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Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Putting a Hard Edge on Soft Power ^[1]

“Soft power” is an important element of foreign policy, emphasizing attraction rather than coercion. The concept, popularized by Harvard professor Joseph Nye, provides counterbalance to the infatuation with hard power, especially military force, which has been driven by the accelerated development of “smart” weaponry. Drones, for example, are appealing to their users because their “pilots” may be thousands of miles away, wholly out of danger while people on the ground are dying. It is war without cost for one side.

The “immaculate destruction” facilitated by such weapons makes it easier to drift into war. When there is little cost to using hard power, policymakers may set aside their moral

compass, relegating soft power to the domain of wimps.

Soft power advocates share some of the blame for this. They have been distracted by cutesy projects such as “gastrodiplomacy,” which may produce a few newspaper articles about the virtues of kimchi or mushy peas, but are unlikely to have any lasting effect on their audience.

Soft power proponents tend to forget that the purpose of soft power, as with public diplomacy more broadly, is to advance the strategic interests of your country. The goal is not be “nice” or transiently popular, but to advance toward your foreign policy goals. Public diplomats are not social workers, and they should not allow themselves to be seen as such.

Soft power intrinsically benefits from logic. Getting the outcome one wants is the essence of diplomacy, and doing so through attraction rather than coercion (although this is not always possible) is common sense. Soft power should become manifest in public diplomacy programs that respond to people’s needs – what will help them improve their lives. This approach is most likely to win the respect and appreciation that are the fruits of carefully nurtured soft power.

Consider the reasons behind the mass public’s support for the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. People were not motivated by just a thirst for democracy; those who marched to Tahrir Square and other rallying points throughout the Arab world wanted a roof over their families’ heads, decent schools for their children, a job so they could be self-supporting, and medical care to ensure their families’ health. The country that helps people reach those goals will begin to find that it has more friends than adversaries. Further, helping achieve such results will enhance freedom and stability, an important function of public diplomacy.

In some countries, including the United States, politics and the scarcity of common sense have led to soft power being pushed out of the policy mainstream, consigned to the backwaters of wishful thinking. Correcting this, in the United States at least, will require structural change. First among the reforms should be bringing to an end the persistent fiction that public diplomacy and aid programs, the domain of USAID, should be separate enterprises. If policymakers really want to rely on soft power, the publics to whom public diplomacy is directed must receive the programs most likely to produce desired results. Programs with such goals have proved successful, including PEPFAR, the President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief, which was one of the great achievements of the George W. Bush administration, and on a more micro level, individual projects undertaken by Peace Corps volunteers.

This readjustment of values and priorities will not come easily. Earlier this month, several dozen scholars and soft power practitioners met at Wilton Park, the conference center of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to consider the future of soft power. Interesting ideas abounded, but many of us came away from the sessions realizing that no matter how hard we work, change will not come unless those at the top of the policymaking pyramid embrace soft power as truly the preferred way of dealing with the rest of the world.
