Contextualizing Soft Power's Analysis: The Value of Attractive National Features

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DANIELE CARMINATI, FEB 8 2021

Soft power was first envisioned towards the end of the Cold War but before the Global Information Age. That was a period of perceived changes in the distribution of power, both between and within states, a process that has accelerated since then. Thirty years have passed since Joseph Nye's seminal book*Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* was published. Since then, dozens of volumes have been written on the topic, along with hundreds of academic articles and an even greater number of analyses and commentaries speculating about the sources, pitfalls, gains and losses of a country's attractive power. The concept might now be in need of a review to reflect novel changes and developments, such as the rise of China and the troubled liberal order.

One of the most common points of criticism towards the term is the unclear mechanisms that denote its 'fuzziness'. This, in turn, leads to perceptions of a limited analytical and practical value to result in the preferred outcomes. Another frequent critique is its Western bias since the term was initially conceived with the American situation in mind and inspired by liberal democratic values. Although Nye has often reminded that all countries can develop soft power, several scholars still called for a de-Americanization or de-Westernization of the discourse surrounding the concept.

Some leaders and policymakers might find soft power as the name itself implies; too soft to obtain tangible outcomes within a given amount of time. Conversely, Mattern argues that the term 'isn't so soft' after all since it depends on 'representational force,' intended as a 'nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that is exercised through language.' This interpretation might have paved the way for the creation of the term sharp power, a deceptive tool akin to propaganda mainly used by authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. Without denying the existence of sharp strategies, this understanding detaches from the original conception of soft power as attractive power, while focusing more on deceiving communicative practices.

Other scholars have tried to draw upon a strategic narrative asking questions such as: how can a country be depicted in a positive light to foreign eyes? Or how can a compelling national story be developed and communicated abroad? This approach originates from the need to bring some clarity in the ever-expanding literature surrounding soft power and the related terms, like public diplomacy and nation branding. In this case, the focus is on how and whether influence occurs or not, instead of the potential soft power assets and the capabilities to wield them. However, this approach might be more or less useful depending on the specific purpose of the researcher and policymaker.

It is often said that soft power depends on the receiving audience since attractiveness lies in the eyes of the beholder. What is attractive to a certain population is not necessarily attractive to another one. Hence is it possible to create a strategic narrative that creates or enhances the attractive potential of a nation? Possibly, but a nation's attractiveness and appeal are likely to still depend on some of its features and factual achievements such as its level of development, its international standing, credibility, quality of life, cultural output, and more. A nation should be aware of its potentially attractive features, some of which may be more useful and appreciated in certain contexts and not in others. Once aware of that, the development of a strategic narrative might help.

The Soft Power Analysis & Resource Centre at Macquarie University defines soft power 'in terms of the most

attractive and compelling characteristics of countries and cultures; that which captivates others without coercion or inducement.' This understanding is similar to how I came to envision soft power after having observed China and other Asian powers (e.g. Japan, South Korea) for several years. Soft power in these countries appear to be predominantly detached from ideologies (as it might have been during the Cold War), and more focused on competitive international promotion of a country to select target audiences. At times, it has broad reputational aims such as improving the national image, but in other situations it might be funneled towards more specific goals, such as being chosen for the development of a major infrastructure project or further profiting from cultural exports. Technological prowess, the ability to deliver and innovate, along with trustworthiness, all play a part in such instances. In these situations, soft power works as a force multiplier, as Nye himself recognized in his work.

Soft power is thus understood as the contextual ability to influence foreign actors through attractive national features. This working definition is expected to address at least some common concerns. First, it detaches from Western-centric views and values through contextual observation while focusing on circumscribed dynamics of attraction. Some countries can indeed boast a strong and broadly appreciated set of attractive features, but others might prefer to concentrate on specific areas of interests and audiences. Second and related, the attractiveness of a country should therefore be assessed in bilateral relations while investigating which features are most cherished in the country sought to influence. This can be done through surveys and polls, a common and imperfect tool that is nonetheless valuable. Third, this definition also provides ground for a more pragmatic assessment that could be useful for policymakers and strategists, particularly when evaluating their efforts and achievements vis-à-vis a potential competitor.

The US arguably boasts one of the most complete sets of attractive features, resulting in widespread influence. Some common examples are the appeal of its cultural and lifestyle industries, its creativity and capacity to innovate, and how it manages to 'sell' and promote its image of freedom and democracy abroad. However, Hollywood movies that were once solely focusing on American and Western values are now adapting to a global or at least more inclusive audience, even opting for self-censorship in some markets. US capacity to innovate is still strong but Asian tech giants such as Samsung, Huawei, or Xiaomi are either direct competitors and trend-setters or quickly catching up. It is also not hard to see how Trump's doctrine has tarnished America's image and ability to lead, especially when considering the country's poor domestic handling of the pandemic. Yet all these developments are unlikely to be evenly received, both regionally and within countries in the same region. Hence the appeal, admiration, and trust in the superpower might vary considerably.

Across the Pacific, Japan and more recently South Korea can be described as quintessential representations of cultural soft power. Both countries are benefitting economically from the vast appeal of their cultural industries, ranging from music and television series to fashion and lifestyle products. Once a consumer technology pioneer, Japan's companies are now struggling to evoke that booming period of innovation, but the country's attractive features extend well beyond that. For instance, Ichihara investigated Japan's international democracy assistance as soft power, as a prominent aspect of the country's foreign policy since the 2000s. Heng, instead, observed as many as three faces of Japanese soft power. These still include Japan's more conventional cultural appeal, but also Tokyo's role in shaping and upholding international norms (e.g. freedom of maritime navigation or combating climate change), and even the less conventional "use of Japanese military assets in a non-threatening manner to attract others into supporting Tokyo's policies" (e.g. humanitarian assistance). Research on South Korea's soft power predominantly focuses on the narrow cultural realm, but it has already been observed how the 'effective handling of the pandemic has increased others' respect for its policies.' Even in the case of these two East Asian powers, the appeal and awareness of these specific features depend on the observed context. Popular culture can spread easily, but it might not be as easy for international norms or humanitarian assistance.

Remaining in Asia, China has been carefully expanding its toolset of attractive features, which has been growing along with its overall power and influence. While the potential appeal of its popular culture is constrained by politics, interest in traditional Chinese culture and particularly in Mandarin language is steadily growing. When considering innovation, beyond consumer products, the country is an admired leader in the infrastructure sector. Even before the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China already vaunted an extensive high-speed railway network connecting far-flung areas of its vast territory. The country now aims to capitalize on the acquired expertise through

the exportation of rail technology and know-how. From a political standpoint, the Beijing Consensus as a model of development might become increasingly appealing to leaders of the developing world. If these leaders manage to 'sell' this model to their citizens and China delivers on its promises, the admiration and recognition are poised to grow. More broadly, the appeal of a successful story, such as China's lifting from poverty hundreds of millions of its people, is likely to resonate with the Global South.

So far, China's win-win rhetoric seems to be failing to convince many foreign actors of Beijing's benign intents, especially when considering the growing assertiveness. Although China's narrative is spreading widely through its 'global megaphone', actions still speak louder than words, and skepticism lingers even when the country's charm offensive is supported by economic incentives. American soft power might have been negatively affected by Trump's presidency, and China's vaccine diplomacy could eventually elevate its standing in the developing world, but it may be misleading to paint the overall situation with a broad brush. If more studies manage to identify China, the US, or any other country's attractive features in specific contexts of interest, broad generalizations could be avoided.

That said, this should be seen as a starting point to streamline the initial phases of soft power analysis taking into consideration the contextual specificities of both the influencing and influenced actors. Once aware of which features are most likely to affect a certain population –through a combination of attraction and persuasion– a country can decide to promote or further develop them in more tailored ways and even with more specific purposes in mind. Strategies could entail public diplomacy initiatives involving private entities such as media companies from which to advance a strategic narrative, more conventional cultural exchanges and events that capitalize on the identified attractive features, or a blend of soft and economic power.

To conclude, this understanding of soft power through attractive national features does not invalidate Nye's original conception, but it tries to break away from the triad of suggested resources (culture, values, foreign policy). More and more studies have investigated additional sources of soft power such as normative aspects, foreign aid, and even naval diplomacy, all heavily dependent on contextual observation. Moreover, money is not soft power, but what about the goodwill towards an actor providing Official Development Assistance? And surely an army is not soft power, but what about the recognition and admiration for employing troops for humanitarian relief operations? Regardless of the specific source, the soft power that originates from interactions in a circumscribed environment might eventually reverberate beyond its initial boundaries and prove useful elsewhere.

Ultimately, the mechanisms through which attraction and persuasion work are difficult to trace and control, but it is hard to deny the value of reputational gains that can result in long-term collaboration while working as a catalyst towards the preferred outcomes. In the meanwhile, the international actors that manage to cope with the ongoing turbulent and uncertain times are the ones that might see the strongest reputational upturn.

About the author:

Daniele Carminati is a lecturer in International Relations and Diplomacy at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and holds a PhD in International Relations from the City University of Hong Kong. His research interest revolves around the sociocultural, economic, and political implications of globalization in East and Southeast Asia with a particular focus on soft power dynamics. Daniele is also a former commissioning editor at E-International Relations.