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To what extent has ‘soft power’ replaced more traditional ‘hard power’ as the key tool of statecraft in the twenty-first century?

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This paper will address the question of whether soft power has replaced hard power as the key tool of statecraft in the twenty-first century? It will argue that soft power should not be considered as *replacing* hard power, but rather that both instruments are vital to successful governance and foreign policy and are captured in the concept of smart power (Wilson, 2008: 115). The basis for this argument is that the utility of either type of power is context dependent, time specific and subjective, as Joseph Nye states, “power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists” (Nye, 2009: 2). The myriad situations in which soft and hard power are of a higher or lesser degree of import are too diverse to definitively argue there is a relationship of substitution between them. For example, while acknowledging that hard power application vis-à-vis states has reduced, in that physical conflict between states is less likely (notwithstanding recent Russian aggression in Ukraine), it plays an increased role in countering Non-State Actor (NSA) threats and continues to be a key element in the international balance of power (Feklyunina, 2016: 774).

This paper uses a definition of soft and hard power provided by Carola M. Lustig in her 2016 study of Brazil’s power in South America who, building upon Nye’s work, stated that “[h]ard power means the construction of power based on material resources like military and economic supplies. Soft power means the building of power through ideas, attraction, and seduction” (Lustig, 2016: 104). Additionally, this paper relies heavily on a specific semantic interpretation of the words *replaced*, *key* and *statecraft*. In this regard, the connotations of definitiveness in *replaced* are challenged. It is argued here that hard and soft power cannot ever definitively or permanently *replace* each other, but the appropriateness of their application will vary. Ranking hard and soft power against themselves with the word *key* is considered too narrow to be cognisant of the nuances of their contextual appropriateness, once again both hard and soft power are equally important to those who can wield them (Wilson, 2008). The word *statecraft* is understood to be the ‘the art of conducting state affairs’ (Miriam Webster Dictionary, online) which comprises the actions of states in dealing with national and international affairs, and with or against states, NSAs, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Organisations (IOs), in sum, the entire spectrum.

To begin, this paper acknowledges the perceived dominance of hard power in the 20th century but argues that its contemporary application has changed rather than its core significance. Secondly, the underappreciated impact and pervasiveness of soft power



historically is presented. After which key criticisms of soft power are presented to highlight how soft and hard power cannot be replacements for each other. Lastly, the interplay between hard and soft power in smart power is discussed to propose that soft and hard power are both mutually exclusive but intrinsically linked.

To begin with the proposed discussion, it is important to set the context of the pre-21st century world and the importance of hard power in it. This paper does not contest hard power's premier importance in the 20th century, but it does argue that hard power was the leader by default. Traditional hard power: military capability and economic sanctions, enjoyed the most extensive popularity because they are tangible, physical and have a readily identifiable outcome, in contrast to soft power (Feklyunina, 2016: 777). When the desire is to coerce or threaten an adversary, the capability to deploy hard power is critical to the success of any such coercion strategy (Nye, 2008: 5). During the Cold War hard power was the distinct instrument in the balance of power between the US and the USSR. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of an adversary's capabilities were embedded in decision making and foreign policy. However, it is through Nye's conceptualization that it is possible to understand the imperceptible machinations of soft power and its subconscious influence on decision making during the Cold War.

The application of hard power, or at minimum the threat of, was pervasive during the Cold War. Some of the most evident examples include the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Vietnam, American overt operations in South America. When combined with some of the lesser-known activities such as CIA and UK counter-communist activities in Iceland, American covert operations in South America and Africa and general widescale espionage by all major powers, the prevalence of hard power as a key instrument of statecraft in previous decades is apparent. The most evident example of hard power's influence on international relations surviving from the Cold War is the maintenance of vast and immensely destructive nuclear arsenals by numerous states around the globe. In an era that was not as well connected and interdependent as in today's world, where technological advancements were slow to promulgate, hard power had a *perceived* monopoly on power strategy. Soft power, however, played a major role in world affairs prior to the 21st century, perhaps just not as readily discernible as hard power.

This paper seeks to juxtapose hard and soft power to support the argument that they are on an equal footing in contemporary times. Throughout the Cold War and into the 21st century, soft power was ever present, however, due to its intangibility, the impacts and effects of soft power were often either misunderstood or not recognised. When Joseph Nye coined the term soft power in 1990, he conceptualised something which in essence existed for millennia (Mattern, 2005: 589). By way of example, Nye argues that the democratic restructuring of Europe post World War Two was aided significantly by American popular culture and programmes of assistance such as the Marshall Plan, which was as much about American values as it was tonnage of cargo (Nye, 2009: 48). He began the discussion on how soft power was a key element of statecraft and theorised the categorisation of its effects and consequences. Nye argues that soft power is the ability to engineer favourable policy decisions from interlocuter states through attraction, rather than coercion or the threat of military hard power application.

The inherent problem with soft power, which Nye identifies, is that it is (and should be) out of reach of governments and attempts to direct and generate sources of soft power may quickly transform into propagandisation and manipulation at a state level. Notwithstanding this, Nye

argues that soft power was a key component of statecraft throughout the Cold War (Ibid: 9). He argues strongly that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a victory of soft power rather than its hard power relation. For him, "hard power created the stand-off military containment, but soft power eroded the Soviet system from within" (Ibid: 50). In her 2016 article, Valentina Feklyunina supports this point by outlining how Soviet and US soft power competed intensely throughout the Cold War, with American soft power prevailing (Feklyunina, 2016: 792). In this regard, Nye's arguments are centred on the effect of programmes such as Radio Free Europe which broadcasted extensively into Eastern Europe and the numerous scientific exchange programmes between the US and the USSR (Nye, 2009: 45-46, 101). These programmes exposed Soviet scientists to Western society, softening their long-held misconceptions embedded by decades of Soviet propaganda. In this context, it is arguable that soft and hard power had more parity in the 20th century than was readily perceptible. Nye even takes this a step further in positing that Soviet hard power was detrimental to the Soviet Union in that it fatally undermined its soft power (Ibid: 9). This peculiarity has contemporary support, with Douglas P. Lackey asserting that US soft power in Afghanistan was undermined by the hard power destruction of the poppy crop and civilian casualties in drone attacks (Lackey, 2015: 124). Temporally juxtaposing hard and soft power pre the 21st century allows us to introduce a key point, that soft power has not *replaced* hard power, but rather soft power's effects are now better understood. Concurrently, contemporary application of hard power has transformed to be less perceptible with a reliance on deterrence, covert, clandestine and remote means, giving rise to the perception that hard and soft power have swapped places.

It is useful now to return to hard power, and to demonstrate how its utility in the 21st century has *changed* rather than been *replaced* by soft power. As Paul Barnes states, "[t]here is little evidence that military force has lost its utility: it remains the ultima ratio regum" (Barnes, 2019: 69). The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US and America's subsequent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq will be used as the temporal point of departure. While insurgencies are not localized to the 21st century, public awareness of them exploded due to American operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan post 9/11. Arguably, the very nature of warfare changed dramatically and the era of state versus NSA was formalised (Wilson, 2008: 112-113). While the application of military force between states has continued to decline, military hard power continues to be applied by powerful state actors predominately against NSAs. Even during times when large scale and overt combat operations were being reduced to appease public opinion in the US, the Obama administration increased the use of drones and covert action in the pursuit of foreign policy goals, particularly in Afghanistan but also elsewhere (Brunstetter & Braun, 2011: 339). Hard power application just simply changed, as Rory Cormac states, "contemporary conflicts invite covert action", owing to the abundance of conflicts against NSAs which operate transnationally and are extremely difficult to subdue militarily (Cormac, 2016: 15). The application of hard power became less obvious. Nye makes a fundamental point this regard, explaining that the role of military power in 'post-industrial democracies' has changed due to the societal focus being on "welfare rather than glory" (Nye, 2009: 19). Nye makes this point not to diminish the potential importance of hard power, but rather to highlight his original point that power is context dependent and that there exists an interplay between hard and soft power.

It follows therefore, that if the application of hard power can change to meet the pervasiveness of existing threats, then it is plausible that it could change back and regain its perceived value depending on the contemporary situation. The utility of hard power has been adapted to adhere to modern democratic values, societal acceptance and to safeguard

positions of political power, but is no less useful an instrument of statecraft than it was in previous decades. Hard power in its 'traditional' form could regain its former prominence if relations between the world powers deteriorate substantially in the future, as seen by Russian actions in Ukraine, China's rising power status and their perceptions of the strength of US leadership. Additionally, Christopher Walker argues that soft power has in fact been 'hijacked' by these states and used to undermine the West, contrary to hopes of integration rather than antagonization (Walker, 2016). Consequently, it is hard to conceive that *more* soft power will stem this subversion.

It is now important to turn to some specific aspects of soft power which render it unsuitable to be considered as a *replacement* for hard power as a key component of statecraft. Criticisms of soft power show how soft and hard power are too unique to be considered in competition with each other. Firstly, one of the most significant criticisms of soft power centres on its inherent subjectivity (Mattern, 2005: 584). The soft power that one state may hold over another, may be entirely ineffective on a different state. Nye acknowledges that soft power requires the recipient's tacit acceptance of their position and their willingness to be co-opted for it to work (Nye, 2009: 7). Shared values, culture, language, and a state's geographical position in the world are significant factors in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of soft power. This problem extends beyond state-on-state interactions and is equally applicable to NSAs, NGOs, and IOs. Mattern has pointed reservations about this facet of soft power, as she argues that the inherent 'attraction' required is poorly understood and badly defined, and therefore unhelpful (Mattern, 2005: 591). This soft power subjectivity problematic is temporally infinite; it existed in the past and will continue into the future. Consequently, soft power is unable to replace hard power as it is subjective and based on 'attraction', not 'coercion'. Soft power is more likely to replace itself in its utility against (or with) a target state by growing and falling in importance based on its 'attractiveness', what Paul Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti call the 'disempowerment nexus' (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Secondly, the ability for small states to harness soft power is another one of its temporally infinite characteristics. This inherently confounds any argument of hard versus soft power, as smaller states largely lack hard power capabilities. Naturally, something must exist for it to be replaced. Small states have relied on, and will continue to rely on, soft power to pursue foreign policy goals, influence international relationships, entice economic growth, garner domestic political support and to augment national security (Ibid). The absence of hard power capabilities renders smaller states vulnerable to external coercion and influence, but the international rules-based order has kept larger states from gobbling up its weaker neighbours. While debates around the fungibility of soft power are in abundance, small states should understand the mechanics of soft power as its *only* key component of statecraft. For example, the tiny gulf state of Qatar has contributed to its security through the precise application of soft power (Ibid: 1139-1140). Qatar's ability to navigate troublesome waters through soft power will be critical to its ability to convince a militarily capable state to rush to its defence if the need ever arose.

Thirdly, writing in 2005, Mattern argues specifically that once a state codifies soft power into strategy with the goal of obtaining favourable policy outcomes, soft power can no longer be regarded as 'soft' (Mattern, 2005). She criticises that this manipulation of the essence of soft power transforms it into hard power as 'representational force' used to coerce others into compliance, albeit through sociolinguistics rather than force, but it is coercion

nonetheless (Ibid: 587). It is likely that this weaponization of soft power will not be well received by states upon the realisation that 'attraction' quickly malforms into 'deceit', highlighting the highly sensitive nature of soft power relationships.

Lastly, hard power has a disproportionate impact on its soft power relation. For example, Nye argues that the Bush administration failed to successfully wield soft power to undercut its Al Qaeda adversaries post 9/11 (Nye, 2009: 25) and its hard power gifted countless Al Qaeda propaganda victories. Capitalizing on this negative effect (or disempowerment to borrow Brannagan & Giulianotti's term), Al Qaeda used the agitation of US hard power as a catalyst for their own soft power gains through an effective media campaign (Wilson, 2008: 13). More recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was immensely successful in generating soft power which saw its ranks and support swell in an unprecedented short space of time. Counter-insurgency operations are characterised by this hard and soft power interplay, in which misguided hard power application will conversely increase the soft power capability of an opponent such as ISIS or Al Qaeda. One need look no further than Afghanistan to imagine the damage to American soft power, as it lost its investment of American values, the currency of soft power.

The purpose of these four points is to demonstrate the fleeting nature of soft power's *power*. Soft power cannot replace hard power, because for many smaller states there is nothing for it to replace, and for the hard power capable states, they simply satisfy different functions. As such, to conclude the core argument of this paper, smart power needs to be introduced to justify the formalising of the relationship between soft and hard power.

The contemporary unipolar world is characterised by a heightened complexity, unprecedented in the history of international relations. Hybrid warfare, economic interdependence, emerging technologies of Artificial Intelligence (AI), space and Information Technology (IT), among many other facets occupy the international space so intensely that complicated approaches are required to tackle them. Smart power is the combination of both hard and soft power to best achieve policy goals (Wilson, 2008: 115). This is particularly salient when considering Carola M. Lustig's observation that in Brazil, the adoption of a type of power was affected more by the international context, rather than domestic situation (Lustig, 2016: 121). This highlights how the appropriate application of either soft or hard power can change quickly with external developments. Smart power encapsulates the utility of both hard and soft power and in combining each element, it solidifies their relative and perpetual importance to each other (Nye, 2009: 32). Mastery of these domains are cornerstones of contemporary IR and Nye argues this by stating that "the agenda of world politics has become like a three-dimensional chess game in which one can win only by play vertically as well as horizontally" (Ibid: 4). In even more pointed terms, in dealing with the 'interplay' of hard and soft power, he states that "whether in the Middle East or in East Asia, hard and soft power are inextricably intertwined in today's world" (Ibid, p.30), highlighting that they rotate and affect each other, rather than replace, and a smarter approach is required.

Arguments which carry that hard power is of less relevance in contemporary times are likely interpreting the world through a principally Western lens. Hard power still matters greatly, but perhaps not to many Western observers. Regional powers such as Russia, China, Iran and others such as India and Pakistan, are heavily reliant on their hard power assets to provide for security and regional influence (Walker, 2016: 49). It would be erroneous to conclude that soft power has become their key element of statecraft as if this was the case, they have either reached a position of contentedness with their neighbours, abandoned

regional hegemonic aspirations, or their security has been sacrificed entirely. Ultimately, policies underpinned by long term strategic vision utilising smart power is the only way to navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations (Wilson, 2008).

In conclusion, this paper argues that soft and hard power are too unique to replace each other as a key component of statecraft. States opt to choose which is more appropriate for the time, the context and the interlocutor state, whether friendly or adversarial. Both soft and hard power existed and were important in the past and continue to be of considerable importance today. In this regard, only our understanding and the more appropriate application of them has changed. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has demonstrated the importance placed on hard power by Russia to achieve policy goals. Academically, the invasion itself carries with it the principal argument of this paper, that hard and soft power are not substitutional. Indeed, soft and hard power are intertwined and can support or 'disempower' each other, once again evidenced by the cold shoulder shown to Russia by many states globally. The most notable criticisms of soft power were presented by illustrating how soft power's contemporary popularity is contextual and has been effectively used against the West. Moreover, the international situation will continue to fluctuate dramatically, likely ushering in more 'traditional' forms of hard power application among states. Such a transformational environment requires a more dynamic approach through the employment of smart power.

Please note that the views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone and they should not be taken to represent the views of the Irish Defence Forces, Maynooth University or any other group or organisation.

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