ARGUMENT

The Rise and Fall of Soft Power

Joseph Nye's concept lost relevance, but China could bring it back.

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Nearly three decades ago, American political scientist and former Clinton administration official Joseph Nye put forth an idea in the pages of Foreign Policy. He called it soft power, a concept that caught fire and went on to define the post-Cold War era.

Nye argued that, although the United States seemed relatively weaker than it had been at the end of World War II, the country still had a unique source of power to bring to bear. Beyond using military power "to do things and control others," Nye later explained, "to get others to do what they otherwise would not," the United States could draw on its soft power—its noncoercive power—to cement its leadership position in the world.

Hard power was easy to measure, of course. We can count the number of missiles and tanks and troops. (As Soviet leader Joseph Stalin is famously said to have asked, "How many divisions does the Pope have?") But what was the content of America's soft power? Nye put it into three categories: cultural, ideological, and institutional. In these areas, the world would want to be like the United States. And that pull, in turn, would help the nation shape the world. "If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes." That is, he argued, "if its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow." For Nye, the basis of U.S. soft power was liberal democratic politics, free market economics, and fundamental values such as human rights—in essence, liberalism.

In the quarter-century that followed Nye's conception of soft power, world affairs played out within the broad contours of his predictions. After the United States won the Cold War, American liberalism had unparalleled appeal around the world. Everyone wanted to vote, everyone wanted jeans, and everyone wanted free speech —so much so that the political theorist Francis Fukuyama coined the phrase "the

market capitalist economies, based on rankings published by the *Wall Street Journal* and the Heritage Foundation, grew from over 40 to close to 100. Never before in human history had so many countries given up so many old political and economic arrangements for one new system. Nye might have called it soft power. I call it the great conversion.

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In the realm of international relations, just as Nye advocated, the United States led a drive to establish and enlarge international institutions that would support its new order, such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. It also expanded its system of alliances to bring former competitors further into the fold.

Things played out similarly in Europe, where the European Union played a role similar to that of the United States. For an entire generation, the world watched in astonishment as scores of countries voluntarily gave up increasingly large portions of their sovereignty to subject themselves to shared sets of rules based on the same liberal values. Brussels's proposition dovetailed perfectly with Nye's; all member states and potential member states wanted what the Western European core wanted. In fact, at one point, it seemed as though everyone wanted what Western Europe wanted: even Turkey, a large Muslim country with a very different culture and set of values, and Ukraine, which risked war with Russia in its attempt to join.

Until recently, in other words, it really did look as if the 21st century would belong to the United States, the West, and their global soft power empire. But it was not to be so.

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Several things went wrong. For one, the products didn't really suit the customers. From the "third wave" democracies of the 1970s and 1980s to the Eastern European states that rushed to join the EU and NATO after the Cold War to, most recently, the

One theory for why is that the neoliberal economic revolution, which was part and parcel of the soft power era, weakened states instead of strengthening them. The market was never a uniting force—the idea that it could be an all-encompassing mechanism to provide growth, good governance, and societal well-being was an illusion to begin with. The German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck elaborated on this idea at a conference in Taiwan this summer. Soft power globalization, he warned, is simply "outpacing the capacity of national societies and international organizations to build effective institutions of economic and political governance." In turn, "increasing debt, rising inequality, and unstable growth" is leading to "a general crisis of political-economic governability." That crisis has resulted in internal revolts on soft power's home turf. Streeck calls it "taking back control." You might call it the rise of America's Donald Trump, Hungary's Viktor Orban, or Italy's Five Star Movement and the League.

So far, such revolts have resulted in anti-liberal governing majorities in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and the United States—and that is just among developed countries. Such is the sorry state of soft power liberalism that it has had trouble holding on even in places where it should have had the best chances of surviving.

Second, the United States, and by extension Europe, grew so confident in the potency of their soft power that they went into overdrive converting the rest of the world to their systems. As Anthony Lake—who served as national security advisor to the United States' first post-Cold War president, Bill Clinton—said, America's future prosperity relied on "promot[ing] democracy abroad." Such a policy of enlargement would succeed the Cold War doctrine of containment. That idea became even more extreme when President George W. Bush famously proclaimed the United States "a moral nation" and said that "moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place." This was soft power on steroids!

In his recent book, *Has the West Lost It?*, Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean academic and former diplomat, calls all this Western hubris. Indeed, hubris may be the only appropriate word for what transpired. Confidence in the potency and legitimacy of soft power was so great that tremendous hard power was deployed in its name. The Iraq War was the most prominent example. And the intervention in Libya, with European support, was the most recent. In both cases, the United States and Europe were left worse off.

Third, the hubris of soft power led to the illusion that soft power could somehow exist on its own. But even Nye never said that. In reality, soft power is and always will be an extension of hard power. Imagine if the United States had become poor, destitute, and weak like many of the new democracies around the world but had retained its liberal values and institutions. Few other countries would continue to want to be like it. The idea that soft power could perhaps be effective on its own perhaps underpinned the fatally mistaken belief that Iraq would automatically become a liberal democracy after Saddam Hussein was toppled.

The European project, perhaps even more so, was built on a false understanding of soft power. For many decades, Europe was essentially a free rider in the soft power game; the United States guaranteed its security, and its economic well-being was reliant on the U.S.-led global economic order. With the United States now less interested in providing either—and focusing more on hard power—Europe is facing real challenges.

The fourth problem is that soft power is actually very fragile and easily turned. For a good couple of decades, soft power, compounded by the internet and social media, really seemed unstoppable. It was behind numerous color revolutions that overthrew governments and dismembered states. The West cheered when Facebook and Google spread the fire of revolution in Cairo's Tahrir Square and Kiev's Maidan, but it wasn't so happy when Russia used the same in a bid to subvert politics in the West.

When the West was confident of its soft power, it cherished the belief that the more open a society, the better. But now, calls for censorship of parts of internet are heard routinely in the media and in legislative chambers. Internet giants are under tremendous political and social pressure to self-censor their content. And many, including Facebook, YouTube, and Apple, are doing so. And so, one of the bedrocks of liberalism's soft power—free speech—has fallen from favor.

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Now, hard power is everywhere. The United States is no doubt the biggest player in this game: Fire and fury to North Korea, trade wars on everyone, gutting the WTO, and using domestic laws to punish foreign companies for doing business with a third country. The list goes on. For its part, Europe looks like a deer in headlights. As some, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, call for standing firm against

And, of course, there is Russia. By adroitly using its limited but still considerable hard power, Russia achieved the most significant territorial gain by force since the end of World War II, taking Crimea from Ukraine. Meanwhile, Moscow's forceful actions in Syria changed the course of the civil war there to its favor.

There are also small hard powers. The most significant is North Korea, whose leader, Kim Jong Un, after being vilified by the Western world for so long, met Trump as an equal this summer. It is unlikely that he would have accomplished such a feat had he not built nuclear weapons. So far, Kim's hard power play is paying off handsomely.

There is little doubt, in other words, that the era of soft power has given way to an era of hard power—and that is dangerous. For centuries, hard power politics resulted in immeasurable human suffering. Just in the 20th century alone, hard power drove two world wars and a long Cold War that threatened to annihilate mankind.

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It is possible to aspire to something better this time. And this is where China may come in. In Nye's original soft power article, China rarely came up. And when it did, it was either lumped in with the Soviet Union or brushed off as a country lacking any ability, hard or soft, to challenge Western dominance.

Thirty years later, Nye's omission seems strange. In the era of soft power, China was the only major country that bucked the trend. It integrated itself into the post-World War II international order by expanding deep and broad cultural and economic ties with virtually all countries in the world. It is now the largest trading nation in the world and in history. But it steadfastly refused to become a customer of Western soft power. It engineered its own highly complex transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, yet it refused to allow the market to rise above the state. It rejected Western definitions of democracy, freedom, and human rights, and it retained and strengthened its one-party political system. In soft power terms, China did not agree to want what the West wanted—culturally, ideologically, or

world by purchasing power parity. In the process of doing so, it lifted 700 million people out of poverty. Harvard University's Graham Allison calls this miracle the "pyramid of poverty." Forty years ago, nine out 10 Chinese lived under the "extreme poverty line" set by the World Bank. Today, the pyramid has been flipped, with only around 10 percent of Chinese living under that line. Without that reversal, global poverty would likely have increased rather than decreased over the last several decades.

Such achievements could be the content of a new kind of soft power.

Nearly two decades ago, Chinese grand strategist Zheng Bijian coined the term "peaceful rise" to articulate China's aspirations for itself. Over the years, the notion of peaceful rise has encountered much suspicion. Critics, for example, point to tensions in the South China Sea to show that China's intentions are not, in fact, peaceful. And Allison has warned that, whatever their intentions, the United States and China could still fall into a Thucydides trap, in which the strength of a rising power (China) strikes fear in the incumbent power (the United States), resulting in war. In his recent book, *Destined for War*, Allison pointed out that most of the 16 such cases of a rising power in history resulted in bloodshed.

However, stepping back, it is plain to see that China's peaceful rise has already happened. It is a fact on the ground, as evidenced by the enormity of its economy, its trading volume, and, yes, its increasing military strength. Compared to the rise of other great powers in history—the Athenian Empire, the Roman Empire, the British Empire, America's manifest destiny, modern Germany, France, and Japan, all of which were accompanied by tremendous violence—China's rise so far has been bigger and faster than them all. And yet, it has happened peacefully. No invasion of any other country, no colonization, no war. Yes, Allison may be right that the psychology of the Thucydides trap is still true. But in substance, the world has already passed the point at which such a conflict could be contemplated responsibly.

And that is perhaps why China is now refocusing from hard power to soft, even as the rest of the world has seemed to go in the opposite direction. President Xi Jinping, for example, has called for "a community of shared destiny," in which nations are allowed their own development paths while working to increase interconnectedness. In the policy arena, such soft power mostly takes the form of the Belt and Road Initiative, which leverages China's massive capital and capacity to drive infrastructure-led development in other countries to spur economic growth that

the downfalls that approach entails: overreach, the illusion of universal appeals, and internal and external backlashes.

In the post-Cold War era, the West linked soft power and liberalism, but that coupling was never necessary. In the next century, it may well be soft power decoupled from ideology that could rule the day. There is no illusion, not least in Beijing, that any kind of soft power can exist and succeed without hard power. But China's proposition is more accommodating of difference. By not forcing other countries into its own mold, China's new form of soft power can mean a more peaceful 21st century. The world should embrace it.

This article is adapted from a lecture given at the University of Bologna in June 2018. An Italian translation of the lecture was published in the Italian journal Limes.

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