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Oct 16, 2023 by [David Ellwood](#)

The Future of UK Soft Power: an Endless Agony in London ^[1]

Introduction

The British Foreign Policy Research Group was founded in 2016-17, in the aftermath of Brexit, by Tom Cargill, an expert in foreign policy, trade and international development. Its official purpose is, “to work as the connective tissue between the UK’s policy-makers, businesses, institutions, and ordinary citizens, to promote the connectivity and understanding needed to underpin Britain’s national resilience and global leadership in the 21st Century.” It is particularly keen to tap into the evolution of national opinion on key issues of contemporary UK foreign policy.

In 2020 it set up a specific *Soft Power Research Group*. This “is co-convened by BFPG and the British Council, and is a network of UK soft power organizations, covering sectors from

culture and sport, to accountancy and international development.” Cities, theatres, libraries and museums are all involved. Horse racing is the most prominent sporting sector. “The mission of the UK Soft Power Group,” says its website, “is to strengthen the United Kingdom’s soft power capabilities, to advance its global influence and to represent and promote its value to the UK Government.”

A report

In June 2023 the Group published *The Future of UK Soft Power: Building a Strategic Framework*. This report takes very seriously the original Joe Nye definition of soft power, i.e. as a tool for mobilizing a nation’s moral and cultural assets so that they can be leveraged to support the ongoing foreign policy goals of governments— any governments. In the UK’s case, the assets available, says the report, including the nation’s science and technology base, its education system, its ability to produce world-leading standards, regulations and models of governance, its sporting institutions and successes, its culture in all its globally recognized forms (including the monarchy), and the English language. For each of these sectors, the report presents detailed evidence supporting their presumed function and effectiveness.

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The report highlights the soft power challenges produced in particular by the Chinese and Russian governments, but also emphasizes just how much investment nations like Germany and France are devoting to their cultural presence in the world, with Germany allegedly integrating cultural relations “into the third pillar of its foreign policy agenda since the 1970s,” according to the report. In general, the report perceives an ever more intense competition for influence via soft power across the global scene, and goes into detail on the costs to Britain’s own soft power influence and access to Europe, as a result of Brexit.

While acknowledging that recent governments have tried to compensate for this with their “Global Britain” narrative, the report also details the cuts to the British Council and UK foreign aid programs, which have accompanied this rhetoric. Short-termism and “the absence of a shared strategic vision,” according to the report, have allegedly long blighted official efforts to coordinate national soft power activities and assets.

In conclusion, the report states that “it is clear that a ‘home’ for soft power within Government is needed to enable the sector to feed into strategy-making,” as well as to “provide guidance to soft power institutions on opportunities for the sector to contribute to Government priorities.” The newly recast Foreign Office should provide a high-profile Minister—a “Soft Power Champion”—to run all this and ensure it gets the attention it deserves in and out of government, across the diplomatic service and in the cities and regions of the nation.

The changing context

For many years now, a corner of the UK governing class has dedicated exceptional attention to the soft power concept. After the success of the 2012 London Olympics, the British Council was quick to produce reports on the topic starting in 2013, just as the House of Lords was holding special hearings, run by its Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence. The British Academy produced its own pamphlet, *The Art of Attraction*, written by Cambridge academics Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle; and in 2016 the first major book on the subject appeared: *British Public Diplomacy and Soft Power* by James Pamment (Cham, Switzerland, Springer Nature: 2016). Yet mainstream media discussions about Britain's profile in the world ignored all this, seeming to believe official influence was all about the British Council, the BBC World Service and foreign aid.

Things changed after Brexit. It was in October 2016 that the May government launched the concept of "Global Britain," and this notion was taken up eagerly by her successor, Boris Johnson, hence his highly performative demonstrations of support for Ukraine after the Russian invasion of February 2022. But he was also the Prime Minister who started scaling back the Foreign Office, the British Council and much else in his effort to find funds to support a renewal and expansion of the UK's armed forces, including their nuclear bombs.

When a grand *Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy* appeared in March 2021, although mentioned as a British feature in the introduction to the policy paper, soft power was given less than two out of a total of one hundred pages. Geopolitics and geoeconomics, science and technology, were all the rest. A *Refresher* edition of this Review was produced in March 2023. At its very beginning, this document lists the 11 "sub-strategy" papers it builds on all defense, intelligence and geopolitics-related. Soft power gets no mention. Even as the Soft Power Group declares its wish to hang its ambitions on these official pronouncements, once again soft power's presence was minimal in the new paper, appearing right at the end, one paragraph out of 63 pages.

Yet for all the government bluster and rhetoric on defense and security, as recently as August 2023, the conservative *Times* was denouncing years of incompetence and underfunding in this sector. In the same days, the center-left *Guardian* wrote of "both the soft power and the hard power of the UK [having] been diminished on the Tories' watch." Andrew Mitchell, the development minister, has confessed that we are no longer a "development superpower" because of savage cuts to the aid budget. The global reach of the BBC's World Service is declining amid reductions in its output and staff. The *Integrated Review* promised precisely the opposite.

Living outside the country, one is intensely aware that the only "Global Britain" that truly exists is the version presented by the Soft Power Group, but also by books such as *Britain's Persuaders: Soft Power in a Hard World*, by Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar (London: I.B.Tauris, 2022) (Reviewed by me in *Political Quarterly*, 2/22). It is the Britain of the Premier League and Wimbledon, of its creative industries and great universities, of its life sciences and cosmopolitan capital, of its legal system, media and grand Royal ceremonies. While those in political and military command steadfastly refuse to learn that "you cannot be a global [geopolitical] power on the cheap," as a former US Secretary of the Navy told a BBC interviewer after the Falklands drama 40 years ago, in the geopolitics of culture, Britain remains indeed a superpower.
