Conference report

Soft power in action

Monday 3 – Wednesday 5 February 2014 | WP1300

Conference report

Soft power in action

Monday 3 – Wednesday 5 February 2014 | WP1300

Soft power has become core to 21st century diplomacy. The shift in recent years away from large-scale use of military force has led to increasing demands being made of soft power, and focused greater attention on the relationship between uses of hard power and the ability to utilise soft power.

In this context, nations and the diplomats who represent them are seeking strategies through which they can use soft power to influence and persuade others to support their national and international agendas.

As connectivity and interdependence amongst states increase and non-state actors become increasingly influential, diplomats seeking practical means to leverage soft power resources increasingly find their attention drawn to collaborative strategies through which they can leverage their soft power resources.

Key points

- Contemporary debates highlight this as a moment at which the deployment of soft power is at the forefront of policy considerations. Over time, nations inevitably shift between phases of heightened readiness to use coercive force and periods when the methods of attraction are discussed more prominently.

- Power is increasingly fragmented. Many more states are able to exert forms of influence and a range of non-state actors now fulfil key roles in developing and enacting policy. As a result, strategies to leverage soft power need to adapt to this changing environment.

- Ideas and influence flow through networks often independent of government coordination or involvement. This occurs in digital domains but equally is embodied in the familial ties which connect migrant or diaspora communities.

- Technological advancement and the increasing networked nature of influence have created many opportunities for governments seeking to harness and deploy soft power. The ability to recognise and engage with networks of influence across a range of technologically driven platforms is an increasingly important part of soft power in the 21st century.

- Within this changing global environment, existing approaches which have been shown to be effective can be complemented by new approaches which respond to the evolving nature of foreign policy challenges.

- Many of the challenges nations now face are not national, they are international. In these circumstances, traditional models of leveraging soft power to attract and direct the actions of others need to be reviewed with a view to developing strategies which facilitate collaborative approaches to address complex international challenges.

- The increased expectation within policymaking circles that results can be achieved through soft power has resulted in a growing need for practical and measurable approaches through which the soft power resources of a nation can be leveraged to achieve specific policy goals.

> "Ideas and influence flow through networks often independent of government coordination or involvement."

- The purpose of leveraging soft power is to advance a country's strategic interest not to be more 'liked' – or indeed scoring a million Facebook 'likes'.

- Advancing strategic interest through soft power requires a delicate balance. Explicit government direction can undermine the ability of a nation to leverage soft power. Collaborative strategies and facilitating connections can support soft power objectives on those occasions when direction is ineffective.

- While there are 'new' elements in the use of soft power, many existing elements continue to be important. For example, authenticity is key; if a nation wants to be thought of in a particular way it must act in a manner which is consistent with that objective.

The evolving challenge of a soft power moment

1. The evolving challenge for soft power combines rapid technological advancement with the rise of non-state actors. These non-state actors increasingly challenge states, through activities and methods of influence which are not hard-power 'strength' orientated.

2. The movement away from hard-power 'strength' is not only a feature of non-state actors. The post Cold War approach to conflict which marshalled overwhelming force or delivered shock and awe, has consistently struggled to produce lasting results.

3. In the first decade of the 21st century the use of hard power, smart weaponry and more recently drone strikes, have apparently led to decisive results. However, in some instances, these outcomes have also resulted in increasingly complex problems, and high levels of military and civilian casualties. For example, drone strikes may kill 'high value' targets but they are unable to address the challenges faced by the communities which produced those targets.

4. Given the limitations on the use of force, many countries including the US are moving away from a perpetual war footing and placing diplomacy at the forefront of their international policy objectives.

5. Diplomacy has to occur alongside the increasing interaction between citizens of different countries. Members of the public are not waiting for permission or government messages before engaging with other people around the world.

6. This person-to-person interaction has an increasingly important role due to the increase in education, technology, and economic opportunity through which networks of influence form connecting communities across the world.

7. For example, classic exchange programmes- such as the Fulbright scholarships, are now massively outweighed by students choosing to study in the US and paying for the opportunity. This pattern is repeated in many countries where government backed scholarship programmes were once responsible for a significant proportion of foreign students entering a country to study.

8. In addition, migration has continued to foster transnational relationships. Migrants and diaspora are an important part of many economies – and many maintain strong connections with both the country of residence and their country of origin.

9. The connection between migrant communities often allows a greater understanding of the culture and governmental systems of the country in which they live and to form a bridging role, both political and cultural, between the two nations. There are economic ties between countries, estimated to be in the region of $325b in remittances sent by diaspora to developing countries. This is in addition to knowledge transfer, training and other forms of social remittances.

10. In an increasingly networked world, soft power is an attractive option, but one which runs counter to traditional governmental structures. This networked approach to diplomacy is challenging to the hierarchies of traditional embassies.

11. Soft power in the UK is seen as having the potential to harness the rivers of ideas,

diversity, ingenuity, knowledge and values which flow across the world, and can cultivate influence that flows rather than power that jars.

12. Tone is important. Governments increasingly recognise that they are not in the business of winning arguments, but in building cooperative relationships. With the shift to soft power and collaboration, listening is becoming an increasingly important part of diplomacy.

13. Governments that listen to the priorities of other communities are more able to gain insights into their preoccupations. If this results in some kind of assistance and improvement in the lives of individuals, the respect for the government and trust in intent is likely to grow. From a soft power perspective, this is mutually beneficial.

14. The emphasis on soft power and diplomacy brings to the forefront many opportunities but also generates a new range of complex challenges. External policy factors need to be balanced with the domestic pressure of remaining responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens.

Influence in action: practical approaches to soft power

15. Governments or states seeking to maximise their soft power assets need to consider practical application beyond academic theory. The chosen approach should leverage the soft power resources available to a country in a manner that is likely to engage the range of global communities which a government may seek to influence. The result is plurality in the practice of soft power as each nation has to find its own unique alignment of aims, interests and resources.

16. A practical approach to soft power should avoid being 'foggy' about the purpose of a specific project. Soft power resources have many potential uses but there should be a clear alignment of strategic objectives. For example, the use of soft power through the GREAT campaign and hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games was primarily focused on an economic legacy. The UK aimed to portray itself as a country with which to do business. The intended outcomes, the hard benefits of soft power, were 'foreign direct investment', increased tourism and overseas students choosing to study in the UK.

17. A successful economic outcome requires a strategy based on cooperation between government 'silos' and collaboration with 'partners' towards a common goal. Government departments should feel able to ask for help from partners across the business, tourism and education sectors.

18. In instances where the use of soft power engages partners from other sectors, a common goal should be established and a balance struck between the contribution of public and private sectors on a range of issues. These include the provision of support for soft power resources, how those resources are used and the extent to which the hard benefits of soft power are accumulated by the public or private sectors.

19. China, the previous host of the Olympic Games, approaches soft power with a different set of relationships between state and private sectors. There are tensions between the ability to harness the potential of individual creativity while maintaining the current level of state control over soft power resources. 'Panda diplomacy', deployed by China over the last fifty years, is an alternative approach to relationship building with other states.

20. Practical approaches to measuring or quantifying the return on soft power are important. Financial goals are more readily quantifiable, with varying degrees of accuracy depending on the events to be evaluated and the methods used. However, recording other forms of hard benefit from soft power can be difficult. Some results are harder to quantify, due to a lack of meaningful data. On the other hand, the ability to generate huge amounts of data and a vast range of analytics can be challenging when producing authentic and actionable findings.

21. The difficulty in identifying hard outputs is further exacerbated by the time-frame over which those benefits are expected to occur. For example, to what extent is it possible to quantify the return on an exchange programme, and over what time period should that

> "…listening is becoming an increasingly important part of diplomacy."

> "…each nation has to find its own unique alignment of aims, interests and resources."

return be realised and measured? In addition to the data challenges, organisations often resist expenditure of limited resources on the evaluation of an exchange programme 10-15 years hence. This runs counter to the objective of many such programmes designed with the expectation of long term impact and lasting relationships.

Authenticity: act as you wish to appear

22. States cannot change how others think of them purely by telling everyone they deserve to be perceived differently. To leverage soft power effectively any approach must be based on authenticity, and a nation should be prepared to act in a manner that is consistent with the image it desires. Ultimately, countries tend to be judged by their actions.

> "…countries tend to be judged by their actions."

23. In environments where there are competing interests, there can be a trade-off between a desire for the 'power' to achieve specific strategic objectives and the aspiration to be respected and trusted. This balance often pivots on morality.

24. Of all the factors which Professor Simon Anholt has identified as underpinning national reputation, including attractiveness, sophistication, strength, and relevance, his findings indicate that morality is often the most prominent. He posits the theory that a nation prepared to act immorally (in the eyes of others) is the nation which feels most threatening to other states. As a result, factors such as attraction, relevance, and sophistication are to a greater extent 'internal' factors whereas morality is 'external'.

25. Mexico is currently examining the inter-face between image and reputation, illustrating the tension between how a country wishes to appear and negative stereotypes which can undermine or devalue the influence of the state. For example, an increase in the level of security in a country can lead to a more positive international reputation. However, increased security, including programmes designed to tackle organised crime may result in increased media reports of violence that, in the short term, could perpetuate negative imagery.

26. South Korea has a different set of challenges. It has made the rapid transition from aid recipient to donor country in a generation. Given the rapid internal transition, and the often slow pace of change in the perception of a country by external actors, there is a need to consider what soft power resources are available to redress the balance.

27. Music is an effective soft power resource, for example the massive growth in the popularity of K-pop, including the first video to break a billion views on YouTube. Technology provides another important source of soft power influence, with increasing global recognition of South Korean brands such as mobile 'phones.

28. The government is considering ways in which to maximise these practical assets to increase soft power influence. It is investing heavily in public diplomacy programmes, including high level bi-lateral dialogues, and positioning South Korea as a regional convenor as well as a contributor to global security.

Diplomacy in a networked world

29. The nation-state is frequently regarded as the unit of analysis in diplomacy. However, countries are not 'islands' in the sense of isolated nations disconnected from each other.

> "…countries are not 'islands' in the sense of isolated nations disconnected from each other."

> "Diplomacy in the twenty first century now inclines more to an open network than an exclusive club."

30. While the rapid developments in technology and hyper-connectivity are yielding many anecdotes about transformation in behaviour and influence, the practical application of soft power should be based on hard evidence.

31. Diplomacy in the twenty first century now inclines more to an open network than an exclusive club. Many more individuals, organisations and communities have the opportunity to participate. People are not waiting for permission or government led messages before engaging with other individuals around the world - and the networks of influence which they form now sweep across the globe.

32. This does not mean an 'end of diplomacy', despite claims to the contrary. Instead, traditional forms of diplomacy are being augmented by new approaches which can engage effectively with these emerging communities and increasingly influential non-state actors.

33. These networked approaches recognise the interdependence between stronger and weaker nodes rather than a global environment imagined through unipolar leadership. Many interactions are collaborative rather than competitive zero-sum encounters.

34. These new ways of working can be counterintuitive in nature. Networked approaches require a surrendering of traditional ideas of control. This may be difficult for some actors, but when used appropriately can deliver greater 'power' and produce positive gains through the ability to collaborate with others.

35. Instead of a top down approach, with states seeking to leverage soft power over others, these new networked forms of diplomacy will- at times- evolve to focus on collaborative strategies which embrace the ideas and input of other nations and non-state actors. In the future, diplomats will need to recognise when they need assistance, be comfortable asking for help, and willing to accept support when offered.

36. This collaborative endeavour, within a networked diplomacy, will be based on the ability to identify networks of influence online and offline. Online, diplomats will need to be more than just literate; they will need to have a digital fluency to be able to understand the culture and identify networks of influence.

37. With the context of this greater digital fluency, online activity will need to remain focused on strategic objectives rather than doing what is popular. High numbers of supporters, followers on Twitter, or 'likes', may be appealing measures but chasing those numbers can distract from the core objectives. It is important to incorporate the digital presence with traditional activities into a single diplomacy.

38. Diplomacy in a networked world faces many familiar challenges. If soft power drifts into propaganda, it loses credibility. There can be an inverse relationship between the closeness of government involvement and the ability of soft power resources to be effective.

39. In the contemporary environment, the ability to work collaboratively with other cultural organisations and networks will be of increasing strategic importance for those wishing to utilise soft power.

40. There are some key lessons for practitioners seeking practical approaches to leverage influence through their soft power resources, including maintaining realistic aspirations. Nations cannot hope to use a marketing or branding campaign to convince the world that they are something which they patently are not. They need to aim for an authentic reputation by acting as they wish to appear. Equally, as connectivity and interdependence increase and non-state actors become increasingly influential, diplomats seeking practical means to leverage soft power resources will increasingly find their attention drawn to collaborative strategies.

Ali Fisher
Wilton Park | March 2014