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More-Than-Human Soft Power: Exploring Futures in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Suspended above a forest pond in Finland, a curtain of dangling seeds and dried butterfly cocoons sways in the air. “Sonic Seeds,” a sound installation by artist Tania Candiani, is thousands of miles from the physical origins of the traditional rattles that inspired it. Yet at the 2025 Helsinki Biennial, the invocation of indigenous Mexican ceremonial dances continues, extending into the more-than-human world. In doing so, the work transcends human centrality and exemplifies an emerging pattern of influence, which I define as “more-than-human soft power”: the deliberate inclusion of nonhuman actors, ecologies and multispecies relationships as agents of cultural and diplomatic influence in the international sphere.

The pivotal theory of soft power, originally conceived by the late international relations titan Joseph Nye, defines how perception mediates power dynamics between states through culture, values and policies. While this prescient concept focuses on human actors, the post-Cold War conditions that originally cultivated it have been outpaced by overlapping existential crises such as climate change, ecological collapse, worldwide pandemics, and mass displacement. These calamities surpass traditional frameworks, calling for an expansion of soft power beyond anthropocentric limits.

Framing a Broader Theory of Soft Power

Today, cultural leverage remains largely tethered to a human-centric and state-oriented model relying on content made by and for humans—such as art, film, music, cuisine and elite exchanges—to project collective identity and national image. While still relevant, many initiatives have also become commercialized or performative, emphasizing mass consumerism and rarely recognizing the ethical impacts that exist in the backgrounds of what they promote. Nonhuman life is still largely treated as symbolic accessories in greenwashed backdrops, tourism mascots, or simply objectified in well-intentioned expressions such as “panda diplomacy,” undermining the very legitimacy that soft power seeks to build.

Not all soft power programs aim to address environmental issues, but it is no longer an analytical stretch to realize that every geopolitical context is now inextricably linked to ecological dilemmas. The late philosopher [Bruno Latour](#) observed, climate “is at the heart of all *geopolitical* issues,” a reality that makes human-exclusive perspectives increasingly out of touch. Treating human-caused environmental issues as fringe now appears hollow, manipulative or obsolete. As such, theories and belief systems that cling to anthropocentric frameworks are already archaic-adjacent.

Credibility and security progressively hinge on planetary awareness and responsiveness. [Nicholas J. Cull](#), a leading historian of public diplomacy, coined the term “reputational security”—the intrinsic and reality-based relationship between national image and the scope of a country's influence. This concept links the possibilities of soft power to the concrete outcomes of hard power by demonstrating how a positive image turns into strength and

ultimately constructs the conditions for strategic advantage. Reputational security is a significant incentive for a paradigmatic reframing of influence, particularly on a collective scale. The credibility of global actors will inevitably diminish if persuasive power is exercised without regard for environmental context, chipping away at reputation and worldwide standing, and exposing both state- and nonstate actors to security risks that once seemed outside the spectrum of soft power.

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Soft power, in this context, is not simply a supplementary tool of persuasion. It becomes part of the collective infrastructure that signals decisive vision and cultural competence in a world defined by both risk and interconnection.

More-Than-Human Soft Power in Action

Contemporary art is one sector that is centering more-than-human perspectives with growing frequency, utilizing major exhibitions to challenge anthropocentric norms and encourage discourse on the agency of nonhuman beings. These developments are particularly evident in a growing number of biennials and exhibitions, many supported by the host governments.

- Helsinki Biennial (Finland, 2025): *Shelter: Below and Beyond, Becoming and Belonging*: Among the biennial's sites on Vallisaari Island, a formerly off-limits Russian military base, the exhibition repurposes a setting once defined by conflict into one centered on interspecies refuge while displacing human centrism.
- *Why Look at Animals? A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives* (Greece, 2025): In a region often associated with classical humanism, the exhibition reorients public attention toward speciesism—not just about how humans view other animals, but how those animals are sovereign in their own right.
- Sea Art Festival (South Korea, 2021): *Non-/Human Assemblages*: Platformed historically marginalized perspectives through an ecological and multispecies lens, reimagining the local coastal landscape through an exploration of site-specific public art inspired by the region's maritime traditions and oceanic ecologies.

Though each exhibition is rooted in a distinct cultural and ecological context, they converge in elevating nonhuman actors as central to the global narrative. Together, they exemplify how art can channel rising concepts across borders, fostering ethical reflection and environmental consciousness beyond human-centered frameworks. The represented communities become participants in an act of cultural diffusion, which opens channels for transnational cooperation on shared challenges and long-term goals, even among states with strained relations.

Relational Leverage

While the exhibitions highlighted are not direct expressions of state policy, they operate within a potent ecosystem where innovation and information circulate across overlapping spheres. In a form of cultural shifting akin to Amitav Acharya's concept of "norm localization," artists, curators and publics contribute to multilateral narratives and practices, often rooted in indigenous and non-Western epistemologies. By adapting global norms to local contexts, they extend influence beyond the exhibitions themselves, shaping public discourse and informing the structural conditions in which both public and geopolitical agendas evolve.

Influence, as anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing notes, often emerges not from centralized design but from contingent, interwoven connections that unfold through time and place. These shared values introduce new forms of relational leverage through disparate actors in distinct contexts with mutual objectives, revealing why states are deliberately attentive to—and invested in—these international exhibitions, even if they do not directly control them.

By recasting the transmission of culture, values and policies not simply as the projection of human identity but as the capacity for alignment with post-anthropocentric principles, more-than-human soft power can reframe and expand traditional public diplomacy, opening the path to more-than-human diplomacy.

Looking Forward

Informed by my ongoing research into more-than-human soft power and diplomacy, these reflections envision a world where influence adapts to planetary challenges. Joseph Nye not only introduced the concept of soft power—he also left room for its evolution: "The question is not whether theory is relevant to practice, but which theories and how aware practical people are of the origins and limitations of the theories they inevitably use." Greenwashed slogans may persist, but the greater failure in this moment of visible epistemic transition would be to confine soft power to an anachronistic projection of unilateral human identities—a sliver, at best, of what constitutes planetary life and the ecological conditions that underpin all forms of power.

More-than-human soft power is not only a theoretical expansion, but a call to reimagine relational strategy—one that helps build the cumulative capacity needed to confront global breakdowns driven by both the mythology of human centrality and the systemic machinery that threatens the core interests of the entire planet. If individuals, diplomats, governments, and institutions alike exercised their influence with the more-than-human world in mind, we would move closer to safeguarding those interests—not through domination but through stewardship of the interconnections that sustain our shared world, and in doing so, open possibilities for collaborative research, innovative policymaking and global dialogue.
