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Oct 28, 2019 by *Ilan Manor*

Power in the 21st Century: The Banality of Soft Power ^[1]

This is the first of a two-part article exploring the concept of soft power in the 21st century. [Read part two.](#)

In the autumn of 1990, Joseph Nye sought to re-imagine what American power would like in the 21st century. Writing near the end of the Cold War, Nye offered scholars and policymakers a new conceptual framework through which they could understand power dynamics in a changing world. The Cold War would soon be over, Japanese power was on the rise, multinational corporations were beginning to accumulate power resources equal to those of states while Europe was moving towards greater integration. Amid this climate of change, Nye argued that power in the 21st century would not rest solely on a nation's military strength or its financial prosperity. Nor would it depend exclusively on its geography or natural resources. Rather, in a world of shifting sands and emerging powers, American power would depend on its ability to change the behavior of other states, willingly. As Nye wrote in 1990:

A state may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it or have agreed to a situation that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situations in world politics as to get others to change in particular cases. This second aspect of power—which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants—might be called co-optive or Soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants.

Nearly 20 years after it was first proposed, soft power remains a popular term. Since 2018 alone, Nye's original article from 1990 has been cited more than 600 times. Of course, today's world is markedly different than the one which existed in 1990. Japanese power has declined, China has emerged as a dominant global power, Russian power has morphed as it substituted conventional arms with digital ones, terrorist groups have transformed into states, tech companies have established foreign ministries while instability seems to dominate global politics. From Brexit and Trumpism to ecological devastation, uncertainty is the new norm. The question that emerges is—does Nye's concept of soft power hold relevance in 2019?

Some have attempted to refashion the concept of soft power by introducing new terms such as “smart power” or “sharp power.” Still others have attempted to integrate Nye's concept into other fields of study. Such is the case with growing literature on public diplomacy. And it is within the public diplomacy milieu that soft power has become banal. I do not mean to suggest that Nye's original term is banal but rather that soft power is now often employed in a banal manner. Countless studies in the arena of public diplomacy employ Nye's term as an afterthought. Such studies tend to include an introductory paragraph in which soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding are all thrown together generating a cacophony of terms with little actual meaning or insight.

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Others have gone down the rabbit hole of exploring the relationship between the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding. Here, scholars debate whether public

diplomacy is a soft power tool, or whether soft power is the result of public diplomacy activities, or whether nation branding is an instrument for generating soft power resources. Yet here again the conversation often becomes dull with studies merely replicating the same arguments in, dare I say, a banal manner. The reason is that such debates tend to be detached from the world around us. As Nye argued in 1990, one cannot discuss terms such as power, soft power or public diplomacy without first taking into account the global political environment. Only by understanding the current and future state of the world, can we approach a meaning of soft power that is anything but banal.

To understand the world, it is often useful to listen to world leaders who have lost their ability to lead. Once out of office, and shunned by the media, such leaders tend to offer insight that may escape scholars. Such is the case with Tony Blair. In a recent video, Blair advocated that the UK stay in the EU. His logic is fascinating. According to Blair, by 2040 the world will be dominated by three major powers—the U.S., China and India. A mix of military strength, technological advancements and population size will increase the power of each of the three states.

In such a world, the ability of small and middle powers, such as the UK, to advance their foreign policy agenda will be limited. The UK will be but another in a long line of middle powers looking to ensure its prosperity amid a field of giants. For this reason, nations such as the UK will need to form temporary coalitions and permanent alliances. Blair views the EU as such an alliance, one that increases the power of each member state as they collectively bargain opposite the three giants—China, India and the U.S. Yet states such as the UK will also need to form temporary coalitions to advance their foreign policy goals be it multilateral forums such as the UN, or during direct negotiations opposite one of the giants (e.g., France and the UK collectively barraging opposite the U.S. on trade incentives).

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *Part two of this series looks at how soft power can be re-conceptualized and the role of perceived morality in a state's soft power resources. This article was originally published in full on the author's blog, [Exploring Digital Diplomacy](#).*
