

What are the key challenges faced by states attempting to utilise soft power in the 21st century?

Word count: 2740

Soft power is a significant part of international affairs in the 21st century, with the power to shape state relations and impact the world either positively or negatively. Power, according to Nye, is the capacity to acquire what you want by attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2008, p. 94). The countries that yield soft power in our era are the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, China and Japan. Recently, China has achieved its best-ever result in the Global Soft Power Index, surpassing Japan as Asia's top-ranked country. China's Global Soft Power Index score has increased by +9.9 points to 64.2, rising from eighth to fourth place globally (Brand Finance, 2022, p. 6-8). An ample reason for this rise can be explained by the help China has provided to countries worldwide through personal protection equipment (PPE) and vaccine donations, cementing their improvement in soft power. In this essay, I will examine some of the challenges faced by states attempting to utilise soft power in the 21st century. "A country's soft power is based on three resources: its culture, political principles, and foreign policy" (Nye, 2008, p. 97). This essay will also explore issues nations confront when using the three resources proposed by Nye to exercise their soft power. Foreign policy issues can arise when a country takes an extreme stance, which may alienate it from its allies. Issues in political values are associated with exerting control over free speech, implementing discriminatory legislation, and establishing an authoritarian system — all of which can impact a state's worldwide perception. A state's cultural issues are related to its exports, such as cuisine, fashion, and the arts, over which the state has little direct influence.

The most critical challenge a state faces in its bid to wield soft power is related to its foreign policy, through which it interacts with other states. It was through both hard and soft power that the United States was able to establish its hegemony in the world; however, the situation began to change under the Trump administration. Under the immigration policy of the United States, the border wall between the United States and Mexico was established to stop illegal

immigrants from entering the country from Mexico. As disastrous as Donald Trump's immigration policies may be for the United States as a nation, the border wall may cause racism in the country (Amadeo, 2021). The new immigration policy infringes on the immigrants' human rights; for a country that claims to champion human rights on the world stage, this is a massive show of hypocrisy for the United States.

Moreover, the United States can be seen as losing some of its soft power due to its "America first" policy. America has long been acknowledged as a generous donor when it comes to providing aid abroad, but as the Trump administration reduced foreign aid (European Parliament, 2017), including decreasing budgets for programmes to combat AIDS and malaria, these reductions undermine the United States' global image. The consequence of Trump's "America First" grand strategy is riddled with ironies as, rather than minimising America's vulnerability to global threats and economic competition, this strategy exposes Americans to global instability and economic retaliation. Trump's strategy rejects the idea of democratic peace by considering the military as the core element of the US foreign policy, also rejecting Globalism and replacing it with Americanism which is economic nationalism and protectionism (Dimitrova, 2017, p. 36). This strategy is built under a hard power vision, and economic protectionism. According to Nye, if a country's actions appear to be hypocritical, arrogant, and indifferent to the opinions of others or based on a limited view of national interests, its soft power will decline (Hongtao and Lin, 2017: 70). Through rejecting common principles in favour of protectionism and unilateralism, the Trump administration has negatively affected the US international reputation and thereby reducing its soft power.

Meanwhile, vaccines and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) have acted as soft power risers and diminishers for China. The coronavirus outbreak has harmed China's international reputation, prompting the country to launch a global public diplomacy campaign to restore its image and strengthen its soft power. This policy, known as "mask diplomacy," involves China acting as a donor. China's Central Government provided more aid to autocracies than to democracies (Telias and Urdinez, 2022, p. 108) which has yielded positive and negative outcomes; on the positive side, In Serbia, for example, the authorities and the government-

controlled media are primarily responsible for China's soft power successes. Chinese mask diplomacy has proven effective due to the use of public spaces by the state (Vuksanovic, 2020). Buildings and bridges were illuminated in red to express gratitude while Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić kissed the Chinese flag. On the negative side, the Chinese generosity policy did not thrive globally. China sent limited freebies to some nations, leading to much larger vaccination purchases. For instance, China gave the Philippines 600,000 doses of its Sinovac vaccine, which they later purchased for 25 million doses (Reuters, 2021). This business-minded aid has generated positive soft power influence in several nations; however, the Chinese reputation did not change much internationally. According to a study, the global sentiments toward China were mixed, owing to the country's tarnished reputation as a result of how the pandemic erupted in Wuhan, with officials refusing to release information to the public, underreporting cases, trying to downplay the serious nature, and rejecting the possibility of person-to-person transmission (Wang, 2021). The "mask diplomacy" in Serbia appears to be based on the fact that the countries affected by the outbreak are homeless with no choice. Therefore, in reality, China's public diplomacy tactic has produced no effect, and even in Serbia, this effect is the result of Belgrade's foreign policy opportunism.

In utilising soft power in the 21st century, a state's political values are a powerful resource. However, it is not without its difficulties. International media agencies are keen to expose nations that discriminate against particular societal groups, which can be detrimental to a country's soft power. For instance, China's soft power influence has declined in Western countries due to media exposure demonstrating the people's lack of freedom. A prime example of this was how Beijing turned the Xinjiang region in far Western China into an incubator for automated authoritarianism — China's actions toward the Uyghur Muslims are evidence of laborious efforts to destroy Uyghur religion and culture through repression of the group's religious freedoms. Authorities have forced Uyghur prisoners to forsake their religious views and ethnic identities through actions that include prohibiting parents from giving their children Islamic names and forcing Muslims to consume pork or alcohol, which are prohibited in Islam (Srivastava and Ambastha, 2020). The right to religion is a fundamental freedom guaranteed under several treaties: Article 18 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights guarantees everyone the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (United Nations, n.d.). The international community does not share China's view, as the Uyghurs are widely seen as an oppressed group. China's discriminatory behaviour towards oppressed groups and infringement on their freedom of belief has tarnished its reputation internationally, resulting in a drop in the country's soft power. Conversely, states that respect freedom of speech and belief and endorse anti-discriminatory acts can improve their soft power and gain influence on the global stage.

Doubling down on their stance, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains that such authoritarian restrictions are required in light of frequent outbreaks of violence. The idea of universal human rights must be upheld by recognising and condemning such blatant infringement. However, it is unlikely that these concerns will impact the CCP's decision-making due to the lack of a universal voice. Many of the most significant geopolitical and economic states beyond the Middle East and Central Asia are either keen beneficiaries of Chinese foreign investments, or export their commodities to Chinese consumers, increasing the likelihood that the CCP will not be on the receiving end of much criticism. Such economic incentives tempt even the most resilient economies in the world. However, these short-term gains from Chinese foreign direct investment or market access frequently outweigh the agreements' long-term drawbacks, such as dependence on Chinese capital or technology transfer to Chinese firms. Additionally, China's economic partners have a part in undermining the importance of universal human rights by turning a blind eye when the Chinese government performs serious violations of those same rights. Beijing's policies that suppress the people's freedom no doubt undermined its reputation worldwide in the eyes of the international audience. Nevertheless, some can argue that other developed state governments are complicit by turning a blind eye due to their dependence on China.

Russia is another country where multiple political challenges have hindered its soft power. Russian suppression of individual and media control challenges Russia's soft power. Before, Western media propagated stereotypes of Russian behaviour carried over from the Soviet era. For example, the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and the murder of exiled

former spy Alexander Litvinenko struck a chord with international audiences used to hearing about Soviet repression of individual dissidents. These examples affected Russia's soft power negatively to a significant degree — even when the Kremlin denies it, no one is inclined to trust their narrative. Additionally, Russia's domestic soft power was undermined by strict media control. A law enacted by Putin on March 4th, 2022, concerning media measures criminalises impartial reporting on the war in Ukraine. Even using the word "war" to describe the situation is considered illegal, and those who break this legislation risk up to 15 years in prison. Consequently, numerous independent media sites have been forced to close, and more than 150 local journalists have gone into exile, according to reports. Joseph Nye states that information is power, which can be achieved through attraction, payment, or coercion. The pressure placed on the media is severe under authoritarian regimes, and some have even stopped killing to stop the spread of information. The Committee to Protect Journalists claims that 15 journalists were killed covering Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022). Meanwhile, according to Reporters Without Borders, Russian airstrikes have destroyed 10 TV towers in Ukraine despite the fact that they were not utilised for military broadcasting, prompting some organisations to halt broadcasting completely (RSF, 2022). Attacking media infrastructure is no doubt an effective method of censoring information. Demonising independent media and identifying journalists as foreign agents weakens faith in both the messenger and the content, and this coercion can be seen as a tactic used by the Kremlin to stop the spread of information.

In the 21st century, culture could threaten a state's soft power. Foreign policy and political values may have a direct effect, but culture requires a process of growth and broader acceptance. An issue posed by culture is whether a nation's cultural exports are as appealing as those of other nations. China and Russia are confronted with this issue on a regional scale in Asia, where South Korea and Japan dominate in terms of culture. For China, marketing its new value system overseas will prove challenging. China's values are distinct, and until recently, largely self-contained — namely that they do not always tie in with many of the liberal democratic values of the West, particularly the Chinese concept of pure hierarchical order and the individual's subordination rights to collective interests. For instance, in recent

years, the Confucius Institute (CI) has come under increasing fire and intensifying scrutiny over concerns of excessive political influence, censorship, and academic integrity. In August 2020, the United States government designated the CI as a "foreign mission" of the People's Republic of China (U.S. Department of State, 2020). As the United States is an influential soft power globally, these statements are detrimental to China's reputation.

Moreover, South Korea has successfully gained influence in South Asia that far surpasses China. Korean films, food and K-pop are cultural exports that have made their way worldwide thanks to the power of attraction as an influence method. Films such as *Squid Game* and the Oscar-winning movie *Parasite* have triumphed by capturing the monstrous cruelties and inequality of modern capitalism in a way that has resonated with many. Conversely, the challenge China faces is its restrictions on showing anything that may portray the country negatively, as most Chinese films depict only the country's history. While Korea accurately depicts the country to the international community. Hence, China chooses instead to promote an artificial image of contemporary China.

The rise and popularity of the English language have also proved to be an issue for China and Russia, partially due to the enormous success of the American film industry. Worldwide, many are keen to learn English. Language is a crucial component of cultural soft power since it enables further cultural exports to be better understood. For instance, if the people who speak English were a minority, Hollywood's success would be significantly limited. For Russia, the language barrier is a significant issue for its cultural exports. The number of people who speak Russian is declining globally; it has gone down by 50 million in the past 25 years, a senior Russian lawmaker said (Tass, 2017). Meanwhile, the United States thrives in regard to culture and consequently, soft power — in particular; power is not generated by governments, but by American society itself. It can be hypothesised that the challenges experienced by Russia and China are the lack of emphasis on boosting human capital and clear societal restrictions that prevent the production and development of a culture that is appealing internationally. For China and Russia, the central government is perceived as the only one capable of generating soft power, while the community is considered merely a

passive institution. On the other hand, nations like Korea and the US are quickly expanding their cultural influence by allowing civil society to generate and spread culture.

However, the positive effects that culture produced by civil society can also have adverse outcomes for states, as governmental powers have little to no control over it. An example of this is a film produced in Hollywood that portrays the American government in a bad light. The lack of control over culture can have adverse effects that are not limited to the arts. The 2016 film *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* is based on the September 11, 2012, events that occurred in Benghazi, Libya. It involved the murder of an American ambassador and a member of the American Foreign Service (Gottschalk, 2019). The movie was made to create enormous fear in the audience about Islam and Arabs, helped by producers who dramatised many aspects of actual events. The negative portrayal of religions in films can influence the soft power of the US, but the opposite, which is restricting the film industry, can lead to a lack of freedom in media and expression, which, if not monitored, may see the US fall into an authoritarian regime.

Soft power is incredibly potent in influencing a nation's standing on the world stage in the 21st century. Nye's three soft power resources: foreign policy, political ideals, and culture, are closely tied to soft power issues countries may face. The United States' harsh foreign policies cost them soft power among their closest allies, while China's PPE and vaccines were double-edged — it boosted Chinese soft power in the developing world. However, China was still seen as the source of the virus in the developed world. Meanwhile, China's treatment of oppression of minorities such as Uyghurs harms their reputations globally. The weakening of the Russian language globally has also negatively impacted Russia's soft power. With a combination of soft and hard power strategies, governments may increase their global influence and power. The Uyghurs are an oppressed and silenced community, yet most governments cannot enact harsher policies toward China as it is an important source of import and export. Russia's suppression of individual and media autonomy also calls the country's soft power into question. The Kremlin exercises power by coercion to silence voices that may harm its reputation, yet cause more damage internationally. Culture could

also pose a threat to a state's soft power. While promoting China's rich culture, the Chinese Confucius Institute is concerned with excessive political influence, censorship, and academic integrity. Additionally, even in China, English is now a second language, showing that many English-speaking countries have succeeded in promoting their culture, like Hollywood films from the US, as opposed to Russian, which is a language fewer and fewer people speak.

List of references:

Amadeo, K. (2021) 'How Immigration Impacts the Economy'. *The Balance*, 21 October, Available at: <https://www.thebalance.com/donald-trump-immigration-impact-on-economy-4151107>. (Accessed 05 January 2022).

Brand Finance (2022) '*Global Soft Power Index 2022 The world's most comprehensive research study on perceptions of nation brands*'. Available at: <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-2022-usa-bounces-back-better-to-top-of-nation-brand-ranking> (Accessed: January 4, 2023).

Dimitrova, A. (2017) 'Trump's "America First" Foreign Policy: The Resurgence of the Jacksonian Tradition?'. *L'Europe en Formation*, 382, 33-46. DOI:10.3917/eufor.382.0033.

European Parliament (2017) '*US development policy: New priorities under President Trump*'. Washington DC: European Parliament Liaison Office. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608639/EPRS_BRI%282017%29608639_EN.pdf(Accessed: January 4, 2023).

Gottschalk, P. (2019) '*Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment*'. Rowman & Littlefield.

Lee, S.T. (2021) 'Vaccine diplomacy: nation branding and China's COVID-19 soft power play'. *Place Brand Public Dipl.* Available at: DOI: 10.1057/s41254-021-00224-4.

Lin, L., Hongtao, L. (2017) 'Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and Its Revelation Towards Ideological and Political Education'. *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol(2), pp. 69-74. DOI: 10.11648/j.hss.20170502.13.

Nye, J. S. (2008) 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power'. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. DOI: 10.1177/0002716207311699.

Reuters (2021) 'Philippines books 25 million doses of Sinovac's COVID-19 vaccine', *Reuters*, January 11. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-philippines-vaccin-idUSKBN29G0V2>. (Accessed 06 January 2022).

Russian News Agency (TASS) (2017) 'Number of Russian speakers across globe down by 50 million — Russian MP', *Russian News Agency*, 28 August. Available at: <https://tass.com/society/962335> (Accessed 05 January 2022).

Srivastava, S., Ambastha, Y. (2020) 'Oppression of Uyghur Muslims: Human Rights Violations in Xinjiang', *The Cambridge International Law Journal (CILJ)*, 28 December. Available at: <http://cilj.co.uk/2020/12/28/oppression-of-uyghur-muslims-human-rights-violations-in-xinjiang/> (Accessed: January 1, 2023).

Telias, D., & Urdinez, F. (2022) 'China's Foreign Aid Political Drivers: Lessons from a Novel Dataset of Mask Diplomacy in Latin America during the COVID-19 Pandemi'. *Journal of current Chinese affairs*, 51(1), pp. 108–136. DOI: 10.1177/18681026211020763

U.S. Department of State (2020) 'Confucius Institute U.S. Center Designation as a Foreign Mission'. August 13, 2020. Available at: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/index.html>. (Accessed 05 January 2022).

United Nations (n.d.) '*Universal declaration of human rights*'. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (Accessed: January 1, 2023).

Vuksanovic, V. (2020) '*China and “mask diplomacy” in the Balkans*'. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazioni/china-and-mask-diplomacy-balkans-25898> (accessed 4 January 2022).

Wang, Y. (2021) 'China's Dangerous Games around vaccines'. *Human Rights Watch*, March 4. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/chinas-dangerous-game-around-covid-19-vaccines> (Accessed 4 January 2022).