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Strategic Impatience and the Undoing of American Soft Power ^[1]

There is a growing argument—implicit in policy, explicit in practice—that soft power has outlived its usefulness as an instrument of American statecraft.


Defined as the ability to shape preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, soft power appears increasingly out of step with a foreign policy that prizes disruption and aggressive domination.

The first months of the current administration offer a stark illustration.

In rapid succession, the administration moved to dismantle key elements of U.S. soft power: eviscerating foreign assistance programs, restricting international student visas, constraining educational and cultural exchanges, shuttering international broadcasting, and curtailing interagency efforts to counter disinformation.

These are not marginal adjustments. They represent a systematic contraction of the United States' capacity to make a credible and compelling case for its policies and behaviors in the

global information space.

And yet, in a striking contradiction, the administration's recently published National Security Strategy reaffirms the importance of maintaining America's "unrivaled soft power through which we exercise positive influence throughout the world that furthers our interests." 

So why the disconnect between rhetoric and reality?

The answer, I would argue, is that the administration lacks the strategic patience required to produce that "positive influence."

Soft power, as Joseph Nye reminded us, is "hard" to wield effectively. It depends on stable, predictable messaging and the cultivation of relationships across societies. It requires investment in education, exchange, and information ecosystems that operate over years—often decades. It does not produce immediate outcomes. It is difficult to measure. And it is rarely attributable to a single policy or actor. In short, it requires consistency, humility, and above all, patience.

None of these requirements are in the administration's foreign policy playbook, which is short term, transactional and oriented toward demonstrable gains.

The current moment is not entirely unprecedented. While the present administration's behavior represents a particularly sharp break, it builds on a longer trajectory of ambivalence toward public diplomacy.

Since the 1999 integration of the U.S. Information Agency into the State Department, successive administrations—Republican and Democratic alike—have underinvested in the public diplomacy institutions and capabilities that support American soft power. Budget constraints, personnel and resource deficits, and disempowering leadership gaps have consistently undermined critical USG information outreach and influence efforts, signaling a debilitating lack of appreciation for their value.

It is also important to note that this failure of strategic patience is not unique to the United States. The American government's retreat from the use of soft power tools to project national power and legitimacy is playing out against the backdrop of the rise of authoritarianism and global pushback against the liberal international order. U.S. allies and partners around the world are confronting similar challenges.

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Here are three prerequisites to the restoration of strategic patience in soft power as an instrument of U.S. statecraft.

First, the recognition that public diplomacy as a soft power instrument has always been a hard

sell. Since the Cold War establishment of USG public diplomacy institutions, its advocates have struggled with the defense of its relevance and effectiveness. Moments of acute insecurity have repeatedly triggered pointed reassessments of how the United States projects power, credibility, and legitimacy. Each technological shift—from radio to satellite television to digital media platforms—has introduced new uncertainties about how influence operates, forcing a reevaluation of the tools used to defend U.S. interests in the global information space. This continuous cycle of reinvention and recalibration is one of the defining characteristics of public diplomacy. It is also one of its greatest vulnerabilities.

Second, the acknowledgement that soft power and sharp power coexist on the spectrum of information statecraft. All societies, from democratic to authoritarian engage in propaganda and information manipulation in defense of national interests. This is a proper use of the coercive element of the information instrument of statecraft, especially in the face of existential threat. The challenge is to deconflict public diplomacy, or the persuasive use of information, from the coercive to retain credibility and influence with key audiences. Soft power gives audiences agency. Sharp power takes it away.

Third, the awareness that the current administration's retreat from soft power is likely to have deepened American vulnerability to unfavorable or disruptive foreign influences. The consequences are global as well. By stepping back from its role as a leading advocate of openness, transparency, and human rights, the United States creates an influence vacuum. That vacuum will not remain empty. China and Russia, among others, are busily filling the breach, with significant consequences for U.S. national security interests.

The administration recently lauded America's "unmatched soft power and cultural influence" as a "world leading asset." But if it is going to take advantage of America's "unmatched" soft power capabilities, it had better act fast to start restoring them. Because there are no real winners in a global retreat from soft power. Not the United States. Not its allies. Not even its competitors.

A world in which strategies of persuasion are eclipsed by an overreliance on threat and aggression is a world that is more volatile, less predictable, and ultimately less secure for all. We don't need more or "better" soft power tools. We need a commitment to the persuasive function of soft power and the strategic patience that it requires.
