Soft Power: Can Less be More?

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MAX NURNUS, APR 15 2020

The administration of Donald Trump, by most accounts, has been a disaster for the soft power of the United States and its international standing. Sure, American popular culture and the products of American companies remain popular abroad. But many of the country's policies are detested around the globe. Opinion polls show that citizens in many countries have little trust in the administration, and significantly less than during the presidency of Barack Obama. The egotism on display in the rhetoric and policies of the United States, its disregard of established norms and values, and the personality of Trump put off even close allies.

The verdict of Joseph Nye, who coined and popularized the concept of soft power in the 1990s, was clear one year into Trump's presidency: he and his administration were eroding America's soft power. More recently, Nye argued that the administration's policies "appear hypocritical, arrogant and indifferent to others' views". They have cost the United States' credibility, trust and friends. America, thereby, was squandering its ability to attract other countries to its own policies, institutions, values and goals – or, in the terminology of soft power, to make other countries want what the United States wants.

This assessment is not controversial. Even supporters of Trump might agree that his administration makes America less an object of attraction for other countries. To them, though, that is probably not a problem and maybe even a benefit. Yet, Nye's assessment deserves closer scrutiny. It contains an assumption that is implicit but ubiquitous in many arguments about soft power: that more is better than less. Soft power is generally depicted as unequivocally beneficial. It may not be useful in every situation, as even advocates of the concept admit, but its acquisition and possession have no downsides. Therefore, behavior that produces or maintains soft power is considered prudent, whereas behavior that undermines soft power is depicted as inherently problematic.

Admittedly, this conclusion seems self-evident. Soft power works through attraction, as Nye argues, and it is difficult to imagine what is wrong with attraction or why one would not want to be as attractive as possible. Soft power changes the behavior of others by changing their preferences. Soft power is cheaper, more effective and more sustainable than hard power, than changing behavior through intimidation and coercion or through rewards and inducements. To its proponents, soft power embodies a more refined and smarter approach to foreign policy, values such as trust and credibility and an ideal of leadership. Accordingly, no country is ever advised to forgo soft power. You cannot go wrong with it.

The literature on soft power is full of suitably grand proclamations. Consider the Soft Power 30 ranking by the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. Last year's iteration of the report argues that soft power gives countries that want to shape global events a 'tremendous advantage.' Soft power plays a 'critical role' in any strategy meant to deal with the current crisis of international order and that it matters for addressing 'the major threats facing humankind'. Even for countries much smaller than the United States, soft power provides 'the optimal means' to make an impact and to punch above their weight.

The terminology of soft power further emphasizes this. Nye argues that the effective combination of hard power and soft power results in 'smart power'. He considers smart power essential for the United States to deal with today's challenges, from Islamic terrorism and climate change to global economic growth, and for success in the world politics of the 21st century. Following this logic, a government that intentionally neglects its soft power is anything but

smart, as was the case for the United States during the presidency of George W. Bush, and as is the case right now. Behavior that forgoes or squanders soft power, in other words, cannot possibly be a choice of strategic value; it is just plain stupid.

This picture of soft power is problematic. The acquisition and maintenance of any form of power is, at least to some degree, the result of conscious choices. For example, to purchase military hardware, to enact economic reforms, or to communicate and behave in ways that are attractive to other countries. But where a choice in favor of one option is made, other options are forgone. In the words of Robert Gilpin: 'Acquisition of power entails an opportunity cost to a society; some other desired good must be abandoned.' This is true for traditional forms of power, which is why decisions about economic and military policies are oftentimes highly controversial, and it is true for soft power.

Most arguments about soft power, as well as most assessments of American soft power under the Trump administration, ignore this. Evidently, the current government of the United States does not care much about the attractiveness of its rhetoric and behavior and about American soft power. This cannot possibly be smart, as the common narrative goes, and the explanations for this choice generally include arrogance, ignorance, incompetence as well as a lack of smarts. Yet, it is worth pondering whether the choice to forgo soft power cannot possibly be a choice in favor of something else, and whether this choice cannot be part of a larger strategic calculus. Can less be more?

One starting point for answering this question can be found in the concept of offshore balancing. The term describes an approach to American foreign policy that is radically different from what the United States has practiced during the past decades. Instead of deploying troops to faraway shores, defending allied nations and intervening where trouble arises, the United States would withdraw its presence and encourage other countries to take care of themselves as well as of regional problems. Only when this fails, and American interests are under threat, for example because one country seeks to dominate a foreign region, would the United States intervene.

Offshore balancing and soft power do not operate on the same wavelength. The literature on the former generally makes no references to the latter, and vice versa. If the United States were to adopt a strategy of offshore balancing, it would step away from existing commitments and deployments, shun new ones, and shake up relations with many of its closest allies, from Germany to Kuwait and Japan. It would redefine its strategic interests in a way that deemphasizes the acquisition and maintenance of soft power. At least in the short term, the reorientation towards offshore balancing would be anathema to soft power and the commandments of smart power.

It is easy to dismiss this idea as, well, stupid. Offshore balancing has been dismissed as unfeasible or even dangerous. Yet it is worth keeping in mind that numerous prominent Realist scholars have been advocating this approach to American foreign policy for decades, among them John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, Randall Schweller and Barry Posen. They argue that offshore balancing is superior to the status quo and for America's role as a global leader and policeman. It would save money, allow the United States to focus on what truly matters for the national interest, prevent other countries from freeriding, and it would align foreign policy with the preferences of the public.

The foreign policy of the Trump administration is not a faithful implementation of offshore balancing. It suffers from ineptitude, incoherence and Trump's personality. However, it is substantially closer to offshore balancing than the approaches of previous administrations. Trump has vowed to put 'America first', to prevent other countries from freeriding, to bring troops back home, and to refrain from future adventures abroad. Subsequently, he began to use tariffs and trade agreements as bargaining chips, to withdraw troops from the Middle East, and to pressure allied countries to pay up for the support they receive from the United States.

For some advocates of offshore balancing, these are steps in the right direction. Randall Schweller concluded in 2018 that Trump's approach to foreign policy represents an overdue course correction in an era of increasing international competition. The same year, Stephen Walt cautiously argued that 'America finally has a president who grasps the basic logic of offshore balancing in the Middle East'. Others have been more critical: Barry Posen pointed out that the Trump administration, even though it seems to forsake multilateralism and the promotion of democratic

values, continues to meddle in foreign regions, for example, North Korea and Iran.

It remains a matter of debate whether the Trump administration's foreign policy can be described as offshore balancing. It also remains open whether this approach serves the national interest of the United States. But, the discourse about offshore balancing illustrates that the United States has strategic options whose adoption is hardly compatible with the maintenance of its soft power. A choice for soft power is a choice against offshore balancing, at least in the short term; in other words, the opportunity cost of maintaining American soft power is that a strategic shift towards offshore balancing must be forgone.

Even Nye admits that a focus on soft power can preclude choices that might be in the national interest. In his book *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics,* he wrote: 'A country that courts popularity may be loath to exercise its hard power when it should.' At the same time, this cautious attitude remains an undercurrent in Nye's arguments about soft power as well as the broader discourse on the topic. More is better, after all. Any loss of soft power and attractiveness is depicted as inherently problematic. Unattractiveness has no upsides. The possibility that closing the door on soft power might open other doors is usually not even entertained.

It is, of course, perfectly valid to criticize the foreign policy of the Trump administration. This text is not meant as a defense of it, but it is problematic to judge an approach to foreign policy exclusively by a standard that this approach evidently is not meant to serve. To point out that Trump and his government squander America's soft power may be correct, but that alone does not make for nuanced or insightful analysis. The opportunity cost of soft power and the possibility that the foreign policy approach of the current American administration may serve the national interest in other ways is not even acknowledged. Many arguments about soft power in the era of Donald Trump, therefore, are dogmatic and self-serving.

Consider how the Trump administration has illuminated the opportunity cost of soft power. The United States has tried for decades to make its European allies contribute more to NATO. Even Barack Obama complained about free riders and warned that they 'aggravate me'. Yet, European partners like Germany, France and Italy did not make notable efforts to increase their defense expenditures. This began to change in recent years in response to Trump's threats of withdrawing American troops from Europe. Trump's threats were met with shock and anger in Europe, but they were effective. Even Nye admitted that 'Trump may be more credible than Obama on that'. His verdict: 'Sometimes nastiness as a hard power is more effective than soft power.'

This example is not meant to imply that Trump, or his policies and his approach to foreign policy are generally in the national interest of the United States. It is also worth emphasizing that a president with a penchant for lying and bigotry, who is unabashedly sexist and racist, who disparages democratic norms and values as well as the appearance of cronyism and corruption are most definitely not in the national interest. However, neither Trump's policies nor his approach to foreign policy should be dismissed just because they disregard soft power or even undermine it.

To do so makes soft power an end in itself. It ignores the reality that the acquisition and maintenance of power are means to other ends. This problem is by no means unique to the discourse on soft power. The pursuit of the national interest and national security has, for a long time, been reduced to and equated with the acquisition of power, thereby precluding other approaches and factors from consideration. For many advocates of soft power, this fallacy makes soft power the universal standard for good policy-making. Through terminology like 'smart power' they preclude the notion that, depending on the country's interests and circumstances, there might be strategic choices that are 'smart' yet do not depend on soft power.

For other forms of power, it is generally accepted that they are not ends in themselves and have an opportunity cost. The acquisition of military power is not necessarily beneficial, for example, when it provokes counter-measures from other countries and results in an arms race. The acquisition of economic power, too, can backfire, for example, when it tilts the international balance of power and sparks conflict. In both cases, the opportunity cost of becoming more powerful is the maintenance of peaceful relations with other countries. In the case of soft power, that is not the issue. Rather, the opportunity cost lies in that the pursuit of soft power precludes certain other choices.

This argument can be made not just for the United States, but also other countries. China, for example, has invested heavily in its attractiveness, through development support and the establishment of Confucius Institutes. Yet the success of these efforts is questionable. As David Shambaugh argued a few years ago: 'China possesses little soft power, if any, and is not a model for other nations to emulate'. He describes China as a lonely country without friends and allies. At the same time, the past decades have been a success story for China. How likely is it that a stronger focus on what is attractive to other countries would have aided this success, and might it even have undermined it?

Any answer to this question is inevitably speculative. But, just like the considerations about offshore balancing made here, it illustrates that soft power has an opportunity cost. The discourse on soft power, whether that of the United States or other countries, would do well to acknowledge this; less can be more. Right now, too many arguments about soft power treat it as an end in itself and as a dogmatic policy prescription. That precludes nuance and undermines the concept's usefulness for policy analysis and guidance. So, yes, Trump and his administration are probably a disaster for American soft power and undermine the country's standing in the world – but is that necessarily bad?

About the author:

Max Nurnus is a lecturer at Seoul National University's Graduate School of International Studies. He is also editor in E-International Relations's articles team.