

Nov 04, 2016 by [Indra Adnan](#)

Why NATO Needs Soft Power ^[1]

Author's Note: *This blog is the edited version of a speech I gave at the recent NATO conference on The Power of Soft Power.*

When Joseph Nye first coined the term soft power over 20 years ago, the United States and Europe were in a different place than they are today.

- We felt we knew the enemy – Russia - and therefore why NATO was required.
- The world had a clear pecking order, with the U.S. at the top followed by its close friend, Europe.
- The cultural domination of the U.S. was unchallenged (even in Russia) because of the strength of Hollywood, McDonalds and a powerful English language media which was reinforced by the United Kingdom's BBC.

We lived in a largely unquestioning hard power culture, where guns - if not guns and money - shaped and controlled the world. Globalization was unfolding on hard power terms, giving rise to an anti-globalization movement (very confusing to those of us who believed passionately in growing connectivity and global citizenship).

Within this transatlantic culture, soft power was offered as a complement to hard power – another means to the same end of getting our way in the world, albeit slower. Instead of armies, we actively shipped artists, products, legal systems, video games – anything that might carry the values and templates of the world we wanted – to capture the imaginations of those abroad and give us access to their decision making processes.

America's soft power was projected upon the black and white backdrop of a world split into good and evil, winners and losers. It painted the picture of a good winner: one you wanted to be friends with. Today is a different world, however. The global culture and broader context for the exercise of soft power has changed significantly in at least 10 ways:

- First and foremost, our ways of communicating have changed so radically that any person with a computer and Wi-Fi can project an idea into minds all over the world;
- The public sharing of breakthroughs in science, medicine, psychology, economic theory, game theory, and political thinking makes it more difficult to monopolize and manipulate national and global narratives;
- The rise of media awareness: we now know we are told stories by people with agendas, because we can do it ourselves;
- The rise of emotional intelligence makes us less easy to manipulate;
- The change of gender balance in the public space, allowing feminine values and modes of operating to challenge the hegemony of masculine ones;
- Increased exposure to different cultures, allowing competing values to parachute into our previously hermetically sealed space;
- A loss of confidence, post 9/11, in the idea that someone is in charge. This fosters a culture of fear, but it does not give anyone carte blanche to assuage it: we remain on our guard against

expectations of continuity;

- A loss of confidence in the institutions, structures and authorities that make promises they cannot keep;
- New exposition of network values – relationship, reciprocity, and distributed leadership. This constitutes a revolution in our understanding of agency;
- Open source technology has given rise to a generation of activists.

The changes in global communications and soft power have resulted in more people taking turns in leading debates. Different stories about our shared space and its apparatus have arisen over the years and taken hold in the public psyche. Many of these ideas are not simply old debates between warmongers and peaceniks, but show a constant reframing of our common reality, sometimes prompted by scientific developments or social science. Unlike the old stories shared on the margins amongst activists, this is the new common wisdom and can have an impact on stock markets, voting patterns, as well as life trajectories in the private sphere.

In my recent speech to NATO, I explored new stories about war, heroism, masculinity, and violence, and how these stories will make it increasingly difficult for politicians to send their troops into conflict zones in the future. These shifts and turns in our shared global space of ideas and story lines add up to a slowly softening culture. Guns and money still rule the roost, but they are neither trusted, respected, nor loved the way they once were.

Instead we have a world that is increasingly self-mediated and hence self-conscious. Individual – as well as group, national, and business - empowerment is built on the ability to connect: to engage, to make relationships. Leadership has gotten flatter as more of us take our chances in the marketplace of ideas and initiatives.

So where does NATO sit in this new world? If soft power is attraction, how can NATO draw people towards itself – how should it reflect these new values and practices and recommend itself as an institution to trust?

NATO needs to tell a new story about itself that mirrors the global developments we are witnessing. Here are five thoughts for those in charge:

- Reframe NATO's history as arising in a time of early globalization. Allow a narrative of diminishing violence and moving away from war. Be interested in the repurposing of the army in a future culture of global interdependence. It's possible to acknowledge the common desire for peace without losing any power.
- Tell a new story about the future of growing alliances and relationships: it's all about friends. Consider creating new roles for women in a gender specific way, using their relational skills. Women taking on traditional male roles in the army does not sit comfortably with the majority.
- Move away from the closed world of NATO; be wary of the NATO world view arising in messages. Most of the people you want to be friends with are not in your club and can't understand your rationale – you have to understand theirs.
- Acknowledge that in a world of growing complexity, networks, and relationships, the ultimate counter-logic is drone warfare. This is NATO's Achilles heel – the ultimate disconnected weapon of death. Like torture – it is on the list of deal breakers.
- Create more initiatives like “We-Nato” where Stephanie Babst created a hospitable, welcoming space. People don't want to live in a world of fear, we prefer a world of increasing knowledge through engagement.

There are some that ask why should NATO care? Ultimately, in their view, the only relationship that matters is between military and political leaders. NATO doesn't need to

attract the public because only those in power will ultimately understand the reality they face on the global stage and they make the decisions. To them I would say, observe our changing world. It is common knowledge that the biggest constituency in the world is public opinion. Politicians – from small dictators to leaders of the biggest democracies – know they will not be voted in to make their decisions without public approval, something they simply cannot manipulate the way they once could. What used to be a cozy partnership between governments and the military is fast becoming a ménage a trois – the public has moved in and the politician has been seduced. Ignore the public at your peril, but befriend them for a more secure world.

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