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Restoring America's Reputation in the World and Why It Matters

In his inaugural address in 2009, President Barack Obama stated that “our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” Shortly thereafter, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America. We must use what has been called 'smart power', the full range of tools at our disposal.” Earlier, Defense Secretary Robert Gates had 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 more than 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.” What does this mean for policy?

I developed the concept of soft power in 1989 while writing a book that questioned the conventional wisdom about American decline. After examining American economic and military power, I found that something

was still missing – the ability of the United States to attract others and thus increase the probability of obtaining the outcomes we wanted. It has been interesting to see an academic concept migrate to the front pages of newspapers, and to see it used by top leaders in China, India, Indonesia, Europe, and elsewhere over the past two decades. But wide usage has sometimes meant misuse of the concept as a synonym for anything other than military force.

Properly defined, soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuasion and positive attraction. My friend Andrew Kohut will present the evidence about how America’s attractiveness to other countries has changed in recent years, so I will confine my remarks to the mechanisms by which such changes produce power, which I define as the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants. My remarks are drawn from my forthcoming book on smart power.

### How Soft Power Works

There are basically two models of how soft power works – direct and indirect. In the direct form, leaders may be attracted and persuaded by the benignity, competence or charisma of other leaders. Friendships sometimes matter in world politics, and elite networks often play an important role. More common, however, is a two step model in which publics and third parties are influenced, and they in turn affect the leaders of other countries. In this case, soft power has an important indirect effect by creating an enabling environment. Alternatively, if an actor or action is perceived as repulsive, it creates a disabling environment .

Judging the causal effects of soft power varies with each model. In the first case, judging direct causation requires careful process tracing of the sort that good historians or journalists do, with all the incumbent difficulties of sorting out multiple causes in trying to trace whether a given influence effort was an important part of achieving a preferred outcome. The second model, indirect causation, also requires careful process tracing because multiple causal factors are involved, but here public opinion polls and careful content analysis can help provide a first estimate of the existence of an enabling or disabling environment.

Even though polls can measure the existence and trends in potential soft power resources, they are only a first approximation for behavioral change in terms of outcomes. Where opinion is strong and consistent over time, it can have an effect, but its impact in comparison to other variables can only be determined by careful process tracing. This is often difficult to catch in the metrics that financial officials demand when considering funds for public diplomacy budgets.

Some skeptics discount polls completely. They argue that the fact that the state controls public opinion rather than being controlled by it in the realm of foreign policy is a fact that undermines the logic of soft power. For that to be true, however, one would have to ignore direct effects, matters of degree, types of goals, and interactions with other causes. Moreover, even in autocracies, public opinion sometimes matters as a constraint on authoritarian leaders, and in many authoritarian states where internal dissent is muted, international opprobrium is not welcomed.

Regarding specific goals, sometimes we see the one step model with direct effects on policy makers that does not go through public opinion. Student and leadership exchanges are a good example. Forty six current and

165 former heads of government are products of US higher education. Not all of the nearly 700,000 foreign students who come to the US annually are attracted to the country, but the large majority are. “Research has consistently shown that exchange students return home with a more positive view of the country in which they studied and the people with whom they interacted,” and foreign educated students are more likely to promote democracy in their home country if they are educated in democratic countries. The results can be dramatic. For example, at the end of the Cold War, Gorbachev’s embrace of perestroika and glasnost was influenced by ideas learned in the U.S. by Alexander Yakovlev when he was an exchange student. Although it took two decades to materialize, that was a huge return on a small investment.

With the two step model, public opinion affects elites by creating an enabling or disabling environment for specific policy initiatives. For example, in regard to Iraq in 2003, Turkish officials were constrained by public and parliamentary opinion and unable to allow the American 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to cross their country. The Bush Administration’s lack of soft power hurt its hard power. Similarly, Mexican President Vicente Fox wished to accommodate his friend George W. Bush by supporting a second UN resolution authorizing invasion, but was constrained by Mexican public opinion. When being pro-American is a political kiss of death, public opinion has an effect on policy that the skeptics’ simple proposition does not capture.

Moreover, in addition to specific goals, countries often have general contextual goals such as democracy, human rights, and open economic systems. Here the target of soft power *is* broad public opinion and cultural attitudes. Most historians who have studied the period agree that in addition

to troops and money, American power to promote such goals in post war Europe was strongly affected by our culture, ideas and reputation. As one Norwegian scholar argued, “federalism, democracy, and open markets represented core American values. This is what America exported.” That made it much easier to maintain what he called an “empire by invitation.” Today, many acts of terrorism are less designed to overthrow a particular government than to create a climate of polarization in which an extremist narrative can spread to wider parts of the Muslim world.

Not only do actors try to influence each other directly and indirectly through soft power, it is also clear that they compete to deprive each other of attractiveness and legitimacy, thus creating a disabling environment either in public opinion in the other country and/or in the eyes of relevant third parties. For example, after the US Senate passed a \$30 million bill to document and publicize human right violations in Iran, the Iranian parliament created a \$20 million fund to expose human rights violations in the U.S. Sometimes leaders are prepared to ignore the opinion of third parties (somewhat misleadingly labeled “world public opinion”), but other times their concerns about diplomatic isolation can inhibit their actions.

Interestingly, military analysts trying to understand counter-insurgency have rediscovered the importance of struggles over soft power. In the words of General David Patreus, “we did reaffirm in Iraq the recognition that you don’t kill or capture your way out of an industrial-strength insurgency.” More recently he warned against expedient measures that damage our reputation. “We end up paying a price for it ultimately. Abu Ghraib and other situations like that are non-biodegradable. They don’t go away. The enemy continues to beat you with them like a stick.” In Afghanistan, the Taliban have embarked on a sophisticated information war,

using modern media tools as well as some old-fashioned one, to soften their image and win favor with local Afghans as they try to counter the Americans' new campaign to win Afghan hearts and minds.

In 2008, after its invasion of Georgia, Russia carefully controlled its domestic media, but seemed ill prepared to press its case internationally. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili used his fluency in English to dominate coverage in the rest of the world. "The Kremlin's reluctance to muster support for its position with the same intensity that it sent tanks into Georgia offers an insight into its worldview." Russian military power dominated, but Russia was not as adept in wielding soft power to consolidate its military victory.

But there is also a danger of thinking of information campaigns in terms that mis-understand the essence of soft power. "The military has to understand that soft power is more challenging to wield in terms of the application of military force – particularly if what that force is doing is not seen as attractive." If the other levers of soft power are not pulling in the same direction, then the military cannot create favorable conditions on its own. In the words of Admiral Mullen, America's top military officer, "no amount of public relations will establish credibility if American behavior overseas is perceived as arrogant, uncaring or insulting." Or as the Australian COIN expert David Kilcullen notes, "this implies that America's international reputation, moral authority, diplomatic weight, persuasive ability, cultural attractiveness and strategic credibility – its "soft power"—is not some optional adjunct to military strength. Rather, it is a critical enabler for a permissive operating environment... and it is also the prime political competence in countering a globalized insurgency."

There are a wide variety of basic resources that can be converted into soft power by skillful conversion strategies. Basic resources include culture, values, legitimate policies, a positive domestic model, a successful economy, a competent military and others. Sometimes these resources are specially shaped for soft power purposes. Such shaped resources include national intelligence services, information agencies, diplomacy, public diplomacy, exchange programs, assistance programs, training programs, and various other measures. Shaped resources provide a wide variety of policy tools, but whether they produce positive or negative responses in the targets (and thus preferred outcomes) depends upon the context, the target, and the qualities of the power conversion strategies. Sometimes skeptics complain that soft power and attraction do not always produce the outcomes we seek. That is true. Soft power is unlikely to get Kim Jong Il to give up his nuclear weapons, and President Obama's popularity did not divert the Dutch government from its plan to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Particular events like this have multiple causes, but this is true of all types of power, not just soft power.

The conversion of power resources into preferred outcomes always depends upon particular contexts. A strong tank army is likely to prevail if a battle is fought in a desert, but not if it is fought in a swamp. The soft power of attraction and persuasion can create enabling or disabling environments that affect the probabilities of obtaining favorable outcomes, but human power relations, unlike the laws of classical physics, are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Does soft power matter? Yes. Does it always predict the outcome? No. Are we better off with it than without it? Surely. That is why a smart power strategy combines hard and soft power resources.