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Dancing Alone: A Hard Look at Soft Power

By Brantly Womack

It seems ironic that the two international relations concepts of the 1990s that most captured the imagination of the world's intellectuals were the "clash of civilizations" and "soft power." At first sight, they could hardly be more different despite the similar backgrounds of their authors as professors at Harvard and consultants for the Defense Department. Samuel Huntington's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Clash of Civilizations?", rejected root and branch the idea of cross-cultural understanding and called on the West to circle its wagons against the Muslims and the Confucians. By contrast, Joseph Nye's notion of "soft power," first suggested in 1990 and developed more recently in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), suggests that American attractiveness in the world can be as important as its carrots and sticks in inducing international compliance. While Huntington viewed cultural contact as the tectonic friction between geologic plates of civilization, Nye sees the encouragement of international exchanges and the better marketing of American foreign policy as necessary accessories to guns and money.

The fact that the two terms have become part of ordinary global language does not imply that they are universally accepted. In particular, the "clash of civilizations" occasioned a storm of criticism, and even evoked a United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Nations sponsored by President Khatami of Iran, which had the misfortune to be scheduled in 2001. "Soft power," as the kinder, gentler notion of the two, has occasioned little criticism and much borrowing by politicians, journalists, and social scientists around the world. Like the Pillsbury Doughboy, it invites a poke and a smile, except from curmudgeons like Donald Rumsfeld, who claimed in 2003 that he didn't know what it meant. Not surprisingly, the political thrust of Nye's book is that America's vast resources of soft power are despised by the neo-conservatives and neglected by the second Bush administration.

Despite the very real differences between Huntington and Nye, there is an underlying similarity, and that similarity corresponds to a continuity in American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era from Bush to Clinton to Bush. Although Nye is interested in the capacity of the United States to achieve its aims by persuasion rather than by the direct application of force or rewards, he does not see American policy and goals as interactive with the rest of the world. Essentially, he sees the challenge of soft power as that of making "our" (American) goals more attractive. While Huntington is unilateralist with the windows closed, Nye is unilateralist with the windows open.

This is too soft a notion of soft power, whether as a general theory or as a policy guideline for the United States. As a theory, it confuses attention, attractiveness and persuasiveness. Although there is unquestionably something there, there in soft power, Nye's smorgasbord, from Elvis and Hollywood to Voice of America, is unconvincing as an alternative to hard power in inducing international compliance. As a policy guideline, it is certainly an improvement over the arrogance of pure power, but fails to acknowledge the essentially interactive character of persuasion. America has become the center of world attention because of its preponderance of power, but it is also the center of the world's anxieties. If America is to achieve and sustain world leadership, as opposed to exhaust itself by bludgeoning others into submission, it must be interactive and based on the acknowledgement of the interests of others. If America dances only to its own tune, the world will watch, but few will follow.

1. Joseph Nye's soft power

Joseph Nye's latest book on soft power appears to come full circle from his 1990 book that introduced the concept, *Bound to Lead*. The first sentence of the earlier work is, "Americans are worried about national decline." In that now antediluvian era of anxieties about Japan as number one and the rise and fall of great powers, Nye argued that the United States would maintain its world leadership position, but would need to face the challenges of co-opting compliance rather than commanding it. In the mood of wary triumphalism set by the current administration, Nye's new point is that, yes, the United States is the most powerful and attractive state on earth, but it is neglecting its soft power resources. The reassuring discovery in the late Cold War that America's strength was based on soft power as well as hard power and thus less susceptible to inevitable cycles of national decline has been replaced by a concern (grown stronger since the book was published in 2004) that American soft power itself might be in decline. The common thread through both books as well as the intervening ones is that the attractiveness of states is an essential dimension of their influence.

Although the term "soft power" is not headlined in *Bound to Lead* (it is not in the jacket material and is not indexed), it is used carefully. In a long footnote Nye distinguishes between command and co-optation, and associates soft power with co-optation. He describes two modes of co-optation, agenda-setting and attraction: "The universalism of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international behavior are critical sources of power" (p. 33). Nye's case that America is still "bound to lead" rests on the narrower cultural appeal of possible challengers and the increasing importance of post-war international institutions impregnated with American values and interests. American power can therefore extend well beyond its military primacy.

The connotations of soft power have shifted considerably in fourteen years. Now Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments," and its sources have shifted to "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies" (*Soft Power*, p. x). The idea of agenda-setting through international institutions has faded into the background (though other scholars, most notably John Ikenberry, have emphasized this theme). The change appears to be event-driven. Under the influence of the drastic decline in the credibility of the United States since the invasion of Iraq, Nye is now

concerned with the marketing of American preferences rather than with demonstrating the soft yet firm foundations of American primacy. The world seems less challenging to him in 2004 than in 1990, but also further away.

2. Too soft?

The problem with soft power is its analytical fuzziness. The "power" in soft power seems clear enough—getting what America wants. But the reason others comply—"attractiveness"—seems soft indeed. Soft power can certainly be pointed to, but can it be used to better understand the mechanisms of world politics or the consequences of choices made by leaders? If it includes everything from Britney Spears to world opinion of the occupation of Iraq, is it a significant and coherent concept? Perhaps Donald Rumsfeld had a point when he said he didn't know what it meant.

The first problem with soft power is whether or not it is really a separate phenomenon from hard power. Perhaps it is only the halo of hard power, the gleam on the sword. Have there been major powers without soft power, or minor powers with world-class attractiveness? Is the apparent difference between power and reputation simply a lag effect? If there is an emperor, will he not eventually have new clothes?

If soft power is merely a penumbra of hard power, then there may well be diplomatic tasks associated with keeping up appearances, but they will be peripheral to the decisions that direct foreign policy. If power attracts, then the pursuit of attractiveness is not a separate issue.

The second problem, related to but distinct from the first, concerns the effects of soft power. As Nye describes it, soft power encourages voluntary compliance, that is, the willingness of others to go along without specific rewards or sanctions. But is the absence of soft power more than merely an inconvenience? After all, if the resources to command compliance exist, what difference does it make whether the others are nodding approval or bowing to the inevitable? Old Europe can rustle its newspapers and bang its beer mugs over the invasion of Iraq, but only because they are peripheral to the action. Clearly Turkey's refusal of transit to American troops on their way to Iraq turned out to be no more than an inconvenience, and had it been a serious bottleneck, the rewards and sanctions could have been raised until compliance was achieved. What can the United States do with soft power that it cannot do without soft power?

The third problem offers a rescue for the significance of soft power, but it also involves a transformation of the concept. The problem here is the structure of soft power. It cannot remain just a pillow of world perceptions and claim to have a distinct effect on politics. Soft power as Nye presents it conflates attention, attractiveness, and persuasion, and each of these should be treated as distinct dimensions.

Much of what Nye catalogues as America's world presence relates simply to world patterns of attention. It is certainly the case that the preponderance of American military and economic power has put the United States at the center of world attention, because what happens here usually matters more to other countries than what happens elsewhere. Attentiveness to Pol Pot and the Dalai Lama exceed their possible impact on other states, proving that attentiveness is not simply a function of power. Nevertheless, it can be said that capacity to affect others is a sufficient but not necessary condition for attentiveness.

Curiosity can produce a momentary shift in attention, but exposure to risk and opportunity will provide a more constant focus. Between states of vastly different capacities, the smaller state is in a structural situation of vulnerability to the larger, while the larger has proportionally much less to hope for or to fear from the smaller. If a state has larger capacities than any other state in the world or in its region, then the imbalance of attention is not simply a summation of its bilateral relations. Instead, it assumes a central position, as the following diagram illustrates:

A > B, A > C, A > D, A > E, =

B C A D E

Of course, disproportionate attention does not imply approval. It can be based on alienation and fear as well as on a community of interest.

Attraction, the second dimension of soft power, is more complicated than attention. The approval or disapproval of what is perceived is an individual judgment. What appears to be a threat to one might seem an opportunity to another. Parents and governments might see Britney Spears as corrupting the youth; if true, then clearly the youth in question have a different sense of risk and opportunity. Judgments of attractiveness are also not unanimous on political issues; after all, there is still the hardy ten or fifteen percent around the world who approve of the American occupation of Iraq. But on political issues there can be a sense of collective approval or anxiety within a community in which the contrarians are an eddy rather than an alternative viewpoint. Political attractiveness will be affected by general exposure to the United States and by American marketing of its position, but ultimately receptivity is set by the interests of the audience.

If attractiveness is co-determined by audience interests, then the third dimension of soft power, persuasion, is even more interactive. Persuasion can be defined as the achievement of compliance without side payments or sanctions. Persuasion is the bottom line of soft power. Attention and attractiveness may be prerequisites for persuasion, but, by definition, compliance without persuasion rests on hard power. The capacity to persuade is the difference between leadership and domination.

What persuades? Aristotle claims that rhetoric, "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," consists of three modes, the character of the speaker, the frame of mind of the audience, and the quality of the argument. Of these, the character of the speaker is most important. But the character of the speaker is not his or her own self-conceit, but rather the audience's conviction that the speaker is sensible, credible, and good-willed. After all, as Aristotle drolly observed, something is persuasive only if someone is persuaded.

Among states, the equivalent of the character of the speaker is the quality of bilateral and multilateral relationships. Leviathans live longer than individuals, there are fewer of them, and they cannot choose their neighbors. Whatever the future holds, the level of international cooperation that will be available will depend on relationships that are being shaped in the present. Persuasion is the essence of diplomacy, and it requires far more than putting the right spin on ones own preferences. Strong relationships require a general confidence in common purposes and mutual respect. Thus persuasive diplomacy is a matter of determining and articulating common goals in a framework of mutual respect. In addition, asymmetric relationships require that the weaker parties do not feel threatened by the strongest. If other states feel that their autonomy is threatened by American unilateralism or that international norms of state behavior are being ignored, then they will be less willing to cooperate.

The contrast between American and Chinese diplomacy in recent years highlights the importance of conserving relationships. China has emphasized the political principles of mutual benefit and non-interference in domestic affairs, and it has promoted multilateral regional organizations. As a result of such "good neighbor" policies, China has greatly increased its regional influence in Asia despite—not because of—its increase in relative hard power. By contrast, the American war against terrorism has been waged with such high-handed unilateralism that other states and peoples are alienated even though they share the same general goal.

Underlying the distinction between attention, attractiveness and persuasion is a fundamental shift in perspective from Nye's presentation of soft power. Nye looks at soft power from the producer's point of view—what sells, what is hard to sell, the importance of marketing. No wonder soft power looks less than vital to a man with a gun who can say "Buy!" But the appropriate perspective for understanding soft power is that of the potential partner, because it is the partner's unforced decision to comply that is at stake. And even if the gun is pointed elsewhere, the man with the gun may appear alienating and threatening.

3. Common purposes and unequal partners

There is an inherent contradiction between world attentiveness to the United States and the persuasiveness of American leadership. In principle, it is not an unmanageable contradiction. But successful diplomacy, and therefore sustainable world leadership, requires American sensitivity to the situation of other states and peoples in an America-centered world. The radically different situations of the sole superpower and the rest of the world make this an especially difficult perceptual leap. Huntington and Nye are outstanding examples of the mistake of trying to understand the world without leaving home.

The United States is at the center of world attention because its capacities to affect others far exceed any other potential center. By the same token, it is the only state in the world that does not face a state stronger than itself. It has no compelling reason to be as interested in other states as they are in the United States. By the much lower standard of possible harm to us, we take an interest in Iraq, North Korea, and Iran, but only insofar as they are seen as potential threats. The American world is a nightly flickering of unrelated crises and stories, currently crowded to the side, not by Iraq itself, but by the American experience in Iraq.

In any case, Americans look out at a world that is looking at them, and we tend to judge it by whether it is smiling or frowning at us. Naturally, Americans attribute the world's attitude to American attractiveness, or lack of it. Americans have the impulse to make themselves more attractive. But the others are viewed as an audience, not as partners, and their clapping or booing does not have much effect on what Americans do. There is, however, a lurking concern that the United States cannot afford to be alone in the world.

The inattentive blindness of the powerful is complemented, if one can call it that, by the hyper-attentive allergies of the weak. Every country in the world is vulnerable to the United States, and the balance of the decisions determining whether this exposure brings more risk or more opportunities appears to be in American hands. This causes not only greater attentiveness to the US, but also anxieties concerning what we might do next. Because of inattention, American policy toward any specific country is composed of rather haphazard byproducts of domestic politics, the activities of interest groups, and applications of generic concerns. But overly attentive partners attempt to connect the dots of scattered policies into overall American strategies, and to extrapolate policy twitches into looming trends. North Korea's behavior, for example, may look from the U. S. perspective like irrational brinksmanship that should be punished, but from its vantage point it is looking up the barrel of overwhelming American power, and so desperate measures seem necessary.

To be sure, North Korea is an extreme case. Common sense assures the Canadians that American movies featuring invasions of Ottawa are meant to be funny. Moreover, other countries appreciate the existence of a world order, however America-centered, and they know that they could not themselves provide an alternative order. But the United States can never expect the complacency it feels about relationships to be completely shared by a vulnerable partner. The fact of vulnerability is created by the disparity in capacities, and it is a situation that can be managed, but not solved.

American solipsism is the cardinal sin of the post-Cold War era, because a superpower that knows only itself and its own interests cannot credibly acknowledge the autonomy of others. Better advertising might just add insult to the possibility of injury. One of the two original dimensions of soft power that has now slipped from Nye's sight—the shaping of agendas by international organizations—has subtly moved from being a means of American primacy to being a (sometimes endangered) warrantee of the legitimate standing of other players. It is therefore not surprising that the momentum for further multilateral institutionalization—the Kyoto Accords and the International Criminal Court, for examples—has moved from the United States to the middle powers. But if soft power counts, the task of the United States is not to dazzle the world, but to reassure it.

The great Sally Rand

4. Leading the dance

The contradiction between the attention that relative power attracts and the difference of interest in the relationship that it creates underlies a fundamental tension in the post-Cold War era. If the path is set simply by the blindness of the superpower and the anxieties of the rest, then the cycle of domination, overreach, challenge and chaos described by Paul Kennedy and others may be inevitable, even if it is modified by the greater integration of the contemporary world and the higher costs of chaos. But soft power, understood as the effective management of asymmetric relationships rather than as cosmetics, may provide the key to sustainable leadership.

But why is the ability to persuade important, if the capacity for punishment exists? First, the exercise of sanctions in one case limits the availability of sanctions in future cases. It is clear, for instance, that without the invasion of Iraq, and particularly the longterm impasse that followed, the response of the Bush administration to North Korea and Iran might well have been tougher. Moreover, a solid case has been made that the launching of the Iraq invasion undercut the successful completion of the campaign against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Second, force is a constant denial of the autonomy and interests of the coerced, and so it requires constant effort. A person might have enough muscle to push a ceiling beam into place, but no one is strong enough to hold it there indefinitely. Third, the use of force to coerce a weaker power is implicitly a threat to all weaker powers, even though in fact the threat cannot be actualized. If A is stronger than X, Y and Z, what A does to X will be viewed by Y and Z as something that could happen to them, but in fact A may not be stronger than X plus Y plus Z. If the exercise of coercion is not to alienate others, then it must be credible that X did not simply irritate A but broke important rules, and that A will itself abide by the rules.

Imperial overreach is far more subtle than simply trying to take a bridge too far. If the threat of force is made, it must be executed or it will lessen the credibility of future threats. If it is executed, the force available for future threats is reduced, and the post-victory situation requires an indefinite commitment. If the coercion of one state alienates others, then the others will comply only under implicit threat, will strive to protect themselves, and may attempt to balance against the superpower. Coercion not only burns the candle of power, it raises the temperature of the ground upon which power treads, and increases the upward slope of surrounding territory.

The key to sustainable leadership is not the ability to mount preemptive strikes against potential challengers, but rather the persuasiveness of soft power. Precisely because persuasion produces cooperation while husbanding resources, it can be sustained indefinitely. In contrast to the self-limiting side effects of the use of force, the preconditions of successful persuasion increase the likelihood of successful persuasion in the future. The mutual commitment to common goals and to existing relationships creates a momentum that favors viewing the next crisis from the same angle. Reciprocal patterns of respect and deference become habitual. The United States has established this pattern of leadership with some allies-- Great Britain, for example--but not with all.

The requirement for sustainable world leadership is that the United States pursue common goals in a manner that does not threaten the autonomy of others. This requires respecting international institutions, maximizing effective consultation, and articulating positions with an eye towards external audiences as well as towards domestic ones. Most fundamentally, it requires a leadership attitude that respects and values relationships, a leadership whose own preferences are shaped by its position of world leadership. Confidence in the reciprocity of American leadership is essential. America can lead the dance, but if it dances alone, no matter how attractively by its own standards, it endangers the toes of everyone else, and they will back off.

Regardless of what it does, America is at the center of world attention in the post-Cold War era. There may well be more capable leaders elsewhere, but they cannot easily hold the attention of all of their peers, and they are even less likely to take America in tow. In the 1980s President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica won the Nobel Peace Prize for his attempts to organize a collective Central American solution to the problem of Nicaragua, but his effort foundered on the resistance of the United States. The alternative of

unpredictable chaos sets a fairly low bar for preferring the continuance of an America-centered world order, but it is the quality of American leadership that determines cohesiveness of that order. And ultimately, world order *is* cohesiveness. An order full of petty tit-for-tats, remembered insults, unfulfilled promises, and unilateral actions is in the process of disintegration, even if there are no challengers to the center.

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