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Jun 16, 2022 by [Lisa Tam](#), [Soojin Kim](#)

The Cause and Effect of Self-Centered Diplomacy ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This piece is based on the authors' articles, "The power of sharing power: Presidential character, power mutuality, and country reputation," published December 2020 in *Public Relations Review* and "What is the power of balancing power? Exploring perceived discrepancy in relational power and its effects," published January 2021 in *International Journal of Communication*.

In international relations, the word "power" is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is necessary for countries to expressly defend their own interests, requiring them to use power to influence ("power over") counterpart countries. On the other hand, it is also necessary for countries to cooperate with counterpart countries for mutual gains, requiring them to build consensus ("power with").

Understanding relational power is crucial for diplomatic relations. The concept of "relational power"

is associated with the asymmetrical distribution of resources between two actors, resulting in the domination of the stronger over the weaker. But acts of relational domination can be remedied by balancing the relations in pursuit of mutual interests between the involved actors.

The definition of diplomacy emphasizes that while diplomatic activities should seek to advance a country's interests without the risk and expense of using force, there are times when coercive threats are made to impose unilateral solutions on counterpart countries.

During U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, its "America first" foreign policy stance advocated for diplomatic unilateralism. However, it resulted in little appeal overseas. It was described to have resulted in "America alone," as the administration pulled the U.S. out of key international agreements.

The lack of balance in relational power can be costly. When a country seeks to prioritize its own interests over another country's interests, foreign publics can evaluate such power dynamics negatively and in turn can become adversarial publics against imports from the counterpart country.

This self-focused diplomacy style can also be found in Chinese government. Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, China has adopted a new "wolf-warrior diplomacy" approach to defend its national interests assertively and aggressively. Chinese diplomats have been using Twitter to defend their home country online. This approach has resulted in negative reactions from international audiences. Australia-China relations have hit their "lowest ebb in decades."

The unilateral approach in traditional diplomacy contradicts the premise of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy should *ideally* be practiced to promote a balance between a country's own interests and the interests of its key publics in counterpart countries. As building relationships with foreign publics is central to winning the hearts and minds of foreign publics in public diplomacy, countries should convey the message that "the opinions of others matter."

Despite this, such an ideal of pursuing "shared" goals and "shared" interests is easier said than done. On one hand, countries may invest in public diplomacy programs such as cultural and educational exchanges to promote shared interests. On the other hand, foreign publics observe how countries and their leaders seek to balance or dominate each other in diplomatic relationships. This balance or dominance is portrayed through relational acts (or the lack of relational acts), such as showing concerns for the other's interests (or ignoring the other's opinions).

To examine the causes and effects of this phenomenon, we conducted survey studies in Australia to explore Australians' observations and evaluations of the relational dynamics between Australia and the U.S. We explored the extent to which they perceived the U.S. to be seeking and pursuing shared power with Australia ("power mutuality") and the extent of

discrepancy between Australia and the U.S. in terms of how they act and communicate to balance power with each other (“power discrepancy”).

We made the following key findings in our paper on “power mutuality:”

- The more positively the U.S. leader is evaluated (high in “presidential character”), the more highly the U.S. is perceived to be seeking and pursuing shared power with Australia (high in “power mutuality”).
- When the U.S. is rated highly for seeking and pursuing shared power with Australia (high in “power mutuality”), it is also evaluated favorably for both the governmental as well as the non-governmental aspects of U.S. country reputation (high in “country reputation”).

We also made the following key findings in our paper on “power discrepancy:”

- When the U.S. is perceived to seek to dominate Australia more than Australia seeks to dominate the U.S. (high in “power discrepancy”), the U.S. is also perceived to be an economic threat to Australia (high in “perceived economic threat”).
- Those who perceive the U.S. to be an economic threat (high in “perceived economic threat”) tend to show a strong preference for Australian products over U.S. imports (high in “consumer ethnocentrism”).
- Those who show a strong preference for Australian products over U.S. imports (high in “consumer ethnocentrism”) are also likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication about U.S. products (high in “negative word-of-mouth intention) and boycott U.S. products (high in “boycott intention”).

The findings of our studies have operationalized the concept of “relational power” as a country’s use of a relational strategy to relate to another country (through acts such as considering the other country’s interests) and/or to influence another country (through acts such as taking advantage of the other country).

The lack of balance in relational power can be costly. When a country seeks to prioritize its own interests over another country’s interests, foreign publics can evaluate such power dynamics negatively and in turn can become adversarial publics against imports from the counterpart country. At the same time, evaluations of such power dynamics can be affected by foreign publics’ perceptions of a country’s leader.

Although it is naive to think that countries will not put their self-interests first, they should influence through “attraction” by showing an ability and willingness to work with other countries to attain maximum “mutual” gains.

Findings from our study highlight that foreign publics do not only evaluate a country’s image or reputation but also its relational strategy toward their home countries. Rather than just investing heavily in communication campaigns or public diplomacy programs to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics, it is important to keep in mind that foreign publics also observe

and evaluate how countries demonstrate relational acts. Their perceptions of power dynamics between their home countries and counterpart countries can affect their attitudes and behaviors toward counterpart countries.
