

## The Irrelevance of Soft Power

Written by Ilan Manor and Guy J. Golan

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/19/the-irrelevance-of-soft-power/>

ILAN MANOR AND GUY J. GOLAN, OCT 19 2020

The irrelevance of Soft Power stems not from its theoretical dimension, but from a changing global landscape. The 21st century will be characterized by growing competition among three giants – China, India and the United States. To contend with this triumvirate, nations will create short-termed strategic alliances that will collectively bargain opposite the giants, or force their hands. These alliances will rest on shared interests, not shared values. In a world governed by increased competition, as opposed to cooperation, the practice of Soft Power will become secondary. The benefit of strategic alliances lies in their malleability. Unlike the Cold-War era, nations will not be bound to one giant. On the contrary, nations will collaborate with different giants towards different ends. National power will emanate from a nation's status as a desirable member in strategic alliances. This desirability may rest on diverse resources ranging from economic stability to technological infrastructure and geographic location. Now is not the age of uni-polarity or bi-polarity. Now is the age of giants. And in this age, power will function differently, as explained in this article.

Vladimir Putin once stated that 'I would prefer to abandon the terminology of the past. 'Superpower' is something that we used during the Cold War time. Why use it now?' (Financial Times, 2016). The demise of the Cold War led scholars to reconsider additional terms including *power*. In a world no longer marked by ideological conflict and a nuclear arms race, collaboration rather than confrontation could be the order of the day. In a seminal article, Professor Joseph Nye introduced the concept of Soft Power. Ultimately, Nye argued, the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policy will be more influential on its engagement with other nations than the number of ballistic missiles at its disposal (Nye, 1990; 2008).

In this article we argue that the world is in the midst of profound structural change, and that this change necessitates that the concept of power be examined yet again. Specifically, we contend that this century will see the emergence of a modern day Triumvirate of three giants. While middle powers such as Russia, Iran, Brazil and the EU (European Union) will remain central to global affairs, it is the three giants who will dictate the rules of the game. India's population size and status as a global telecommunications hub will see its power overshadow that of Iran or Brazil. China's financial dominance and global military reach will eclipse that of Russia, while the US's strength will continue to rest on its mass investment in defense, and ardent commitment to consumerism.

We argue that the power of strategic alliances will become a core concept in the field of international relations given its ability to account for relationships that cannot be explained through the Soft Power paradigm. A strategic alliance will consist of several nations who share a common interest that can only be secured by one of the giants. Jointly, alliance members will hold greater sway over a giant, or even threaten to align with another giant. Yet once an alliance has obtained its goal, it will disband. For in a world dominated by three giants, permanent alliances will be harder to maintain. Continuous competitions between the giants will send constant ripple effects locally, regionally and globally and shifting sands will result in new alliances (Firestone & Dong, 2015).

### Back to the Future

When Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of Soft Power in 1990, the bi-polar system was drawing its last breath. The collapse of the Soviet Union was imminent while Communist states in Eastern Europe were openly courted by the West (Pearce, 2009). The bi-polar world was one of Hard Power defined by an arms race that ultimately

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bankrupted the Soviet Union. The exercise of power, or changing the actions of other states, rested heavily on the use of weapons and the threat of force. Nye hypothesized that the post Cold War world would be marked by collaboration as shared challenges would necessitate shared solutions (e.g., terrorism or drug trade). The world would also become more interdependent thanks to advances in transportation and telecommunications.

Given that the post-Cold War era would rest on cooperation, Nye conceptualized Soft Power as 'getting other states to want what you want'. The Soft Power arsenal would include culture, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 1990). If a state could make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it would encounter less resistance to its foreign policies. If a state's culture and ideology seemed attractive, allies would be willing to follow it rather than being ordered to do so. And if a state could establish international norms consistent with its own society, it would not be required to alter its behavior (Van Ham, 2014).

Nye's original article was also a manifesto, a roadmap that sought to guide America through times of global restructuring while avoiding confrontations with other states. Through Soft Power America could make the world American without using weapons. American ideology, masked in culture, arts and cultural exchanges would reshape the international system while American prosperity would win over former Communist States. Consequently, the world would change to accommodate America rather than America changing to accommodate the world.

The concept of Soft Power had an immense influence on policy makers throughout the world. Following the Cold War, numerous nations invested billions of dollars on Soft Power initiatives (Shambaugh, 2015). These included the creation of radio and television stations; the promotion of cultural institutions (e.g., Confucius Institutes); the expansion of foreign exchange programs and, more recently, maintaining social media empires spanning thousands of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts (Manor, 2019) Most taken with the Soft Power paradigm was the Obama White House. As Foreign Policy wrote in 2011, 'All roads to understanding American foreign policy run through Joseph Nye'.

### **The Practical Limitation of Soft Power**

In many ways, the Obama Presidency and its Middle Eastern policy symbolize the practical limitations of Soft Power. Following the Bush administration's War on Terror, Obama started his tenure with the 'New Beginnings' address in which he called for a new beginning to America's relationship with the Muslim World (Black & Tran, 2009). This proclamation was followed by mass investments in Soft Power throughout the region including broadcasting, cultural exchanges, and citizen diplomacy programs. Yet despite the consistent and expansive engagement with Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East and South Asia, Anti-American sentiment remains high. Not even America's war on the cruelty of the Islamic State was enough to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world.

America's failure to successfully engage the Middle East through Soft Power was further magnified by Russia's effective use of Hard Power. Sensing America's unwillingness to involve itself in another military conflict, Vladimir Putin carpet bombed his way to Damascus. Supporting President Assad and the Alawi Shite minority against the majority Sunni opposition, Putin aligned himself with Iran, Hezbollah, and a variety of Shiite militia fighters from all over the world. Overseeing a brutal war, Putin and his allies killed more than half a million people, and led to the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis in many parts of Syria (Kofman & Rojansky, 2018; Lund, 2019).

And what was the cost of Russia's brutality? The Soft Power paradigm would predict that Russia would lose its legitimacy, its seat at the table of international affairs or at the very least turn into a pariah. Western diplomats did in fact whale into microphones while UN ambassadors tweeted images of dead Syrians. Yet Russia gained its stronghold in the region. Even more importantly, Russia has become a kosher powerbroker in the region with Lebanon, Iraq and even Israel looking to bolster their ties with the Kremlin (Keinon, 2020). Obama talked. Putin Bombed. The results speak for themselves.

In another part of the world, India has relied on a Soft Power arsenal to strengthen its ties with neighboring states. Yoga diplomacy, selfies by Prime Minister Modi and foreign aid projects have all been used to court India's neighbors (Mazumdar, 2018; Gautam and Droogan. 2018), while limiting China's influence in the region (Jha, 2017).

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Yet most neighbors are far more impressed with China's Belt and Road initiative and its financial benefits than with Modi's selfies. Interests, not values or politics determine how nations align themselves in South East Asia.

## A New World Order

In his Meditations, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius states that to understand how society works, one must first understand human nature. Similarly, to understand how power works one must first understand the state of the world. As the world changes so does the fundamental exercise of power. Unlike the Cold-War era that was dominated by two superpowers, or the period that immediately followed where the US stood alone as the world's leading superpower, the 21st century will see a new power dynamic of three giants, and several regional powers. We argue that in such a world power will function not through the threat of Hard Power or the allure of Soft Power, but through narrow, issue specific strategic alliances.

As in ancient Rome, 21st century states will have to negotiate opposite the Triumvirate, while the respective strength of regional powers will decline. The current decade was the harbinger of the Triumvirate's spring. In preparation of the Triumvirate's crowning, China has deepened its investments in Africa (Alden, Large and Oliveira, 2008; Jiang, 2019); the EU has moved towards greater integration; Russia has claimed its stake in Eastern Europe (Freedman 2014; Burke- White, 2014), while the United States provides military advantage to its allies in the Persian Gulf. Similarly, Iran has extended its reach to Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. As Western powers withdrew from Libya, Russia and Turkey sought to influence the nation's politics, gaining support from both their allies and rivals.

In a world of three giants, Soft Power will no longer be relevant as nations will be forced to bargain opposite the Triumvirate. At times, small and medium nations may collaborate with the giants while at other times pitting the giants against themselves. Yet this will necessitate that nations form alliances, which increase their bargaining position opposite global powers. France alone will be unable to force new trade agreements on India or China; yet the EU as a whole will be far more successful given its collective strength. Similarly, Japan will be unable to offset China's ambitions in the South China Sea unless it forms an alliance with the U.S., Vietnam, Philippines, and South Korea.

Already now we are witnessing an unprecedented and somewhat covert alliance in the Middle East consisting of Israel, Saudi Arabia and several Gulf States. There is no love lost between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The peoples of both nations know little about each other. The two countries do not share values, political structures, history of traditions nor are there any cultural exchange programs in either country. Rather, what draws these nations together is a common desire to halt Iranian expansion in the region.

The recent normalization of ties between Israel and its Sunni neighbors, was preceded by years of economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation between them, proving that the power of strategic alliances often trumps both Hard and Soft Power. This was recently made evident when the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed treaties with Israel normalizing relations between the nations.

Recognizing the shifting balance in power between global and regional actors, we argue that the exercise of power will not only depend on general coercion or attraction, but rather on issue-based cooperation. Unlike Soft Power which is obsessed with winning hearts and minds (Comor and Bean, 2012), the power of strategic alliances requires that nations articulate how they can aid one another in solving salient problems.

In a world of alliances and collaborative bargaining values will play a diminished role. Saudi Arabia will care little about Israel's acceptance of LGBTs so long as Israel shares military technological innovations with alliance members. Kenya will care little about Germany's immigration policies so long as Germany holds sway over IMF loans in the Horn of Africa. Sweden will care little about Rwanda's constitutional reforms so long as Rwanda joins a trade alliance opposite an empowered China.

While long-term alliances may survive the 21st century (e.g. NATO, the EU), nations will most likely create or simply join various short term problem specific alliances which can be created and disbanded with ease and agility. As such, power will not fit into dichotomous categories of soft and hard. Like modernity, it will be fluid creating different

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constellations of power at different times (Bauman, 1999).

Crucial to our argument is the fact that foreign publics come to care about other states primarily when they share interests. During the mid-1990s, war-torn Lebanon cared little about Russia. Yet since its incursion into Syria, the Lebanese have come to care a great deal about Russia's foreign policies. Similarly, German citizens cared little about Ukrainian-Russian relations until Germany's gas supply was threatened by the annexation of Crimea. The people of Chad likely care little about Qatar's exploitation of its migrant workers, as it attempts to gain favorable coverage on Al Jazeera, and receive Qatari economic aid. The age of the Triumvirate, and of strategic alliances was already manifest in the COVID outbreak.

## **COVID and the Power in the 21st Century**

The COVID outbreak provides a rare case study to test the nature of power and international relations in the 21st century. While the COVID example takes our case to the extreme, it is nonetheless instructive. Although the COVID outbreak posed a global challenge, it was primarily framed and managed at a national level. Even in the EU, which may be the most organized and institutionalized multinational collaborative, decisions regarding the handling of the Coronavirus were made in national capitals rather than in Brussels (EU, 2019). What soon followed was a global bidding war with nations vying after medical equipment and protective gear, each attempting to secure its own needs and interests. Some bartered, others stole.

During the outbreak, any country that would have developed a well tested and reliable vaccine would be welcomed as a hero, even if it had been Iran, North Korea or Pakistan. Western nations including France, Germany, Sweden and the UK would have traded in favor of the vaccine ignoring Pakistan's treatment of dissidents, its civil rights abuse and its harboring of terrorists. This was exemplified in China's case as Chinese doctors received a royal welcome when they landed in Italy to help combat COVID. At that moment, no one dared mention China's mass surveillance programs, its incarceration of dissidents or reported concentration camps for Muslims.

In other words, the Coronavirus sheds a light on the mostly normative nature of the Soft Power paradigm which works well in theory yet is mostly unproven in the real world. What the Coronavirus demonstrates is that nations are ultimately motivated by their own interests and will cooperate with other nations based on utility and their ability to help them solve problems. It is not Soft Power assets that engage foreign nations as much as the ability of nations to articulate their contribution to solve a problem facing another nation. In coming years, as the world becomes increasingly unstable due to its restructuring, similar motivations will guide many nations.

COVID also saw an important shift in China's European and Middle Eastern image. During December of 2019, newspapers reported on an Asian flu making its way through China. The media narrative was both that China, a rising power, was brought to a halt by a mere virus and that China was hiding the numbers of fatalities. Soon, COVID was China's Chernobyl, a massive cover-up. Next, newspapers reported that China was taking unthinkable measures to combat the virus including welding people's doors shut. Totalitarianism showed its true colors. Finally, China was portrayed as the champion of the COVID outbreak, the only country to defeat the virus (Bolsen, Palm and Kingsland, 2020).

Notably, it is during crises that people may be willing to alter their perceptions of other nations. COVID may thus mark China's transition from a global threat, to a legitimate global power and a legitimate member of the Triumvirate. COVID may also help China become a coveted member in future strategic alliances. Fearing this very thing, the US State Department has recently launched a digital and diplomatic campaign aimed at framing China as the cause of the Coronavirus and the one responsible for its financial ramifications (Manor, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

If 21st-century power rests on the creation of short-term alliances, government communications should focus on demonstrating how one nation can help another protect its interests opposite a powerful Triumvirate. Switzerland may be an attractive partner in trade alliances given the relative stability of its currency. Russia may be an attractive

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partner in security alliances given its close ties with isolated regimes including Iran, North Korea and Syria. Pakistan may be an attractive partner as it shares a tense border with India, while Israel may be an attractive partner thanks to its technological achievements that can help other nations overcome problems in the area of agriculture or public health.

As such, nations should consider moving away from their attempts to present a consistent national brand that packages a nation in a manner similar to the market positioning of luxury yoga pants, organic coffee, or designer sunglasses (Surowiec, 2016; Szondi, 2007). Whether it is Norway as the Peacemaker, Israel as the Startup Nation, or Incredible India, any attempt to present a standardized image to a global market ignores the new realities of the 21st Century.

The ultimate question that every nation ought to answer is what solutions it can offer other nations to help solve specific problems, paving the way to strategic alliances. Norway can assist the Baltic states with hydro-electronic power; Israel can mold its alliances in Africa through water desalination, while India can provide biopharmaceuticals solutions to its neighbors (as it did during the Covid outbreak). As the world changes, the essence of power changes with it. It is time to move beyond the antiquated Soft Power concept and towards a more realistic paradigm of strategic alliances that will ask every nation to answer the question: What can you do for me?

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