

Center for Political Studies

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Session 2: Global peace and new conceptual approaches - soft power as a mechanism for constructing a new political reality

If there is a conceptual crisis, what sorts of new models can provide stability for the global development? To what extent the potential of soft power in the current and future systems of international relations is assessed?

With the global system undergoing shifts on several fronts, we are living through interesting times. The word multi-polar is almost ubiquitous and an Arab spring that followed a financial crisis in Europe and North America, that followed the economic rise of China and India, that followed debates on how American power is declining, all go to show how new political realities are emerging. This requires a reconstruction of traditional narratives – soft power, which I will take to be a multitude of issues, is part of this reconstruction. Perhaps giving it utmost significance is hasty; indeed it becomes a chicken-and-egg question when we speak of political power, economic power and consequently soft power. What comes first? Do they go hand in hand? These are necessary questions that are central to coming up with new models and narratives in global development and international relations.

With unprecedented communication networks and everyday technological improvements offering further avenues of showcasing, perhaps sustaining relationships and creating better images, it is not surprising that social networking offers myriad alternatives and opportunities. Thus while Facebook and Twitter have been given a lot of publicity in their role in protests in Iran and the recent uprising in Egypt, they are also the platforms now used by many politicians, governments and embassies aiming to improve relations and images – the Royal Family of Britain and the Dalai Lama no less, are institutions that are part of this new and unique phenomenon. This is more than simply a publicity gimmick since people power, integrated media, social networks, soft power and new emerging markets in a world that is dominated by economic growth as a strong, if not the strongest, measure of international strength, are all undergoing many changes and creating complexities that necessitate new conceptual approaches for global development, stability and international relations.

Perhaps calling this shift in conceptual approaches and the rise of soft power as a means to achieve new forms in international relations a crisis can only be a luxury afforded to academics. In reality, while changes are taking place, for the foreseeable future international relations will continue to be guided by existing power equations but in a new milieu that brings in multiple new actors – and hence a multi-polarity. While political power is not easily given away, the space that the United States has been enjoying alone is now being shared. This is evident in major debates – perhaps most blatantly in the Climate Change concerns. However, it is without doubt that soft power for the most part has traditionally come along with political and economic power. And thus it is as embedded. The United States then, despite economic issues,

continues to have an influential popular culture; it continues to act as a proverbial land of opportunities and the American dream lives on. It is also without doubt that as new economic powers are emerging, they are changing the global paradigm of political realities as well as soft power. I will argue that in the current age, soft power here offers economic and political gains, as opposed to the past American experience where arguably it was more of a complement, if not a by-product of political prowess. The conventional wisdom that sees soft power as a result of changes rather than as a potential game-changer now needs to change. By doing so, we can also understand how bilateral relationships are undergoing shifts in the world today.

If nothing else, the events in the Middle East have necessitated this. It is always interesting to note how relations with foreign countries are guided by such events. If soft power is about creating a better image of oneself and using it to one's own benefits, then the stances taken by countries with interest in the Middle East have been interesting. The American comedian/political commentator Jon Stewart and his take on Hilary Clinton's ambivalent and changing views on the protests in Egypt go to show how important public perceptions of a USA supporting democracy and people power in Egypt became. Interestingly, Jon Stewart and Hilary Clinton themselves are two vital sources of American soft power – perhaps epitomes of it; one with a comic popular appeal, and the other as a charm offensive in political circles.

That soft power in a country's image can have economic and political gains is undoubted. It is not for no reason that the world is obsessed with charisma, or with a royal British wedding. The next question is how this can lead to more hard power - perhaps no other country has the best opportunity to do so than India. The theory of path dependency notes that it is difficult to get out of established paths due to history – however, there come opportune moments that can be grasped and can lead to changes. I would argue that the current age of rising soft power, declining American power and technological advancement means that we are going through a prolonged period of opportunity where the right policies can enable soft power and a country's image, to guide its international relations goals.

This image goes hand in hand with discourses in development studies. On the one hand is the developing country narrative – of how health, gender rights, human rights, migration and militancy issues cause chronic underdevelopment as the country's image remains distorted. Emerging countries that are still categorized as developing then make it a point to ensure that their softer side is complementing their economic strengths since one can and should lead to the other – most blatantly in the form of tourism. Thus China, India, Brazil and Central Asian states have much to gain by investing in soft power. It is not incidental that these are countries with growing economies, but also rising tourism, and venues of international sporting events. They are also consequently gaining political power, as seen in the BRICS agendas and a collective, strong front in the Climate Change debate. When Brazil decides to officially ask Google Earth to show its cities in better light to ensure that it is not the *favelas* alone that are in focus, one knows that soft power is a means and a consequence of hard power.

On the other side of this debate is the soft power emanating from the developed, or more appropriately, the aid-giving world, since aid is one of the quantifiable means of addressing image. It is more than simply the rich giving to the poor – it adds a new dimension to

international relations; when the UN notes that 0.7% of the GNI or Gross National Income of developed countries should be its aid commitment, we can see that soft power is institutionalized as well. Humanitarian aid during disasters is also a show of either reaching out, or future expected reciprocation, or a sign of friendship – again the image is of utmost importance. This was evident during the floods in Pakistan last year when aid given by the US became a subject of interest because American analysts believed it had not been publicized and hence, not led to better perceptions. When India provided aid to Pakistan, it became another facet of soft power that needed to be rationalized in the system of international relations. Thus, aid in soft power is not simply a matter rich and poor. It is about the image of countries and the expectations and results that others seek from them. The slow aid to Pakistan after the aforementioned floods last year, was attributed in part of the country not ‘marketing’ itself better and due to a negative image it had in the donor market. The same cannot be said of for instance the United States and its own Hurricane Katrina where aid poured in for a number of reasons – clearly soft power had a strong motive of better international relations. Thus the giving of aid is a facet of soft power and receiving is also a result of soft power.

The imagery that follows development problems in Africa and the donor presence there also compels one to rethink concepts. While for some the visuals are regarded as an ironic success of soft power – since images of poverty lead to aid pouring in – others see it as a business agenda and a ‘pornography of poverty’ – indeed the continent’s manufactured soft power has strong economic and global interests with the food industry for example; but as Dambisa Moyo of ‘Dead Aid’ fame and others have contended, this is not leading to growth. Then we also have the case of China, so often perceived to be unsuccessful in its soft power and image, which has entered the African aid market as well as Arabian economic markets and let its manpower, finances and engineering become its agents of soft power and hence added significantly to its image and its foreign relations.

On more bilateral levels, we find consulates and embassies reaching out to the public in an effort to raise their countries’ image, especially in strategically important areas. Moreover, current political realities that have a strong economic angle are also seeing more nuanced angles in debates that used to be ideologically clashing. Thus, when monarchists and republicans argue about the monarchy, for instance in the United Kingdom, there is also the added economic dimension where history, fascination and traditions have a strong tourism industry. The expenses of a royal wedding, in line with recent events, are not simply seen as expenses – they are seen as investments since it is a global affair and attracting tourists, and raising the soft profile of a nation. Clearly then, soft power, despite its strong romanticism, cultural appearance and exoticism, has a tangible economic and political strand that is increasingly being appreciated and thus necessitates a conceptual shift in how global development and international relations are being addressed today.

Democracy, human rights and values have been the most useful, if also exploited vehicles of soft power. The United States as the undoubted superpower of the last few decades has been running a global war through these very concepts. The perception of Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan as backward, militant and extremist nations has created space for American soft power to be brought in. The narrative built in these situations – as it is being built in Libya these

days – is not of hard power, military might or war. It is about soft power – the words used are democracy, people power, human rights and justice. The negative soft power of Afghanistan and Pakistan's own tribal areas leads to a public image that in turn becomes a justification for war. Thus soft power, as is blatant in the case of Afghanistan is one of the most important issues at play. Indeed the American and NATO presence there is also attempting to 'win the hearts and minds' of people – that is as soft as it gets. One would not be out of line to say that a military-led offensive has slowly emerged as a soft-power war in Afghanistan.

However, in international relations and global development, contradictions abound. Image-building is a prerequisite to policy implementation. A protest movement may be shunned as extremist in Afghanistan, or heralded as people power in Iran, shown ambivalence and then supported in Egypt, and you may remember, supported also various in revolutions in Central Asia, including in Uzbekistan. It has consequences for international relations and global development as external sources with media power may be able to use events to their advantage. Protests in Andijan then, highlighted as a popular movement in 2005 by the US – as was the so-called Green Revolution in Iran – have emerged as internal matters of countries taken out of context and not entirely in line with the very concepts of democracy, human rights and values that are showcased as its very own symbols of soft power.

Let me move on to a more competitive angle. A comprehensive BBC documentary last year about this very concept defined soft power as 'the attractiveness of a country's model' or of telling your story so that other countries want what you have. British soft power then, includes football, music and the BBC itself – not to speak of its parliamentary democracy.

It saw the US as the soft power of the last century and sees China as entering the field since the prize to be gained is global influence and even leadership. In the case of China, its soft power offensive has been visible in its Olympics and the World Expo in Shanghai. The story of China becomes that of a confident and welcoming nation ready to take center stage and as it is slowly being accepted and admired, it is winning the battle for soft power as it is about making others like you rather than fear you.

This is a complement of hard power though; for the US, Hollywood, educational institutions, even lofty and proclaimed American values are widespread – but more as a by-product rather than a strategy. That is the reason behind my contention that even if military and economic decline is a reality, American soft dominance is not going to be easy to replace. Yet, times have changed. Many believe that the current phase with American involvement in war, images of Guantanamo, Abu Ghuraib and its financial issues and contradictory foreign policies having dented the country's image abroad– the American dream is giving way – and so this may be China's chance.

That chance China is taking with some gusto – with the Olympics and Expos, there are also the more cultural sides of the 282 Confucius Centers set up in 88 countries to promote Chinese culture and specially language. Given their appeal and funding, they attract much competition among various institutions and there are plans for a 1000 such centers by 2020. This is soft power in action as the aim is to dispel negative images and get a better feeling of the country

and hence add to its hard power appeal. Indeed then, political realities, given the financing of soft power, are bound to change accordingly.

Just as democracy and values become soft power for the US, China's miraculous economic development, record-breaking trains and infrastructure become soft power vehicles. They lead to an idea that an alternative model of modernization without westernization is possible and this holds much appeal for East Asian and Islamic countries. There are concerns, says the BBC, that it could hurt the single biggest soft power tool of democracy! Alternatives also include environmentalism as a lifestyle – again China with a Buddhist attraction, harmony and ideas of closeness to nature has the soft power to counter the uglier side of being one of the biggest contributors to climate change. That is a contradiction – but one that is understandable and shows how Chinese leadership is valued by the developing and emerging world in this context. There is also the flipside – that since China does not have that political appeal of democracy as it has become the mantra of soft power, a country like India, with its history, culture, tourist destinations, music- in addition to its democracy – could well be the world's first superpower!

India has the natural appeal, but perhaps has not been 'packaging' itself as well. PR campaigns have had minor successes but also faced derision – and it took a film about the worst of India for a change to come about – and ironically *Slumdog Millionaire* actually made slum tourism a business. But it also showed how traditional India and modern India can mix and come up with a new brand for Indian soft power.

India's political soft power has long been noticeable, what with the larger-than-life figure of Mahatma Gandhi. Now that its outreach is much wider, does it need to be a government endeavor as has been the case with China? The counterparts to Confucius Institutes are India's own Nehru Centers. While initially set up for diasporic communities, now they are being developed to expand India's soft power. They have been set up in countries with good international relationships to promote partnerships, including in Tokyo, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Dhaka. You might note that Little Italy, Chinatown and now Little India are all part of this very same soft power game, image building, relationship enhancing soft power offensive. And jumping this bandwagon has tremendous political and strategic rationality. Thus, when Obama speaks in India, praising Gandhi and his values, it is not simply rhetoric. Rather, it is a success of a natural soft power that India possesses.

But culture is only one ingredient. There are others too – such as IT skills for which the Indian city of Bangalore has almost acquired a mythical status – and plays a multidimensional role in international and economic affairs. There are obvious positives, but this IT miracle has also been criticized for leading to a stereotype. Indeed call centers and outsourcing become norms, but innovations have not come from inside. Thus soft power as a weakness here too! It may lead to short term economic benefits and bilateral relations, but a sustained and long-term internal process of growth may be compromised if it is not leading to innovations.

Moreover, when projecting soft power is serious business since it involves serious money, one also knows that it can backfire. That is why opening and closing ceremonies of sporting events are closely watched. India almost suffered greatly due to the global coverage of its lack of

preparation for the Commonwealth Games – ironically that was accompanied by national public campaigns to ensure that its image remains clean.

It is not incidental that these trends come as international relations and political clout is also rising across the world. The football World Cup last held in South Africa and the next one in Brazil and then Qatar in 2022; and the next Olympic Games also to be held in Brazil are cases in point. And the competition they beat out? Obama's Chicago and London! The profits, both tangible and intangible, of this soft power are going to be priceless. But they will come at a price – since soft power is now serious business and costly.

All in all then, soft power is redefining relationships, causing a complex interplay with factors of hard power. Heavy funding to all the ingredients of soft power- heritage, culture, language - is not simply for the sake of being liked and admired. It leads to, and sustains, economic and political power. And that consequently means that international relations, political realities, and global development are all in a period of transition and need new conceptualizations – perhaps more informal and abstract, but new nonetheless.

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