

FPC Briefing: A 'New Hope' as the 'Empire Strikes Back'- British Soft Power in 2013 Dr Simon Mabon

In November 2012 a Swedish magazine, *Monocle*, published an annual report listing the most powerful nations in terms of soft power. The report, compiled through a matrix of 50 factors, placed Britain top, reflecting a successful 2012 for various facets of British life and leading to the headline in *Forbes* 'The Empire Strikes Back'¹. Much discussion of soft power in contemporary debates has centred on the US and China, given the focus of many - both within the academy and policy realm - upon the major powers in the international system. As such, other states and their soft power potential have often been overlooked. Yet many states that do not occupy such lofty positions within an international system defined in terms of hard power have the capacity to influence proceedings on the world stage.

Perhaps the most direct cause for Britain's move up the rankings was the London Olympic Games, where Lord Coe stated "London, we did it right"² and President Obama referred to the games as "brilliant"³. However, the success of the Olympics was not solely responsible for increasing British soft power. Rather, the success of *Skyfall*, the latest film in the James Bond franchise, coupled with the popularity and huge record sales of Adele's *21*, Bradley Wiggins winning the Tour de France and Andy Murray winning the US Open have all contributed to increasing British influence in soft power stakes. This can also be combined with the increasingly popular English Premier League, with games shown across the world and US TV giant NBC recently purchasing the rights to screen games, with discussions taking place to renew a contract with China's Super Sports channel⁴. The immediate consequence of this is that in 2013, British foreign policy has the capacity to promote positive change in the world, brought about through soft, rather than hard power. This briefing explores how this may occur, with a particular focus upon Britain's increasing influence within the Middle East.

Soft Power: A useful tool?

Soft power, a term initially defined by Joseph Nye, is the ability to influence the behaviour of others in order to get the outcomes that a state desires, as a consequence of seduction and attraction rather than coercion⁵. This is contrasted with the more conventional moves of incentives and disincentives, such as economic benefits and sanctions and military posturing, typically employed by Realist strategies⁶. This seduction and attraction is achieved through possessing cultural resources, transmitting values and through public diplomacy. The benefit of possessing a soft power potential is that a state would

*encounter less resistance to their wishes. If a country's culture and ideology are attractive, others more willingly follow. If a country can shape international rules that are consistent with its interests and values, its actions will more likely appear legitimate in the eyes of others. If it uses institutions and follows rules that encourage other countries to channel or limit their activities in ways it prefers, it will not need as many costly carrots and sticks.*⁷

¹ Kenneth Rapoza, *The Empire Strikes Back: U.K. beats U.S. in 'Soft Power', Survey Says* (Forbes, 18.11.12) Available from: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2012/11/18/the-empire-strikes-back-u-k-beats-u-s-in-soft-power-survey-says/>

² 4 News, *London 2012 Olympics: 'We did it right'* (4 News, 13.08.12) Available from: <http://www.channel4.com/news/london-2012-olympics-we-did-it-right>

³ Jamie McGinnes, *Obama praises 'brilliant' games* (The Times, 12.08.12) Available from: <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/sport/olympics/article1102952.ece>

⁴ David Bond, *Premier League boosted by foreign TV cash* (BBC, 30.10.12) Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/davidbond/2012/10/premier_league_boosted_by_fore.html

⁵ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).p6..

⁶ See the work of Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, John Mearshimer amongst others.

⁷ Nye, Op. Cit., pp10-11.

One can immediately see that the concept of soft power stresses non-material, intangible factors that are often omitted from traditional Realist forms of analysis, which tend to focus upon (hard) power politics. Non-material factors permit actors to increase their legitimacy, through increasing cultural resources, continuing the transmission of their values and through public diplomacy.

However, there are several serious problems with the term 'soft power'. The main issue is how one is able to measure what influence a state has, and where that influence emerges from. Given that soft power is often seen to be intangible, stemming from norms and cultural practices, this appears to be a rather pressing concern. Furthermore, for which audience is soft power used, for domestic or external audiences? However, these are issues to be aware of, rather than to resolve here; indeed, many scholars and practitioners are currently using the term without serious regard for the aforementioned problems.

Soft Power in Action

Despite the aforementioned problem, it is possible for soft power to be a useful concept. In exploring its use, one must question for whom soft power is useful, i.e. will soft power have a direct influence on particular actors embroiled in conflict (of whatever nature)? If not, then how does soft power operate, and how can David Cameron and William Hague wield British soft power more effectively in 2013?

It is unlikely that British soft power would be able to resolve conflicts independently of other variables. Take for instance the Israel-Palestine Peace Process: Regardless of any affinity that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu may hold for the British, this affinity, or respect for British soft power would not independently result in Netanyahu, or any other world leader for that matter, resolving conflicts that are not in their interest to resolve. Indeed, soft power will most likely not directly override *real politik*.

So what then is the true value of soft power? It is, in my view, the ability to shape the views of other states not directly involved in conflicts, and thus to put additional pressure on actors to change their behaviour and resolve conflicts. Post-Cold War the nature of conflict has changed, with battles occurring directly and indirectly, namely in an attempt to secure legitimacy. Given this indirect conflict, soft power and the ability to shape narratives, but also to reject narratives, and have other actors follow your position is invaluable. Thus, coming from a position of power means that an actor has an ability to shape narratives in a particular way, which is often seen in a more legitimate way if emanating from a position of soft power. In an increasingly interconnected world where news proliferates easily through internationalised media and social media outlets, this legitimacy is of paramount importance. This can be seen during the conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2012, which spilled into the social media realm, seen as an attempt to transmit values and facilitate public diplomacy.

However, there is also a form of soft power that is self-perpetuating, in that by being seen to do the correct thing, normatively or morally in foreign policy, can also increase an actor's soft power potential. As such, it is imperative that Cameron and Hague use their increasing soft power responsibly, as this will also serve to increase legitimacy and soft power potential, through being seen to do the correct thing.

Normative Responsibilities

To this end, how can the British government retain its soft power potential? I suggest that adhering to a normatively driven foreign policy in accordance with the goals of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) will aid Britain's quest to retain its position within the soft power hierarchy; this would also achieve a soft power potential that is self-perpetuating. Indeed, if one

considers that soft power predominantly is derived from how an actor perceives you, then behaving in a way driven by normative considerations will aid this perception.

Furthermore, whilst British companies such as BAE are reliant upon Middle Eastern contracts with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain⁸ to ensure both profit margins and continued employment for its staff in the UK, criticism of trading partners should not be avoided at the expense of foreign policy goals. Indeed, continued relationships with states that appear in contradiction with the goals of the FCO will only erode British soft power.

However, in addition to Britain's soft power potential, other states, particularly within the Persian Gulf, have sought to capitalise on the soft power resources within Britain. Indeed, one can see the increased foreign investment within British companies such as Harrods and several football clubs.⁹ While money is not necessarily made from investing in such enterprises, it is not financial reward that is to be derived from these investments. Rather, investing in these companies attempts to achieve an increase in prestige through association with the legitimacy of brands. Given this, there are two possible ways of viewing the situation: either Britain has an increased influence over these states given the increase in business ties between the two, or Britain has a decreased influence given economic conditions and a fear of a withdrawal of financial resources. Regardless, this fear of financial withdrawal should not limit the nature of Britain's response to behaviour that is perceived to challenge the chosen normative agenda.

Moving Forward

The foreign policy under the Conservative government must largely be considered as a success. Indeed, the aforementioned successes would have little lasting value if not taken in conjunction with a considered foreign policy. However, there are several areas in which progress must be made. Re-evaluating the relationship with states that appear to challenge the normative agenda is imperative, particularly when considering the relationship between human rights and arms deals.¹⁰ British soft power reserves provide an opportunity to challenge the nature of this relationship and also to shape the norms surrounding the arms trade.¹¹ A second area that should become a priority is the Middle East Peace Process. With what appears to be a new Netanyahu led coalition in Israel, with a greater representation of left of centre parties, coinciding with the beginning of President Obama's second term in office and a recently appointed John Kerry as Secretary of State, the time appears ripe for resolving the issue. Moreover, if one considers the moves made by Mahmoud Abbas, in gaining enhanced non-member status at the United Nations and issuing passports under the name of the 'State of Palestine' suggests that there is an opportunity for progress. As a leading power in the soft power realm, this is an opportunity for Britain to wield some of its power, which would in turn lead to an increase in this power.

⁸ Frank Gardener, *Saudi Arabia 'insulted' by UK inquiry* (BBC, 15.10.12) Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19943865>

⁹ Middle Eastern sovereign wealth funds have recently invested in Manchester City and Leeds United, along with football clubs on the continent, namely Paris St. Germain, Malaga, and Barcelona. While money is not made through investing in these clubs, the investment increases the profile of actors and also permits access to sources of prestige. In 2010 Harrods was sold to the investment fund of the Qatari royal family, Qatar Holding.

¹⁰ Richard Norton Taylor, *Arms sales and human rights don't mix, UK told* (The Guardian, 23.10.12) Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/defence-and-security-blog/2012/oct/23/arms-human-rights>

¹¹ While I accept the counter arguments in favour of ensuring economic investment and growth, the importance of ensuring a normative foreign policy for both humanitarian reasons and soft power reasons