

The Limits of Soft Power



Originally published as
part of *Soft Power:
The Means to Succeed in
World Politics*, 2004.

While important, soft power may be less relevant than hard power in preventing attack, policing borders, and protecting allies, however, soft power is particularly relevant to the realization of “milieu goals.” Moreover, governments are not in full control of the attraction—much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft, and Michael Jordan. In a liberal society, government cannot and should not control the culture.

Some skeptics object to the idea of soft power because they think of power narrowly in terms of commands or active control. In their view, imitation or attraction is simply that, not power. As we have seen, some imitation or attraction does not produce much power over policy outcomes, and neither does imitation always produce desirable outcomes. For example, in the 1980s, Japan was widely admired for its innovative industrial processes, but imitation by companies in other countries came back to haunt the Japanese when it reduced their market power. Similarly, armies frequently imitate and therefore nullify the successful tactics of their opponents and make it more difficult for them to achieve the outcomes they want. Such observations are correct, but they miss the point that exerting attraction on others often does allow you to get what you want. The skeptics who want to define power only as deliberate acts of command and control are ignoring the second, or “structural,” face of power—the ability to get the outcomes you want without having to force people to change their behavior through threats or payments.

At the same time, it is important to specify the conditions under which attraction is more likely to lead to desired outcomes, and under which it will not. As we have seen, popular culture is more likely to attract people and produce soft power in

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004) 28–31.

the sense of preferred outcomes in situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than widely dissimilar. All power depends on context—who relates to whom under what circumstances—but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers. Moreover, attraction often has a diffuse effect, creating general influence rather than producing an easily observable specific action. Just as money can be invested, politicians speak of storing up political capital to be drawn on in the future circumstances. Of course, such goodwill may not ultimately be honored, and diffuse reciprocity is less tangible than an immediate exchange. Nonetheless, the indirect effects of attraction and a diffuse influence can make a significant difference in obtaining favorable outcomes in bargaining situations. Otherwise leaders would insist only on immediate payoffs and specific reciprocity, and we know that is not always the way they behave. Social psychologists have developed a substantial body of empirical research exploring the relationship between attractiveness and power.¹

Soft power is also likely to be more important when power is dispersed in another country rather than concentrated. A dictator cannot be totally indifferent to the views of the people in his country, but he can often ignore whether another country is popular or not when he calculates whether it is in his interests to be helpful. In democracies where public opinion and parliaments matter, political leaders have less leeway to adopt tactics and strike deals than in autocracies. Thus, it was impossible for the Turkish government to permit the transport of American troops across the country in 2003 because American policies had greatly reduced our popularity in public opinion and in the parliament. In contrast, it was far easier for the United States to obtain the use of bases in authoritarian Uzbekistan for operations in Afghanistan.

Finally, though soft power sometimes has direct effects on specific goals—witness the inability of the United States to obtain the votes of Chile or Mexico in the UN Security Council in 2003 after our policies reduced our popularity—it is more likely to have an impact on the general goals that a country seeks.² Fifty years ago, Arnold Wolfers distinguished between the specific “possession goals” that countries pursue, and their broader “milieu goals,” like shaping an environment conducive to democracy.³ Successful pursuit of both types of goals is important in foreign policy. If one considers various American national interests, for example, soft power may be less relevant than hard power in preventing attack, policing borders, and protecting allies. But soft power is particularly relevant to the realization of “milieu goals.” It has a crucial role to play in promoting democracy, human rights, and open markets. It is easier to attract people to democracy than to coerce them to be democratic. The fact that the impact of attraction on achieving preferred outcomes varies by context and type of goals does not make it irrelevant, any more than the fact that bombs and

¹ For an early example, see John R. P. French and Bertram Raven, “Bases of Social Power,” in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, eds., *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 259–69.

² This builds on a distinction first made by Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

³ *Ibid.*

bayonets do not help when we seek to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, slow global warming, or create democracy.

Other skeptics object to using the term “soft power” in international politics because governments are not in full control of the attraction. Much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft, and Michael Jordan. But the fact that civil society is the origin of much soft power does not disprove its existence. In a liberal society, government cannot and should not control the culture. Indeed, the absence of policies of control can itself be a source of attraction. The Czech film director Milos Forman recounts that when the Communist government let in the American film *Twelve Angry Men* because of its harsh portrait of American institutions, Czech intellectuals responded by thinking, “If that country can make this kind of thing, films about itself, oh, that country must have a pride and must have an inner strength, and must be strong enough and must be free.”⁴

It is true that firms, universities, foundations, churches, and other non-governmental groups develop soft power of their own that may reinforce or be at odds with official foreign policy goals. That is all the more reason for governments to make sure that their own actions and policies reinforce rather than undercut their soft power. And this is particularly true since private sources of soft power are likely to become increasingly important in the global information age.

Finally, some skeptics argue that popularity measured by opinion polls is ephemeral and thus not to be taken seriously. Of course, one must be careful not to read too much into opinion polls. They are an essential but imperfect measure of soft power resources because answers vary depending on the way that questions are formulated, and unless the same questions are asked consistently over some period, they represent snapshots rather than a continuous picture. Opinions can change, and such volatility cannot be captured by any one poll. Moreover, political leaders must often make unpopular decisions because they are the right thing to do, and hope that their popularity may be repaired if the decision is subsequently proved correct. Popularity is not an end in itself in foreign policy. Nonetheless, polls are a good first approximation of both how attractive a country appears and the costs that are incurred by unpopular policies, particularly when they show consistency across polls and over time. And as we shall see in the next chapter, that attractiveness can have an effect on our ability to obtain the outcomes we want in the world.

⁴ Milos Forman, “Red Spring Episode 14: The Sixties,” interview, available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-14/forman1.html>. Quoted in Matthew Kohut, “The Role of American Soft Power in the Democratization of Czechoslovakia,” unpublished paper, April 2003.

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