

## *The Allure of Soft Power*

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### Introduction

The medium through which states attempt to exert influence or engage in conflict has undertaken a change in shape over the years. Before the Cold War era, nations would achieve their goals through military might or economic coercion. Although these methods are a successful means to produce desired results, they did not positively impact long-term attitudes and preferences. In more recent times, these methods would be deemed far too extreme. Globalization has ushered an era of interconnectedness that, coupled with significant advancements in military power and technology, reduces the weight of detriments from an all-out conflict far heavier than the benefits. As a result, nations have explored an alternative through which they can exert influence – soft power. In this commentary, I will examine the origins of the concept of soft power, observe how the U.S. and China have deployed their peaceful power tactics, and deliberate the status quo of nations using soft power amidst the pandemic.

### The Origin: What is Soft Power?

#### Definition

The term 'soft power' was coined by former United States Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Joseph S. Nye Jr. He described it as the ability of a nation to convince others to do what it wants without coercion or force<sup>2</sup>. Most of us are familiar with countries exercising command through hard power, which is essentially coercing a nation to submit to desired outcomes by deploying military prowess or economic burden. Nye argued that, although

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<sup>2</sup>Nye, Joseph. '[Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics](#)'. *Foreign Affairs*, 2021.

hard power was indeed a significant component of a country's overall strength, soft power was just as crucial in a nation's power equation<sup>3</sup>. It is also far more beneficial and economical to achieve goals through weak power employment. Hard power at work requires significant resources, such as the mobilization of troops. However, soft power, on the other hand, can be exerted through more practical means – the allure of culture, shared values, etc.

Furthermore, soft power also ensures that no ill attitude remains among interacting member states, thus making the application of this concept more suitable for the long run. Hard power and soft power related by the fact that both seek to gain results by exerting some sort of influence. However, they are distinctively different in what resources they use and the type of interaction they undertake. The table below shows an example of how their separation would work.

	Hard	Soft
Spectrum of Behaviors	<p>coercion    inducement</p> <p>Command ← ●      ● → Co-opt</p>	<p>agenda setting    attraction</p>
Most Likely Resources	<p>force      payments</p> <p>sanctions    bribes</p>	<p>institutions    values</p> <p>                          culture</p> <p>                          policies</p>

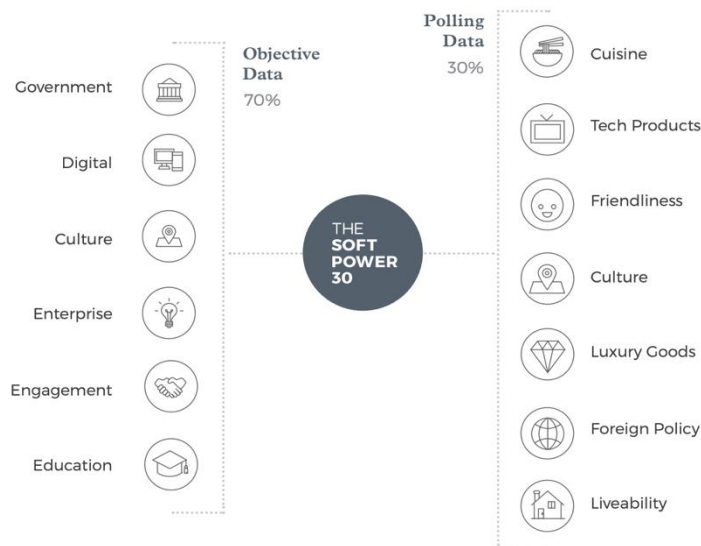
Power

*Source: 'Soft Power: They Means to Success in World Politics' by Joseph S. Nye (2004)*

<sup>3</sup> Nye, Joseph S. 'Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics'. PublicAffairs, 2004, pp. 7-8.

## Sources of Soft Power

According to Nye, a country's soft power primarily comes from the three sources – culture, political values, and foreign policy (including policies nations adopt at home)<sup>4</sup>. Culture has been attributed and manifests differently from place to place. The state of education, music, food – all of these can attribute to a nation's desirability and thus their influence. Political values play a crucial when one country is attempting to woo another. For example, liberal values and democratic institutions may be something the people suffering from the military rule may want to adopt. Lastly, policies implemented significantly impact a nation's soft power abroad. For example, the racial segregation in the U.S. during 1950 undercut its' allure in South Africa. Traditionally, these attributes would capture all sources of soft power. However, the current state of affairs has opened new avenues to attract nations. **SoftPower30**, a ranking of the country's soft power, has created an index that builds on Nye's three pillars and comprehensively explores individual indicators inside the three primary attributes. The index uses over 75 metrics across six sub-indices of objective data and seven categories of international polling data<sup>5</sup>. Their experts have identified types, such as livability, digital infrastructure, and others, which influence attitudes in the current era. This ranking system also indicates which countries have moved 'upward' or 'downward' in the soft power index.



**Figure: The Soft Power 30 Framework**

<sup>4</sup> Nye, Joseph S. 'Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics'. PublicAffairs, 2004, pp. 11.

<sup>5</sup> "[What Is Soft Power?](#)". *Soft Power*, 2021

## Case Study 1: Rise and Demise of Uncle Sam's Allure

The U.S. has its ups and downs when it comes to soft power. Generally, the nation has many resources which other countries can consider attractive – liberal way of life and democratic values, a plethora of foreign migrants, major metropolitan cities, and solid financial institutions are just to name a few. However, in more recent times, the U.S. has seen a sharp decline in the allure of its soft power. This is primarily down to controversial foreign policies such as the wars in Iraq and Vietnam. The effects of the U.S.'s involvement had rippled across to bordering nations who had to bear the brunt of a foreign entity. Coupled with the catastrophic destruction of infrastructure and loss of life, the U.S. lost a lot of its approval in the region. A rise of popularity of the U.S. being a sort of 'war machine' arose and the subsequent wars left a question mark on decisions made by Washington D.C. The Trump administration's isolationist narrative did not make things better and left the world to ponder on the legitimacy of the U.S. being a global force for good. All this while, China had exhibited massive economic growth and lent its helping hand to many countries, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative. Through their soft power, China has provided the world with an alternative of democracy, which further affects the U.S.' attractiveness. With Biden at the helm, the U.S. has much to do if it wants to fix its image and make a comeback.



*Figure: U.S. President Joe Biden*

## Case Study 2: Beijing's Long Arm

China's meteoric rise has grabbed the attention of all onlookers from across the world. In parallel with its growth, Beijing has also undertaken showing the world that democracy is not the only sustainable model that works for economies. The PRC's soft power has seen a rise in recent years, and this can be understood through the various incentives it provides. Firstly, many Chinese universities give merit-based scholarships to international students. Coupled with the modern urban landscape its significant cities offer, Beijing is considered an attractive location to pursue higher education. As a supplement to universities, China also has the financial capacity to open many cultural centers across the globe where participants are taught language and culture<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure:** China markets itself in Times Square New York. **Source:** China Daily

However, China's primary source of soft power comes from two more extensive references. The Belt and Road Initiative provided many growing economies with significant investments in infrastructure, leading to more jobs. Chinese infrastructure projects across Asia and Africa became

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<sup>6</sup> Carminati, Daniele. "The State of China's Soft Power In 2020". *E-International Relations*, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/03/the-state-of-chinas-soft-power-in-2020/>.

a common sight, which bolstered the nation's acceptance. Lastly, amidst the dire situation of acquiring vaccines to combat COVID-19, Beijing and Russia came to the rescue of smaller countries in Asia when they were left astray.

## Conclusion

Aware of the fine line between soft power attraction and malicious intent, Nye himself said that "sometimes in real-world situations, it is difficult to distinguish what part of an economic relationship comprises hard and soft power." China's strategies demonstrate its leaders' willingness and ambition to test the boundaries between attraction and inducement. Will this continue to work in the future? That is a difficult question to answer. However, a relationship that has to be sweetened by profit reflects mutual disdain for morality. This is more evident with the current resurgence in relationships among the transatlantic nations that have seen them actively promoting and rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific. The recent G7 summit introduced the 'Build Back Better World (B3W)' initiative to counter China's BRI. Hostilities are on the rise, and it will be interesting to observe how all of this plays out. Will nations push their agendas through soft power, or will we see a confrontation between the West and China? The future looks rather concerning.