

AMERICAN SOFT POWER AND SMART POWER¹

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Power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants. Global polls show that American soft power has declined in recent years as a result of the policies of the Bush Administration. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payments. Public opinion polls show a serious decline in American attractiveness in Europe, Latin America, and most dramatically, across the entire Muslim world. An important regional exception is non-Muslim East Asia where a recent Pew poll shows that despite China's efforts to increase its soft power, the United States remains dominant in all soft power categories. In addition, the U.S. has a reasonable standing in Africa where the Bush Administration followed enlightened policies on aid and AIDS.

The resources that produce soft power for a country include its culture (where it is attractive to others); its values, (where they are attractive and not undercut by inconsistent practices); and policies (where they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others). When poll respondents are asked why they report a decline in American soft power, they cite American policies more than American culture or values. Since it is easier for a country to change its policies than its culture, this implies the possibility that that new policies can help America recover its soft power.

Soft and Hard Power

Some analysts have drawn analogies between the duration of the current struggle against terrorism and the Cold War. Most outbreaks of transnational terrorism in the past century took a generation to burn out. But another aspect of the analogy has been neglected. Despite numerous errors, Cold War strategy involved a smart combination of hard coercive

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power and the soft attractive power of ideas. When the Berlin Wall finally collapsed, it was not destroyed by an artillery barrage, but by hammers and bulldozers wielded by those who had lost faith in communism.

There is very little likelihood that the U.S. can ever attract people like Osama bin Laden. Hard power is necessary to deal with such cases. But there is enormous diversity of opinion in the Muslim world. Witness Iran whose ruling mullahs see American culture as the Great Satan, but where many in the younger generation want American videos to play in the privacy of their homes. Many Muslims disagree with American values as well as policies, but that does not mean they agree with bin Laden. At the strategic level, soft power helps isolate the extremists and deprive them of recruits. Even at the tactical level, as terrorism expert Malcolm Nance has recently argued, “soft power tools – giving small cash gifts; donating trucks, tractors, and animals to communities; and granting requests for immigration, education and healthcare – can be vastly more effective than a show of force” given the “fluid diversity of the enemy.”

In the information age, success is not merely the result of whose army wins, but also whose story wins. The current struggle against extreme Islamist terrorism is not a clash of civilizations, but a civil war within Islam. The U.S. can not win unless the Muslim mainstream wins. While we need hard power to battle the extremists, we need the soft power of attraction to win the hearts and minds of the majority.

There has not been enough political debate in the U.S. about the role of American soft power. Soft power is an analytical term, not a political slogan and perhaps that is why, not surprisingly, it has taken hold in academic analysis, and in other places like Europe, China and India, but not in the American political debate. Especially in the current political climate, it makes a poor slogan — post 9/11 emotions left little room for anything described as “soft.” We may need soft power as a nation, but it is a difficult political sell for American politicians.

Of course soft power is not the solution to all problems. Even though North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il likes to watch Hollywood movies, that is

unlikely to affect his nuclear weapons program. And soft power got nowhere in attracting the Taliban government away from its support for Al Qaeda in the 1990s. It took hard military power to end that. But other goals such as the promotion of democracy and human rights are better achieved by soft power. Soft power often takes longer to show effects, but it is often a more effective instrument for accomplishing milieu or contextual goals. In addition it can create an enabling or disabling environment for the accomplishment of short term goals as the U.S. discovered in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. Skeptics who belittle soft power because it does not solve all problems, are like a boxer who fights without using his left hand because his right hand is stronger. Not smart.

Smart Power

The term “smart power” describes strategies that successfully combine hard and soft power resources. A bipartisan Smart Power Commission of Republican and Democratic members of Congress, former ambassadors, retired military officers and heads of non-profit organizations was recently convened by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. It concluded that America’s image and influence had declined in recent years, and that the United States had to move from exporting fear to inspiring optimism and hope.

The Smart Power Commission is not alone in this conclusion. Last year, Defense Secretary Robert Gates called for the U.S. government to commit more money and effort to soft power tools including diplomacy, economic assistance and communications because the military alone cannot defend America’s interests around the world. He pointed out that military spending totals nearly half a trillion dollars annually compared with a State Department budget of \$36 billion. In his words, “I am here to make the case for strengthening our capacity to use soft power and for better integrating it with hard power.” He acknowledged that for the Secretary of Defense to plead for more resources for the State Department was as odd as a man biting a dog, but these are not normal times.