attraction from countries pursuing their own national interests.

Interdependence however, also fails to generate friendship that overcomes territorial disputes and regional rivalry between China and Japan. It is further indicated that linkage between economic interdependence and negotiation does not always guarantee positive outcomes.[9]

As the trade intensity index (2007) shows, trade intensity in Asia is higher than in Europe.[10] Even the intensity of ASEAN+3 countries including China, Japan and South Korea is higher than the intensity between EU countries. In particular, South Korea, China, and Japan have long been major trade partners. Yet, despite centuries of economic and cultural exchange, the three nations still have not been able to see any success in interdependence on each

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other for mutual benefit and development.

## Soft Power Under Different Cultural and Civilizational Contexts

Soft power becomes an idealistic dream in areas where states bear inherent differences in identity. Soft power requires a shared worldview and a common outlook in ideology, culture, and ideas. As Lee Kuan Yew posited, soft power is effective “only when other nations admire and want to emulate aspects of the nation’s civilization.”[11]

Currently, America and its soft power is competing with a 3,000-year-old Chinese soft power. The *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK), also called the Chinese Proficiency Test, has seen a dramatic increase in number of examinees in recent years. To date, 32 Confucius Institutes has been set up in 23 countries to teach Chinese language and culture to residents in nations outside China. Foreign student enrollment in Chinese schools also has shown dramatic increase. The number of former international students in Chinese schools who held minister-level positions in their home countries is also skyrocketing.[12]

The Chinese definition of soft power involves the concept of spiritual power which incorporates traditional moral principles. The Chinese conception is more encompassing than that of Nye’s definition because it includes the ability to generate compliance through “moral examples and persuasion.” It also may be equated with Sun Tzu’s idea of subduing an enemy without fighting. The Chinese soft power stems from its cultural legacy such as language, literature, philosophy, and medicine.[13]

Construction of a shared identity in Northeast Asia involves a far more intricate *modus operandi* because it implies harmonization of four different civilizations: Western, Chinese, Slavic and Japanese. If we add India and Malaysia, we would have an even more complicated picture.

While nations in Africa have made numerous attempts to engage in interaction and exchange of culture and ideas among themselves, through platforms such as the African Union (AU), not much has been done to bring forth a multilateral institution that can generate socioeconomic and humanitarian assistants. Somalia, for example, requires a stronger government to establish order for its people. Civil war has been raging on in the Democratic Republic of Congo now for nearly two decades, despite numerous attempts at interacting with other African states to help mitigate the severity of the situation. Even relatively wealthier African nations are not free of problems. Nigeria, a major producer of oil, is fighting against the attacks of Boko Haram. Its economy is so dependent on oil, without any other industries to rely on, that just a little dip in oil prices results in an economic downturn for the Nigerians.

The core problem of the African Union lies with the fundamental assets that build up the entire continent. In total, the entire continent of Africa holds around 3,000 ethnic groups, each of which boasts its own unique identity as a group, with a special culture and language created just for the group. However, in 1884, European nations gathered in Berlin for the Berlin Conference to randomly divide the African continent and assign territories to each nation present at the meeting. As such, ever since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, various ethnic groups have been living together as a same country, despite the groups’ ideological and cultural differences in custom and worldview. This eventually became the cause of various internal conflicts in African nations, most notably the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. Such internal conflict still hinders development in African nations, despite efforts to cooperate among ethnic groups and nation states. Thus, Africa elucidates how hard it is for soft power to take hold to make progress.

Thus, the concept of soft power is in nature, very US-centric, while soft power requires a similar social context, rather than an ethnocentric cultural frame. Soft power requires transforming other countries’ interests and preferences in line with the United States. For its part, China views regional relations not in terms of territorial order but in terms of relational order based on perceptual legacy of Sino-centric feudal order.[14]

## Who Controls Soft Power?

First of all, it is not certain whether the U.S. government exercises significant control over the use of American soft power. There is no clear manager of soft power. There is no group that is able to use soft power for their sole benefit,

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making it questionable as to whether this can be considered a source of power. Soft power, as the ability to influence other's behavior, is not monopolized by governments. Due to diffusion of power between state actors and non-state actors, according to Nye, a country's soft power is also determined by non-state actors such as large firms, NGOs, and the media. On the contrary, in the case of hard power, it is evident that the government is in direct charge of military or economic strategies used to influence other countries.

Unlike hard power, which operates largely on the hands of the home government, the effectiveness of soft power lies heavily on the hands of the perceptions of target governments and their citizens. The home government has little direct control over its own soft power.

In China, soft power belongs not only to states but also to regions, organizations and even individuals.[15] Soft power, if not perceived positively, is like a book on a shelf.[16] The concept of soft power is not a strategy, but an attitude that could generate a favorable mindset among citizens of soft power's target country. Although most aspects of American culture may be perceived as attractive to foreign nations, key cultural differences may intervene in perceiving American soft power.[17] If the key decision makers of the foreign nations—whether they are citizens of a democratic nation or of an autocratic government—do not view a nation favorably and thus refuses to observe its culture and ideas or interact in any way, the nation's soft power thereby tumbles down.

How other countries interpret soft power is far more important than the soft power itself, and the reaction to the soft power determines the influence of the soft power.[18] Because of America's status as the world's top superpower, American domestic politics, such as presidential elections, also attract attention around the world. This means that American domestic politics may affect its soft power influence in the international scene. Even a single candidate's outspoken manner of speech, and unwillingness to abide to American democratic values could weaken the discourse of American soft power. Thus, soft power should answer to the question, "who are you and why should I obey you?"[19]

According to Atkinson's work on student exchange programs in America between 1980 and 2006, students from authoritarian regimes who come to study in the United States often become wholly immersed in the societal difference between America and their homelands that they return to hold politically influential positions and be causes of their nations' ideological shifts. This shows that, if the interactions between exchange students and the hosts are done well, America's soft power in political and societal ideology can, in the long run, have an "Americanizing" effect to other nations.[20]

However, Atkinson rarely mentions how to measure the effect of such educational programs. Whether a correlation exists between such experience and a specific policy outcome, overall increase of security, and the state's aggregate capability, requires further analysis.[21] At the same time, a further research is required to find any evidence that American soft power has influenced actual U.S. foreign policy choices or outcomes.

## **How Long Does It Take to Construct Soft Power?**

What requires further observation is how much time is required to lead others to admire American values, culture, and thus, soft power. In other words, how long does it take for a nation to transition from setting the agenda to garnering attraction, and, finally, co-opt other countries rather than coerce them?[22] A key concept that frequently is missing in theories in political science is the factor of time. For example, political scientists often only discuss the contents of a certain process, neglecting to elaborate on the time it would take to complete the process, and what that length of time means in the context of the status quo. For example, one rarely considers the amount of time needed to build trust between states, or how long a state needs to form a certain identity through global interactions. Soft power is no exception.

According to Nye, a successful use of soft power lies in three resources: a nation's culture, a nation's political values, and a nation's foreign policy.[23] These three resources are laid in chronological order. A nation's culture is what can spark the initial attraction to the nation from the rest of the world. Then, when the culture starts living up to the world, the nation starts marketing its political values for the world to be influenced by. Finally, the nation uses foreign policy

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to actively exude its newfound influence, at a stage where the world sees the nation's soft power as legitimate and moral.

History has proven that such interaction hardly makes any notable changes within a short period of time. It took over three decades for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to evolve shared identity among its members, thereby transforming itself from an alliance to a security community based on a democratic identity.

## Can Soft Power Overcome Historical Rivalry and Nationalism?

Another point that underscores the weakness of soft power is its incapability to completely overcome centuries-long rivalry and hatred. To make matters worse, due to the delicate nature of soft power, it could actually have an opposite effect and bring forth negative progress instead of a positive one. Both Japan and South Korea are allies of the United States. It has in various ways, ranging from political and societal ideologies to cultural customs and ideas, heavily influenced both Asian nations.

However, the strong hatred between Japan and South Korea puts the U.S. on a tightrope because as a favorable action toward one of the two results in, from a Japanese or a Korean point of view, an immediate dislike of the other. For example, the recent agreement for joint military exercises between U.S. and Japan brought negative perceptions in South Korea. Issues such as Korean "comfort women" for the Japanese soldiers during World War II and the ongoing battle between the islands which the Koreans call *Dokdo* and the Japanese call *Takeshima* all put the two nations in a heated battle, leaving the U.S. to play an intermediary role to appease its two allies. This indicates that every time the U.S. acts in favor of one of the two nations, its soft power influence diminishes in the other.

The present day lifestyles in Tokyo and Seoul themselves nonetheless exemplify the ineffective nature of soft power. Japanese restaurants and manga libraries (called *manhwabang* in Korean) are common places in Seoul for people to relax and enjoy. "One Piece", "Howl's Moving Castle" and "Crayon Shin Chan" are few of numerous Japanese films that garnered immense popularity in Korea. Similarly, Korean restaurants are very commonplace in Japanese cities such as Tokyo. Many K-pop groups, such as KARA, Girls' Generation, and 2NE1 have released singles in Japanese and achieved major popularity and success in the Japanese music industry. Despite such close interaction and exchange of cultural mediums, however, Japan and Korea have yet to solve their distaste for each other. It remains unpredictable as to how much soft power engagement between the two nations it would take for the two nations to reconcile their historical enmity and remove all ill feelings completely, if at all possible.

## Conclusion

This study has investigated why American soft-power influence has failed to help solve international issues in its favor, such as the rise of China, the Russian intervention of Crimea and Syria, and the creation of a NATO-like security community in Northeast Asia. Through the analysis, we indicated several key points in lieu of answers. First, we found that democratic values and mutual interdependence are not sufficient enough to construct effective soft-power through the example of historical enmity and trade intensity that still fails to bring together countries in Northeast Asia despite continuous economic and cultural exchanges between the nations. Second, we demonstrated that different cultural and civilizational contexts heavily limit the influence of soft-power. Third, we delved into the rather uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of soft-power, citing that while the U.S. government generally handles American soft-power, it still cannot control the outcomes of the exercise of soft-power and thus is forced to rely on chance and guesswork. Fourth, we pointed out the rather lengthy and time-consuming process a state must go through to construct its own sturdy soft-power influence. Finally, we noted that soft-power is simply not strong enough to overcome any and all cases of deep-rooted historical enmity between states, such as that between China and Japan, as well as Korea and Japan.

## Endnotes

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