

Squandering the U.S. 'Soft Power' Edge

POWER, SIMPLY PUT, IS THE ABILITY TO AFFECT OTHERS TO GET THE OUTCOMES YOU WANT. Nations need power because without it they have a difficult time advancing their goals. But there are ultimately three main ways for a nation to achieve power: by using or threatening force; by inducing compliance with rewards; or by using “soft power”—attracting followers through the strength of a country’s values and culture. When a country can persuade others to follow by employing soft power, it saves a lot of carrots and sticks. This is a lesson the United States needs to remember.

Historically, the United States has been good at wielding soft power, which is based on culture, political ideals, and policies. Think of young people behind the Iron Curtain listening to American music and news on Radio Free Europe or of Chinese students symbolizing their protests in Tiananmen Square with a replica of the Statue of Liberty. Many U.S. values, such as democracy, human rights, and individual opportunity, have proved deeply attractive when they were backed by sound foreign policies.

Dissipating Strength

The soft power of the United States has diminished in recent years. Long before the Abu Ghraib and Haditha revelations, polls showed dramatic declines in the popularity of the United States, even in countries such as Britain, Italy, and Spain, whose governments had supported the United States. America’s standing plummeted in Islamic countries around the world. In Indonesia, the world’s largest Islamic nation, three-quarters of the public said they had a favorable opinion of the United States in 2000, but within three years that had shrunk to 15 percent. Yet the cooperation of these countries is essential if the United States and its allies are to succeed in a long-term struggle against terrorism.

Since Sept. 11, 2001 it has become commonplace to say that the United States is engaged in a war of ideas for the hearts and minds of moderate Muslims. Even former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has admitted that the metric for measuring success in

a war against jihadist terrorism is whether the numbers we kill or deter is greater than the numbers that the jihadists recruit. We cannot attract the hard core jihadists: they have to be dealt with by hard power. But we cannot win the war unless we win the hearts and minds of the moderates. The polls suggest that we are not doing well. In key countries like Jordan and Pakistan, more people say they have confidence in Osama bin Laden than in George W. Bush. While some polls show a slight improvement in America’s image in countries like Indonesia and Lebanon, large majorities in the Muslim world remain skeptical about the United States.

The United States spends only slightly more than a billion dollars a year on public diplomacy to get our message out, about the same as Britain or France though we are five times larger. We spend nearly 500 times more than that on our hard military power. The priorities in Bush’s first term were on America’s hard power, not its soft or attractive power. President Bush began paying more attention to soft power in his second term. In addition to rhetoric about promoting democracy and freedom, he made a modest increase in funding for public diplomacy, including both international broadcasting and the State Department’s educational and cultural exchange programs. In the president’s words, “rarely has the need for a sustained effort to ensure foreign understanding for our country and society been so clearly evident.” But even with these increases there is a long way to go.

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The U.S. started new broadcasting outlets like Radio Sawa and Al Hurra television for the Arab world, but the latter is widely mistrusted as American propaganda. In any event, better broadcasting is not enough. Even the best advertising cannot sell if the product is poor.

Edward R. Murrow, the noted broadcaster who once headed the USIA, argued that the most effective dimension of public diplomacy is not broadcasting but “the last three feet” of face-to-face communication. To promote this, the government has to work with the private and nonprofit sectors. To accomplish our objective of promoting democracy in the region, the U.S. must develop a long-term strategy of cultural and educational exchanges aimed at creating a richer and more open civil society in Middle Eastern countries. We need local people who understand America’s virtues as well as our faults. Visa policies that have cut back on the number of Muslim students in the United States do us more harm than good. International students usually return home with a greater appreciation of American values and institutions, and the millions of people who have studied in the United States over the years create a source of goodwill. Many of them eventually wind up in positions where they can affect policy outcomes that are important to U.S. citizens.

Lessons from the Cold War

Indeed, soft power can be attained through international education; cultural contacts and international exchanges were crucial in the Cold War. As Yale Richmond recounts in *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, academic exchanges played a significant role in enhancing American soft power. While some American skeptics at the time feared that Soviet scientists and KGB agents would “steal us blind,” they failed to notice that the visitors vacuumed up political ideas along

with scientific secrets. Many such scientists became leading proponents of human rights and liberalization inside the Soviet Union. Starting in the 1950s, the Ford Foundation, the Council of Learned Societies, and the Social Science Research Council worked with eventually 110 U.S. colleges and universities in the exchange of students and faculty. Though the Soviet Union demanded a governmental agreement to limit the scope of such exchanges, some fifty thousand Soviets visited the United States between 1958 and 1988 as writers, journalists, officials, musicians, dancers, athletes, and academics. An even larger number of Americans went to the Soviet Union.

In the 1950s, only 40–50 students moved in each direction in higher education, but over time, powerful policy effects can be traced back to even those small numbers.



Because cultural exchanges affect elites, one or two key contacts may have a major political effect. For example, Aleksandr Yakovlev was strongly influenced by his studies with the political scientist David Truman at Columbia University in 1958. Yakovlev eventually went on to become the head of an important institute, a Politburo member, and a key liberalizing influence on the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. A fellow student, Oleg Kalugin, who became a high official in the KGB, said in looking back from the vantage point of 1997, “Exchanges were a Trojan Horse for the Soviet Union. They played a tremendous role in the erosion of the Soviet system. ... They kept infecting more and more people over the years.” The attraction and soft power that grew out of cultural contacts among elites made important contributions to U.S. policy objectives.

Visa Policy Roadblocks

The United States seems to be forgetting these lessons. Ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, American visa policy has been tied up in red tape, and the hassle has deterred many foreign students from applying. Horror stories abound such as the Harvard postdoctoral student in biochemistry who went home to Beijing for his father’s funeral, then had to wait for five months for permission to return. And China, of course, had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks on September 11. On a recent trip to the Middle East, I encountered a number of businessmen and potential students who said they were deterred from trying to study or hold meetings in the United States. Many were turning to Europe instead.

Although there have been some recent improvements in visa procedures, the system remains cumbersome. In trying to keep out a dangerous few, we are keeping out the helpful many. Consular officials know that

they face career-threatening punishment if they are too lax, but will face little sanction if they are too strict. Add to those perverse incentives the need to coordinate with the massive bureaucracy of the Department of Homeland Security, and you have a perfect recipe for inertia.

China Expands Its Soft Power

While the United States has been forgetting the lessons of the past, other countries have been quick to learn. American universities now face increased competition from overseas universities, particularly in English speaking countries like Britain and Australia where enrollments have been increasing. Perhaps most interesting is China's growing interest in developing its soft power. As a rising power, it has a strong incentive to soften its image and reassure other countries so they do not create a traditional coalition to balance Chinese power. The enrollment of

foreign students in China has tripled from 36,000 to 110,000 over the past decade, and the number of foreign tourists has also increased dramatically to 17 million last year. China is creating 100 Confucius (not Mao!) Institutes around the world to teach its language and culture, and while the Voice of America was cutting its Chinese broadcasts from 19 to 14 hours a day, China Radio International was increasing its broadcasts in English to 24 hours a day.

In terms of political values, the era of Maoism (and Mao jackets) is long past. Although China remains authoritarian, the success of its political economy in tripling gross domestic product over the past three decades has made it attractive to many developing countries. In parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the so-called "Beijing consensus" on authoritarian government plus a market economy has become more popular than the previously dominant

"Washington consensus" of liberal market economics with democratic government. China has reinforced this attraction by economic aid and access to its growing market. It is not surprising that Chinese leaders have begun to speak openly about their soft power. As the vice president of China's Foreign Affairs University put it, "in traditional Chinese philosophy we have something similar to this, and it is called moral attraction."

China's economic and military power is far from matching that of the United States, and China's soft power also has a long way to go. China does not have cultural industries like Hollywood, and its universities are not yet the equal of U.S. higher education institutions. It lacks the many nongovernmental organizations that generate much of America's soft power. Politically, China suffers from corruption, inequality, and a lack of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. While that may make the "Beijing consensus" attractive in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian developing countries, it undercuts China's soft power in the West.

But that is scant source for satisfaction in the United States. A recent BBC poll found that twice as many nations believed China has a mostly positive influence on the world as believed the U.S. does. Similarly, a June 2006 Pew Charitable Trust poll found a continued decline in U.S. soft power in most of the 15 countries it surveyed. As for the government, our potential soft power resources—public diplomacy, educational exchanges, broadcasting, development assistance, military exchanges, disaster relief—are scattered among a variety of agencies and departments without an overall budget or strategy. In the Cold War, we combined our hard and soft power to become a smart power. We seem to have forgotten that lesson. It is time for us to take the decline of our soft power more seriously and become a smart power again. **IE**

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