Global power, influence and perception in the 21st century

ADAM ROBERTS

The concept of soft power – coined by Joseph Nye, a Fellow of the British Academy – is today a subject of considerable debate, as governments at home and abroad seek to exploit their 'soft power assets' in furthering their foreign policy objectives.

In March 2014, the British Academy published a report on *The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World* (see page 14).

And on 24 June 2014 the Academy hosted a panel discussion on the subject of 'Global power, influence and perception in the 21st century'. The following article is an edited version of remarks made on that occasion by Professor Sir Adam Roberts (President of the British Academy, 2009-2013).

A time of troubles

This is a sobering time in the history of thought about power in general, and soft power in particular. It is especially sobering in relation to attempts to build states on a Western model, which has been the focus of a great deal of international activity, both civil and military, over the two and a half decades since the end of the Cold War.

In Iraq, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) has captured major towns in the north and west of the country, just a few years after formal Western involvement ended there. In Afghanistan, we see deep uncertainty about what will follow the eventual completion of Western withdrawal. In Egypt, a country that has received remarkably high quantities of foreign military and civil aid, we see the emergence of a military regime that does not hesitate to use extremely dubious trials, torture, laws against demonstrations, and general repression, as part of its armoury of restoring stability.

A striking feature of these and many other situations is the limited capacity of Western powers to do anything much about it. Secretary of State John Kerry, when he travels between the countries I have been talking about, invariably pleading for more inclusive government and respect for the rule of law, seems to have relatively little chance of being heeded. In all these countries, where there has been huge Western military involvement – including in Afghanistan, which has been host to the longest war in American history – the Western role looks more and more like Shelley's *Ozymandias*:

> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The concept of soft power

It is not surprising that awareness of the trouble into which Western roles have been running has been one factor contributing to a new interest in 'soft power'. In British terms, if our uses of armed force have resulted in so many disappointments, should we not be looking at another kind of influence in the world – one that relies more on the extraordinary attractive power of our language, culture, educational system, and parliamentary government?

In considering the role of soft power, we can all agree on one basic proposition. Not all power involves the threat or use of armed force. Both *within* countries in their domestic politics and *between* countries, power can derive from authority, legitimacy, persuasion and consent.

Professor Joseph Nye, a Corresponding Fellow of this Academy, is widely credited with being the inventor of the term 'soft power', which he used from 1990 onwards. He stressed that any exercise of power can involve elements of 'soft power', which is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments'.[1]

It is important, at this sobering moment, to recall that
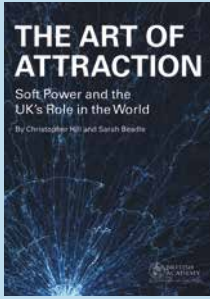
The Art of Attraction
by Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle

This British Academy report, published in March 2014, concludes with the following list of abbreviated recommendations.

Governments would be well-advised:

1. To refrain from direct interference in soft power assets.

2. To invest in and sustain soft power institutions such as the BBC, the British Council, and the education system over the long term, and at arm's length.

3. To recognise that hard and soft power, like power and influence more generally, reside on a continuum rather than being an either-or choice.

4. To understand that the power of example is far more effective than preaching.

5. To pay careful attention to the consequences of official foreign policy for Britain's reputation, identity and domestic society, ensuring that geopolitical and socio-economic goals are not pursued in separate compartments.

6. To accept that the majority of ways in which civilised countries interact entail using the assets which make up 'soft power', whatever political vocabulary we choose.

7. For their part, citizens and voters need to accept that some hard power assets, in the forms of the armed forces and security services, are necessary as an insurance policy against unforeseeable contingencies, and for use in non-conventional warfare against terrorists or criminals threatening British citizens at home and abroad, although not regardless of cost. Even diplomacy will sometimes need to be coercive (i.e. hard power) in relations with otherwise friendly states in order to insist on the UK's 'red lines', however they may be defined at the time. Because soft power excludes arm-twisting, it will never be enough as a foreign policy resource.

8. Lastly, those engaged in the private socio-cultural activities which contribute to soft power need to be aware that they are to some extent regarded as representative of their country's interests. They need not and should not compromise on such principles as academic or artistic freedom, but it is excessively innocent to imagine that their work takes place in a vacuum, untouched by the manoeuvring of governments and the competing narratives of world politics – especially when they are beholden to the Treasury for funding. Whether they like it or not, the universities, the orchestras, the novelists, the sportsmen and women, the archaeologists – and indeed the British Academy – are all part of the 'projection of Britain abroad'.

Joe Nye and others, in introducing the concept of soft power, did not see it as a complete alternative to military power. Perhaps there would be specific cases where one would have to choose between military power and soft power, but they did not see it is a complete alternative.

The idea that there can be non-military forms of power has also been reflected in the perennial optimistic notions that particular states or groupings of states are 'civilian powers'. In the 1970s, both the European Communities (which later became the European Union) and Japan were sometimes described as pure expressions of 'civilian power'. 'Civilian power Europe' was a phrase that was used quite a lot in the 1980s. By this it was meant that it was primarily concerned with economic activity, had relatively low defence budgets, and was helping to build a world of economic interdependence. Yet that ran into a good deal of criticism as being based on an oversimplification of what the basis of European security actually was and of what policies might be usefully pursued.[2]

Although it may be tempting at this moment in history, it would be wrong to see the ideas of 'soft power' and 'civilian power' as inextricably associated with a recognition of the *limits* of hard power. When these ideas were developed, including from the early 1990s by Joe Nye, it was not at a time of special pessimism about hard power. The Cold War had just ended, and there was a degree of optimism about certain uses of hard power – not least because of the extremely effective use of force in the 1991 Gulf War, which seemed to be an indicator of the capacity to use force on a multinational basis for a limited and legitimate purpose.

Soft power in state-building

The critical issue that faces us today is whether soft power has a significant role to play in respect of the state-building exercises in which the West has become so deeply involved in the post-Cold War era in so many parts of the world.

A good starting point is to recognise that soft power clearly has some role. To take the case of the Balkans and some of the countries in Eastern Europe, there was the enormous attractive power of Western Europe and European models, and of the prospect of becoming members of the European Union. The process can be described, in my view, as one of 'induction', in both senses of the word 'induction'. It was induction into membership of the European Union and of NATO. But it was also induction in the electromechanical sense of a force in one part of the continent having an effect on forces in another part of the continent without direct physical intervention. That seems to me to be clear evidence of a creative role for a certain kind of soft power.

1. Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, Public Affairs, 2004).
2. For two excellent critical views of the concept of 'civilian power Europe' in different eras, see Hedley Bull, 'Civilian Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 21:1-2 (Sep–Dec 1982), 149–64; and Karen Smith, 'Beyond the Civilian Power EU Debate', *Politique Européenne*, 17 (Autumn 2005), 63–82.

The event held on 24 June 2014 on 'Global power, influence and perception in the 21st century' was organised in association with the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. The presentation by Karl W. Eikenberry (former US Ambassador to Afghanistan and retired US Army Lieutenant General) included a film clip about the five-year project to renovate the old citadel of Herat in western Afghanistan, to help restore Afghans' sense of common historical identity. Eikenberry said the project demonstrated the relative costs of hard and soft power:

'The total US contribution to that project was a little over $1 million. That $1 million was the cost of stationing one US army soldier or marine in Afghanistan for one year.'

A video recording of the panel discussion can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/events/2014/

But as we approach the subject, we need to recognise three key difficulties.

First, the process of state-building is inherently difficult. Virtually all the conflicts in the world today have the character of being post-colonial conflicts. Creating a new order out of the ruins of an empire is extraordinarily difficult, especially in cases where some local politicians are in danger of being seen as mere puppets of outside forces. That problem, which is an eternal problem of colonialism and post-colonialism, is still very much with us today. The common accusation levelled against outsiders in such a situation is one of 'divide and rule'. It is very common as a left-wing critique of much that has been going on in the recent interventions. Actually, I think it is a complete misreading of what has been going on. It has not been an attempt at 'divide and rule'; it has been an attempt at 'unite and depart'. But uniting a society that may have deep in-built divisions is, in itself, a very difficult task. Time and again, intervening Western powers have found those deep internal divisions are ones that they can scarcely get to grips with.

The second difficulty we should recognise is that the capacity of Western powers to attract – their soft power capacity – has in itself proved to be a problem. Inasmuch as there is enormous attraction – whether it be in the form of Hollywood movies, or women's education and liberation – that very fact can set up antibodies in parts of these societies. It possible to interpret the origins of both the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda as partly being a strong cultural reaction to rapid Westernisation. Our soft power may therefore sometimes involve us in problems. There is something solipsistic about that particular version of soft power in which it is thought that we in the West have the right way of living and of understanding the world and the right kind of political order, and it is merely up to others to copy us. The power to attract could easily be thought to mean that, but it can result in the creation of antibodies.

The third difficulty is well recognised in the British Academy's excellent survey of the soft power debate, *The Art of Attraction* by Chris Hill and Sarah Beadle.[3] The report stresses that, while soft power may indeed be very important for particular national purposes, aspects of it are often at their best when they are not under the baneful control of the state – indeed not under any kind of organised or rigid control.

In sum, soft power is indeed a reality, and will have a key role in hard times, especially in light of the disappointments following certain uses of Western military power in deeply divided post-colonial societies. However, like any other form of power, soft power is neither easy to manage nor free from dangers – especially the dangers that result from lazy assumptions that the rest of the world wants to be more like us, and that it can be transformed without producing antibodies.

---

3. The full text of the report can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/intl/softpower.cfm