

# Soft and Normative Power: The Power of Attraction in International Politics

Written by Zohir Uddin

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ZOHIR UDDIN, OCT 1 2011

In an increasingly globalized world, the interaction between the sovereign member states of the international community is as important now than at any other juncture in recent history. As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the progression of peaceful diplomacy and cultural interactions will take an eminent place in the objectives of many state governments and the United Nations. The 'art' of diplomacy lies in the ability to resolve legitimate disputes between nations regarding areas of mutual interest. Diplomacy is a means by which to avoid the escalation of conflict and the dangerous severities of war. The founding Charter of the United Nations<sup>1</sup>, the epitome of international diplomacy, has eternally enshrined this desire to avoid conflict when it states in the opening lines, "we the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind."

Since the writing of these infamous words, rival nations have come together in times of great peril to discuss and determine solutions to global problems such as war, poverty and humanitarian disasters.

This short paper will briefly examine the concept of power within politics, namely the role of soft power and how it is conducted between nations. It's important to understand that any article on the power of attraction must first examine the forces which push governments to pursue soft power in the first place. In my view, the underlying reason for the use of soft power by governments, rather than hard power, is to avoid the likelihood of military tensions between nations and the eventual onset of war.

### War, Diplomacy and Soft Power

War and conflict is all too often an inherent part of the anarchic Westphalian system of international governance. The so-called 'Peace of Westphalia' was established by the major European powers of the time in order to maintain a 'balance of power' within a system of political anarchy. This understanding between them was intended to highlight two main features of the nation-state political system. The respect of territorial sovereignty and the absence of an international lawmaker or governmental structure. Even though, the Westphalian treaty was flawed from its very beginning; it was and in some views continues to be the status-quo, certainly within Europe. Now the creation and subsequent strengthening of the EU may have changed this focus on the nation-state within Europe, but as it stands the EU's mere 40 years of existence stands small compared to the centuries long history of European warfare between its member states. I am not attempting to belittle or reduce the EU's role within regional IR in Europe, but in my view it still has to stand the test of time. Although I completely agree and acknowledge the regional unity the Treaty highlights, ultimately the Lisbon Treaty is a treaty amongst many treaties, of which some have been maintained and some have been dramatically torn apart.

The science of IR, unlike other areas such as finance or music, must not be measured in decades but rather by centuries. And the recent centuries of Europe, especially the last one, prove that warfare is still the norm, and not the exception. This unfortunate feature of politics should not be ignored or discredited as an extreme case scenario, as it is this very attitude which results in the escalation of conflict and violence. By understanding and acknowledging the ever present threat of war, governments and their diplomats are more prepared and able to put into place certain

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measures which will prevent such systematic use of force. The great frequency of warfare within Europe and other parts of the world during the previous centuries should not be seen as a failure of cultural diplomacy. I believe the reason lies in what we talked about yesterday, as culture being seen as a luxury item during the previous centuries. With more pressing concerns, such as feeding the growing populations and fuelling the industrial revolution, European countries were understandably less interested in cultural interactions and diplomacy. However, as Europe prospered and became wealthier, the luxury of culture was more widely available to larger parts of the population. Cultural agencies such as the Alliance Francaise and its European counterparts were established to promote language and culture.

To provide a balanced argument, its important now to explain how the EU and other such ventures into cultural diplomacy reduces the likelihood of war and conflict. Westphalia may still be flying her flag over Europe, but multilateral agencies such as the EU and NATO are diminishing her influence. It was from the ashes of World War II, from which a legion of men arose, who proclaimed their allegiance not to a particular nation, but to a league of many nations. They promised to each other through various bilateral and multilateral agreements to not attack one another, and to keep in check the radical and nationalist forces that exist within their borders, so that the people of the world may be saved from the plague of war. To uphold these principles, nations established charters and conventions which set in motion guidelines which would steer the nations of the world into an era of what Kant proclaimed as perpetual peace.<sup>2</sup> An era of peace amongst nations, where they will remove their standing armies and respect the territorial sovereignty of their neighbours. Kant, the great German philosopher, described man as not being a creature of reason but one of emotions. It's from this sensual nature of man, he argued, which conflict and violence between nations arise. To limit the weakness of emotions and short sightedness, nations decided to ally with one another, in secret and in open, to ensure the continuation of peaceful diplomacy and cultural interactions between their peoples. This, I believe in my view, is the bedrock of cultural diplomacy and soft power. If two nations have cultural and diplomatic ties and interests with one another, then they are less likely to attack each other. Inevitably however, turbulent times placed a great strain on diplomatic and military relationships and in many cases these strains spilled out into the arena of warfare. However, even during these dark times, the 'art' of diplomacy maintained an existence, albeit a limited one, and allowed for the eventual de-escalation of conflict. This 'art' was further refined during periods of great tension such as the decades long Cold War. Policy makers realised during this time that the power of "attraction" was as important as any other diplomatic tool in gaining friends within the international community.

## Power & Soft Power

Mearsheimer argues that power is the currency of great-power politics, and states compete for it amongst themselves. He says ' What money is to economics, power is to international relations.'<sup>3</sup> This realist view on the role of power within the international system narrows the objectives of states to focus only on the acquisition of power. It's this centrality of power which scholars argue underpins the fabric of the Westphalian system of sovereignty. If the international system is indeed defined and characterized by a feeling of anarchy, then the desire to accumulate power, which is in itself a very subjective and relative term, is in the eyes of nations the most-guaranteed path to survival. To push above your weight is the only assured way of opposing the otherwise fatal forces of anarchy.

Before delving too much further into the essay, it is important to give a clear and widely accepted definition of the term 'power' in regards to international relations. I believe the definition Joseph Nye gives is the most basic but fundamental when he states that power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want.<sup>4</sup> This follows on to the notion of 'soft power' as having the ability to reach this effect through mutual cooperation rather than forceful coercion. Soft power is the attractiveness of a nation's political and economic model. Having the diplomatic infrastructure to peacefully cooperate with rival nations in order to build or maintain your national interests, in some cases to the detriment of your rivals, is the embodiment of soft power. When observers speak of soft power and its manifestations, concepts which are also mentioned within the same context include culture, diplomacy, values etc. These are seen to be the weapons of soft power which attracts nations to each other to cooperate or to emulate their respected allies within the international system. A sense of respect and admiration may surround this bond between nations, and a fusion of national interests may arise due to this temporary proximity. Soft power can replace coercive power and in many cases brings about a more advantageous result for both the projector of soft power and the host

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of such projections.

Within diplomatic circles, the spread of soft power has been welcomed as an alternative to coercive forms of diplomacy. The sovereign member states of the international community are now able to choose their allies and protectors rather than being forced to do so through economic and military might. The era of 'protectorates' and 'mandates' has been gradually replaced with a new chapter of mutual cooperation and respect of territorial sovereignty. Where the European powers of previous centuries reached their zenith through the forceful spread of their ideology of free markets and slaved labor, the rising powers of the developing world must now maneuver their large geographies with the aid of soft powers such as cultural interactions, diplomatic missions and the promoting of universal values.

Nations who intentionally manipulate soft power to reach pre-intended objectives can be seen as 'projectors'. Such projectors may target, specifically or generally, a list of recipient nations to become 'hosts' of their soft power (i.e. culture, values, democracy). These 'host' nations may welcome such projections and view the implementation of this soft power as beneficial to their own national interests. By associating myself with a richer and stronger neighbor, I may be able to survive within this system of anarchy.

Any nation's strategy must answer at least three questions: What are the nation's core interests? What external forces threaten them? And what can the national leadership do to safeguard them? In previous decades, certainly during the Cold War, these crucial questions were viewed through sniper lens and gas masks. However, in today's age of globalization they must be answered through conferences and conventions.

## **United States – Soft Power King**

The rhetoric of freedom and liberty has been the battle cry of the United States throughout her two and half centuries of existence. The banner of peace and democracy has flown proudly over the White House for all to see. This external display of her values and political beliefs has spread far beyond her shores and has influenced other nations in dramatic and powerful ways. From the establishment of Marshall Aid to rebuild a broken Europe, to a promise of protection for the land of Israel, the United States government has looked to establish a liberal and democratic order of international world governance through its promotion of what it views as universal truths and values. As the balance of power shifted from Old Europe to the New World, Washington policy makers realized that the cementing of American values through soft power was a paramount foreign policy objective. Through Harvard and Hollywood, the American dream was expanded to include all who chose to become part of this new way of life. The roaring 20's may have kick started the party, but it was only after World War II that the Americans realized their potential to expand their sphere of influence in order to curtail the rising Soviet Union. For half a century, the United States spent millions in diplomatic missions and foreign aid in order to maintain its status as the king of soft power.

## **Emerging Soft Powers – China & India**

The United States was the soft power giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Asian countries particular India and China are now emerging as serious soft power contenders. Philip Dodd, renowned British broadcaster for the BBC, has stated many times that the future belongs to a constellation of India and China.<sup>5</sup>

The government of China has for a long time understood the importance of the role of soft power in attracting positive interest towards the Middle Kingdom. From the 'Ping-Pong diplomacy' of the 1970s, the Communist Party has looked to maintain this focus on cooperating with other nations and multilateral agencies in order to promote its own interests and ideals. The Beijing Olympics in 2008 was seen as China's coming out party onto the world stage. Even though China had been making massive inroads into the international economic and political framework for over the past two decades, the Olympics highlighted the best of Chinese culture and economic prowess. The Shanghai World Expo in 2010 further strengthened China's ambition for building bridges with other nations and in particular their enterprises and businesses.

India, to counter the rise of China, has also established certain soft power tools in order to attract influence which

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might have otherwise gone to China. The recent signing of the civil nuclear agreement between India and the US in 2008 demonstrates Delhi's desire to please the US and keep it onboard during its period of economic growth and political expansion.

## **Soft Power and Nation Branding**

An area of recent interest regarding soft power within international relations is the role of 'nation branding'. This somewhat artificial concept has been spoken about as a marketing tool for national governments and public bodies to promote a nation's particular goals and objectives. As a result of intense competition and the need for clear product differentiation, brand strategies encapsulating both tangible and intangible features have been formulated and implemented for almost everything, including nations. The heterogeneous nature of 'nation branding' allows there to be somewhat of an affinity and overlap between public diplomacy, including soft power, and 'nation branding'.<sup>6</sup> Both are used to attract interest from others within international politics and economics. Many scholars argue that since the advance of globalization, national image and reputation have become more critical assets in the modern world. This attempt to commercialize a nation's identity, along with a more revised approach to international diplomacy, can help create prosperity, improve international relations and ultimately address some of the major issues facing the international community today.

## **The Importance of Democracy**

The rush to democracy during recent decades, starting from the end of the Cold War to the ongoing Arab Spring<sup>7</sup> has highlighted the importance of governmental structures throughout the world. The demand for a representative form of government by the people has forced long standing dictators and authoritarian regimes to reconsider their positions in the eyes of their populace. As kings and princes shift about nervously on their thrones, the distant rumble of discontent just outside their palace walls grows ever louder. The importance of democracy lies not so much in the democratic values it brings with it, but rather the interconnections between political freedoms and the understanding and fulfillment of economic needs.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there are added incentives for people to demand democracy as it provides them with a pathway into a more privileged life. Democracy secures political and private rights, and acts as a pressure valve where the myriad of ideas and opinions can be peacefully funneled into a collective decision making process. As the world's population grows, especially in megacities in developing nations, the call for democracy will be one hard to suppress. Therefore, it's crucial for governments in the spirit of cultural diplomacy and interaction to facilitate these growing concerns and allow for the peaceful transition of power to the rightful heirs, the people themselves. The "attraction" of democracy will not subside anytime soon, nor will it stay the same.

The nature and practice of democracy will evolve, rather than change, into a more inclusive and universally accepted form of governance for peoples from all cultures. This is because the democratic process is not unique to a particular nation or culture. It is merely a phase in the evolution of man's desire for utopia on earth. A system which erodes the innate urges of man's personal interest for the sake of the greater good of society is an extremely appealing system. Man has formulated a code of governance which limits his natural tendencies of pillage and plunder, and which shines a somewhat civilized light over his dominion. It is this desire to remove their beastly instincts, which has forced nations to unanimously accept this particular code of governance. However it can be argued that democracy is not the most accepted code of governance, it is merely the least rejected. For this reason it has been chosen to lead the sovereign nations of the international community into a world free of war and full of peace. Nations have temporarily, not permanently, agreed on memorandums of understanding where their short term interests lie in the establishing of representative forms of government. They have established a multi-equilibrium point where the projections of many of their national interests converge over the short term. This multi-equilibrium point is not static, but is continuously being revised and moved in accordance with the national interests of the powers involved. However, due to massive global trends, such as the great migration into cities and the spread of technologies such as the Internet, governments are realizing that rather than foreign nations, it's their own people who are becoming the most pressing concerns for the national interest of the country. Ironically, rightly or wrongly, state governments are viewing their own population as the greatest threat to their national security. This is the manifestation of globalization, as men, women and children are increasingly identifying themselves as global citizens rather than belonging to a particular country. The "attraction" of universal values is eroding traditional and political boundaries, and creating a single governance

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space, especially within the cyberspace of the internet, which is resulting in a new and exciting matrix of ideas and influence.

## Globalization

The ongoing story of civilization tells a narrative of how the tribes of man gave way to the nations of men and how eventually they will in turn give way to the world of mankind. This oversimplified recollection of history, should not be accepted as a single unbroken stream of progress as it is by no means such. However, the aggregate transfer of power from different forms of governance and structure over time is clear for all to see. The next and subsequent structure of power will be one without such clearly defined structures as its predecessors. This may be welcomed by many observers such as Stiglitz as he views globalization as “helping hundreds of millions of people attain higher standards of living, beyond what they, or most economists, thought imaginable but a short while ago”.<sup>9</sup>

## What does the future hold?

From a distant vantage point, through the fog of war, one can catch a glimpse of the glowing lights of peace and harmony as the convoy of globalization and democracy inch ever closer. As feelings of ecstasy spreads amongst the people, the word will spread that a new dawn is coming. The age of war has come to an end and with it, what Fukuyama called the ‘end of history’.<sup>10</sup>

The strength and spread of cultural interactions between different governments and different people’s will reduce the likelihood of war between nations. As globalization takes its seat as the world’s ruling party, the international system will become a single yet vibrant meeting place. The periphery will be dragged into the centre, and one and the other will become the same. The nation state will be forced to go underground as the political and economic fabric of the new world order governed by the rights of all men takes further strides to cement its position as the harbinger of truth and defender of peace. As globalization is the combined process of interactions between peoples from around the world, I believe Globalization therefore has an international mandate. With an international mandate, the new world order will become the pinnacle of globalization with its power to “attract” all.

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