

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

Planning Soft Power's Future ^[1]

LONDON --- For much of the past decade, “soft power” has been touted as a means for making foreign policy more effective by emphasizing enticement rather than coercion, conversation rather than conflict. The concept has won applause, but putting it into practice has often been half-hearted, especially by nations that possess significant military muscle. They prefer macho diplomacy and remain wary of the public diplomacy that puts soft power into practice.

The United Kingdom is a notable exception to this. Its policymakers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) are sophisticated and articulate in their discussions of how to weave public diplomacy into the fabric of British foreign policy. They clearly see that Britain can make public diplomacy work for it, and this is reflected in their promotion of next year's Olympic Games, Queen Elizabeth's 60-year jubilee, and other events to which Britain can lay claim. They will use these events to enhance the notion that Britain is a country to be admired. We will still see the bagpipers, the red-coated guards, the crown jewels, and other reminders of past glories, but Britain has recognized that today it is a middle power and is searching for ways to take full advantage of that.

A meeting last week at FCO's conference center, Wilton Park, underscored this commitment to modern foreign policy realities. About 50 policymakers, academics, and other public diplomacy aficionados from around the world gathered to discuss how public diplomacy – which involves reaching out to publics rather than governments – might make soft power a more dominant factor in international relations.

In addition to the UK, countries represented included Norway, China, Israel, The Netherlands, Jordan, France, Uruguay, and others. Other participants included spokespersons for NATO, OECD, and the virtual states Al Jazeera and Facebook. The breadth of this roster illustrates the wide interest in soft power. It should be noted, however, that while other nations are eager to participate in such conferences, the FCO and Wilton Park are probably the most pro-active governmental bodies in the world in terms of persistent efforts to refine the scholarly and practical consideration of public diplomacy.

That the UK should take the lead on this makes sense. During the past 60 years, Britain has shed, sometimes painfully, its imperial hubris while retaining its desire to play a significant role in world affairs. During my meetings in London with officials from FCO, the British Council (probably the world's best cultural diplomacy agency), and others, I found a level of interest in and commitment to the wielding of soft power that other nations, including the United States, might study carefully and perhaps emulate.

A lesson emerging from this is that those at the summit of power ought to contemplate the value of public diplomacy before they feel forced to do so. The UK is a good example of a country that is supplanting muscle with wisdom. If its officials at the FCO, Wilton Park, the British Council, and elsewhere within its foreign policy community retain their commitment to

soft power, British leadership might become even more important in global affairs.

Events in the Arab world earlier this year showed that fundamental change can take place without resort to old-style, bloody conflict. In an era in which revolutions rely more on social media than on machine guns, soft power will be ascendant. Governments throughout the world should take note.
