

SOFT POWER IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

V. R. RAGHAVAN*

Introduction

Power in the most general terms refers to the ability of influencing the behaviour of others to achieve the outcome one desires through coercion, inducement or attraction. Governments have forever utilised their military and economic might to achieve national goals and in turn increase their power. However the potential of a favourable image abroad was never completely ignored. References to the nation and its image go back to international relations in ancient Greek and Rome where diplomatic activity aimed at foreign publics. Seventeenth century French are said to have put enormous effort into managing their country's reputation seeing it as one of the principal sources of a nation's power.¹ In the time period between and after the First and the Second World Wars professional image cultivation across national borders became intrinsic to international politics. Governments established offices to propagandize their cause and the advent of Radio helped in promoting favourable images abroad.

Today, decades after the two World wars, the ability to attract through a favourable image has become a more evident and reliable source of power. In an environment of multiple transnational linkages and changing nature of power, the tools of effective diplomacy include not only "hard power" which is the use of military and economic might to threaten or induce others to change or reinforce their position but also "soft power" which is the ability to obtain desired results through attraction rather than coercion or payments. States not only rely on military force but also on an enhanced global influence, so much so, that the ability to influence others with a combination of hard and soft power has been termed as 'smart power'. This paper aims to highlight the importance that soft power has gained in the Asia Pacific and focus on the broad interplay between hard and soft power in international relations.

¹ Michael Kunczik, 'Transnational Public Relations by Foreign Governments', in Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Vercic (eds.), *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research and Practice* (New Jersey London, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), pp-399-405

* Lt. Gen (Retd.) V. R. Raghavan is President, Centre for Security Analysis, Chennai and Director, Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi. The author acknowledges the research contribution to the paper by Ms. Tejal Chandan, Research Fellow of the Centre for Security Analysis.

Soft Power

In the words of Joseph Nye, who has popularised the phrase, ‘Soft Power’ emanates from three resources: “*a state’s culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (where it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (where they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).*”² In other words, a country has more soft power if its culture, values and institutions incite admiration and respect in other parts of the world.

Soft power can be developed through relations with allies, economic assistance and cultural exchanges which in turn would result in a more favourable public opinion. Therefore, soft power can be either ‘High’ i.e. targeted at elites or ‘Low’ i.e. targeted at the broader public.³ The value of soft power arises from the ability to influence others unobtrusively and unconsciously. It relies on the ability to shape the preferences of others and grows spontaneously out of the cultural milieu of a society. Since it is an indirect way to get what you want soft power has been called the “second face of power”⁴. The existence of a vibrant democracy has been promoted as the basic condition for the growth of a strong soft power.

Potential for Soft Power in the Asia Pacific

Asian countries have impressive potential resources for soft power. The arts, fashion and cuisine of Asia’s ancient cultures have had a strong impact on other parts of the world for centuries. Asia today enunciates a broader idea of soft power than the term first coined by Joseph Nye. Whereas Nye excluded investment and aid and formal diplomacy from his soft power, in Asia, the idea of soft power implies all elements outside the security realm including investment and aid. Countries like China and Japan have identified and developed conscious strategies to enhance their soft power.

China

According to Peng Fuchun, National People’s Congress Deputy “*we should never underestimate the importance of building soft power as economic miracle is only one side of China’s*

² Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

³ Joshua Kurlantzick, ‘China’s Charm: Implications of China’s Soft Power’, Policy Brief No.47, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2006

⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, No. 80, Fall 1990, p 153-170

rising in the world area”⁵ In light of this, China is expanding its use of cultural, educational and diplomatic tools to increase its appeal across the world. China is steadily increasing its support for cultural exchanges, sending doctors and teachers to work abroad, welcoming students from other nations to study in China, and paying for Chinese-language programs abroad. It has also established Confucius Institutes with a mission to promote Chinese language, culture and a range of other aspects of learning about China, including its business environment. Several of these institutes have already been established around the world, in places such as Japan, Australia, Sweden and the United States. Beijing currently has around 140 Confucius Institutes in more than 50 countries and regions.⁶

Win-win diplomacy aimed at multilateralism, mutually beneficial cooperation and the spirit of inclusiveness remains the keystone of China’s foreign relations. China has supported its win-win strategy with initiatives like signing the Southeast Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and committing itself to creating a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.⁷ China’s embrace of free trade and promotion of the idea that it will become a source of foreign direct investment strengthens its image and the success of its developmental model holds significant appeal for many Southeast Asian countries. China has been using its aid as one of its soft power strategies. Chinese aid to Philippines, Laos and Indonesia has far outnumbered US aid in the region. The Chinese government is also gradually increasing its aid to African countries under the China- Africa Cooperation Forum and is set to double the amount of aid by 2009.

Space has become another area where China is trying to exert its soft power. It is positioning itself as a space benefactor to the developing world-the same countries in some cases, whose natural resources China covets. China not only designed, built and launched a satellite for oil rich Nigeria but also combined it with a major loan to help pay the costs. It has signed a similar contract with Venezuela and is developing an earth observation satellite system with Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan, Peru and Thailand.⁸

China has also adjusted its diplomacy and unlike a decade ago joined the World Trade Organization, contributed more than 3,000 troops to serve in United Nations peacekeeping

⁵ ‘ Soft Power : A New Focus at China’s Two Sessions, National People’s Congress, People’s Republic of China, URL: www.npc.gov.cn

⁶ ‘China Launches First Confucius Institute in Pakistan’, *People’s Daily Online*, April 10, 2007, URL:<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/>

⁷ Kurlantzick, ‘China’s Charm: Implications of China’s Soft Power’, p-2

⁸ Jim Yardley, ‘China uses space Technology as Diplomatic Trump Card’, *International Herald Tribune*, May 24, 2007

operations, become more helpful on non-proliferation issues (including hosting the six-party talks on North Korea), settled territorial disputes with its neighbours, and joined a variety of regional organizations.⁹

Ultimately, is the Chinese soft power working? The popularity of ‘Beijing Consensus’ on an authoritarian government plus a market economy, a sharp decline in Southeast Asian leaders questioning China’s rise, rare accounts of the media in the region criticizing China’s economic and security policies and the increasing popularity of Chinese language and cultural studies are some examples of a working Chinese soft power. While at the high level, soft power boosts Beijing’s influence over leaders in less democratic nations, at the lower level, Beijing’s soft power allows democratically elected leaders in places like the Philippines to move closer to China.¹⁰ But the Chinese influence in Southeast Asia comes with a warning. China’s soft power could prove disastrous for the region for democratization, for anticorruption initiatives, and for good governance. In the worst case scenario, China’s success in delivering strong economic growth while retaining political control could serve as an example to some of the more authoritarian-minded leaders in the region.¹¹

China nevertheless will continue to invest in soft power by increasing its diplomatic spending. According to the draft 2007 budget, the central government plans to raise diplomatic spending by 37.3 percent from 12.3 billion Yuan to 23 billion Yuan (US\$3 billion) and use this money mainly to fund overseas aid programs, peace-keeping operations, and increased membership fees at international organizations.¹²

Japan

Japan’s soft power has led the way in Asia for decades. It’s cultural attraction is high both in terms of the traditional Japanese culture and its modern ‘cool’ which is a gateway into a new view of Japan.¹³ “Cool Japan” refers to the overseas appeal of contemporary Japanese culture ranging from its anime or animation to sumo wrestling. Even as a decade long economic slump tarnished the attractiveness of Japanese economic policies, it did not erase Japan’s soft power resources. Japan’s

⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr, ‘The Rise of China’s Soft Power’, *The Wall Street Journal-Asia*, December 29, 2005

¹⁰ Kurlantzick, ‘China’s Charm: Implications of China’s Soft Power’, p-4

¹¹ Ibid, p-5

¹² ‘Soft Power: A New Focus at China’s Two Sessions’

¹³ Joseph. S. Nye Jr., ‘Soft Power and Public Diplomacy’, Centre for Global Partnership, March 20, 2006, URL: www.cgip.org

global cultural influence quietly grew in the midst of widely reported political and economic misfortunes.

Japan's cultural influence grew globally in areas ranging from fashion, food, pop music, consumer electronics, architecture and art.¹⁴ Japanese traditional spiritual disciplines such as Zen Buddhism and Japanese martial arts have inspired admirers and visitors for decades.¹⁵ Furthermore, Japan's resurgence by the end of the century and its remarkable performance has not only made the Japanese wealthy but has also enhanced the country's soft power. It is also important to note the designation of modern Japan as a "cultural superpower".¹⁶

Japan's soft power also emanates from some of its official policies such as its "Peace Constitution" and support for the United Nations.¹⁷ The provision of Official Developmental Assistance to many countries and Government supported exchange programs like those that bring foreign teachers to Japan have created immense goodwill. Apart from these strong soft power resources, Japan is also home to seven of the 25 top businesses and three of the top 25 multinational brand names- Toyota, Honda and Sony.¹⁸

While Japan sits on a huge reserve of soft power, there are some limits to tapping this reserve. Japan faces serious demographic challenges and Japanese language is not widely spoken. Its meager English makes it difficult to attract international talent to its universities and even as Japanese culture is open to foreign influences there is neither political nor public support for immigration or immigrants.¹⁹

Recognizing the need for stronger public relations, Japan initiated efforts such as the \$ 17 million "Visit Japan" campaign. While this may help with tourism, long term soft power gains will require better foreign language skills and more open attitude towards foreigners.²⁰ Some negative policy choices, such as the former Prime Minister Koizumi's frequent visits to the Yasukuni Shrine have reduced the popularity of Japan in the Northeast and Southeast Asian region and undercut the positive soft power of culture. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of modern Japanese culture can

¹⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., 'Soft Power Matters in Asia', *The Japan Times* –Opinion, 5 December 2005

¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., 'The Soft Power of Japan', *Gaiko Forum: Japanese Perspectives on Foreign Affairs*, Summer 2004 p 3-7

¹⁶ Douglas McGray, 'Japan's Gross National Cool', *Foreign Policy*, May- June 2002, p 44-54 and Aoki Tamotsu, 'Toward Multilayered Strength in the Cool Culture', *Gaiko Forum: Japanese Perspectives on Foreign Affairs*, Summer 2004, p 8-16

¹⁷ Nye, 'The Soft Power of Japan', p- 3

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p-4

¹⁹ McGray, 'Japan's Gross National Cool' p-53

²⁰ Nye, 'The Soft Power of Japan', p-5

help offset the negativity surrounding wartime/ history issues.²¹ On the other hand, its cultural soft power can yield dividends for its overall economic power.

Singapore

Policy makers in Singapore have given a great deal of thought to the need for developing a national soft power strategy along with building hard power. According to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong Singapore is a land of opportunity for enterprising people from all over Asia.²² Singapore's soft power is unique in the sense that it is at the crossroads of the east and the west as a modern cosmopolitan society, connected to the world of finance, business, and yet rooted in the Asian cultures of its forebears.²³ In the words of Tan Tay Keong, Executive Director of Singapore International Foundation, "Singapore aims to be the London of finance, the New York of culture, and the Boston of education".²⁴ Keong classified Singapore's soft power paradigms into Talent, Trade, Technology and Tolerance.

With a lack of natural resources, Singapore's success strategies focus on human capital and knowledge. In order to attract foreigners, the country has abolished some of its strict rules and made investments to boost its cultural life. A free media and an open space for political and public expression are some of the means that Singapore has been trying to embrace in the pursuit of enhancing its attractiveness. Being a small state, Singapore is highly dependent on trade. Apart from securing free trade agreements with several countries, Singapore also supports a well functioning global multilateral system. Its support for the World Trade Organization, East Asia Community and other international and regional organisations is part of a soft power strategy to project an image of a good citizen in the international community of nations.

With regard to technology, investment in high technology will lead to a highly literate work force and also attract top talent to Singapore. With extensive research and development in the field of health care, Singapore wants to become the "Biopolis" of Asia.²⁵ Similarly, creating a conducive

²¹ Nye, 'Soft Power and Public Diplomacy'

²² 'Creating Opportunity, Building Community', Singapore Budget 2005, Government of Singapore, URL: http://www.mof.gov.sg/budget_2005/budget_speech/

²³ Tan Tay Keong, 'Survival Strategies of a Small State: Lessons from Singapore', Soft Power Workshop- Lessons from Singapore, Harold Hartog School of Government and Policy, Tel-Aviv University, November 2005, URL: <http://spirit.tau.ac.il/government/>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

environment for foreigners and facilitating a lifestyle that attracts intellectuals has been a top priority.

Other soft power strategies are reflected in programs such as “Singapore Volunteers Overseas” whereby doctors, teachers and university professors from Singapore volunteer to serve in other countries for a certain time period, and “Friends of Singapore” Program, whereby scholarships are offered to students from poorer countries in the Asian region. These programs capitalise on the ability to build links between people within the region and globally.

The United States and soft power

The U.S. has a major global military and economic presence. It is part of the security structures in Europe and Asia Pacific. It has a significant role on hand in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its economic integration in Asia-Pacific is critical to the economics of the region. The global role of the US soft power content is noteworthy.

However, in recent times, by undermining alliances, international institutions, and U.S. credibility, the Bush administration has triggered a cycle that is depleting U.S. power. Spurning global cooperation has encouraged distrust of U.S. motives, hampering U.S. effectiveness in Iraq and fanning hostility. The pernicious result is that liberation and freedom, the most contagious ideas in history, are becoming associated, at least in the Middle East, with a violent and unwanted occupation.

According to Suzanne Nossel, a new liberal internationalist agenda must turn this vicious cycle into a virtuous one, in which U.S. power generates confidence in the U.S. leadership, enhancing U.S. power all the more²⁶. She also recommends a combination of hard and soft power, to create what she calls ‘smart power’.

Conclusion: The interplay between soft and hard power

Even as early as 1939, EH Carr wrote that ‘power over opinion was not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power and has always been closely associated with them’²⁷ Hard and Soft Power are ‘inextricable’ aspects of the ability to achieve desired outcomes and the use of either one alone is inadequate. Soft power strategies alone may not translate into

²⁶ Suzanne Nossel, “Smart Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 83, No. 2, March-April 2004

²⁷ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983 (First edition-1939)) quoted in Jan Melisson, ‘Wielding Soft Power: The New Public Diplomacy’, *Clingendael Diplomacy Papers*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, May 2005

desired outcomes as soft power resources are generally much slower, diffuse and cumbersome to wield than hard power resources. As soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy they take years to produce the desired outcomes.²⁸

Countries with immense soft power may still face legitimacy concerns for their diplomacy, for instance, lack of meaningful political reform in China along with its friendship with dictators in the developing world creates a legitimacy problem.²⁹ At the same time the loss of soft power can be costly for hard power. For instance the US led war in Iraq led to a plummeting popularity of the US image which in turn has made it difficult for the US to wield its hard power in Iran.

Therefore, the two aspects of power at best intersect with one another to enhance, achieve or undercut their separate goals and purposes. Policy makers and diplomats have therefore agreed that effective international relations today depend on our understanding of the interplay between hard and soft power. Hard and soft power can supplement each other and can be exercised in complementary ways. This in other words is the use of 'Smart Power'- the efficient as well as the effecting melding of hard and soft power to achieve desired results.

²⁸ Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*

²⁹ Gill, Bates and Yangzhang Huang, ' Sources and Limits of Chinese Soft Power', *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 2006, p 17-36