Is soft power an effective strategy? Libya and North Korea offer a study in contrasts

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Abstract: Soft power can be effective as a standalone strategy, but such efforts only succeed when consistent with the sponsoring state's underlying culture and characteristics. Historically, soft power initiatives have not received the focus, priority, or resources that hard power initiatives have, largely because it is more difficult to see and measure how effective soft power strategies are. To understand how well soft power strategies can work, it is necessary to see how they have been executed – successfully and otherwise. The soft power strategies enacted by North Korea and Libya offer the necessary study in contrasts, with the former's Arirang festival a strong case in how to use soft power effectively and the latter's hopes of becoming a tourism destination illustrating the flaws of building a soft power strategy on a weak foundation. Hard power will always be a staple of security strategy, but fighting is expensive. Integrating soft power into the strategic mix can make security more cost effective and more reliable.

Keywords: Strategy, soft power, North Korea, Libya, smart power, strategic studies

Introduction

STRATEGY HAS EVOLVED WELL BEYOND ITS MARTIAL ROOTS. The discipline's broader role continues to include measures used to prevent or avoid conflict, and it has expanded to address the wide range of other risks that states face. Soft power represents part how the discipline of strategy has expanded, and in fact, soft power has become a strategy in its own right. The potential for greater direct physical, social, economic impacts from hard power strategies requires that states develop, cultivate, and employ alternatives to threats, coercion, and deterrence. War is expensive, and it has only become more so

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(Hartung 2021 2). Soft power strategy can mitigate the costs and risks associated with the exercising of power in the global anarchic environment, particularly when force is a suboptimal solution.

Soft power offers a continuum of measures from those closer to hard power (such as deterrence) to cultural investments designed to make a state seem more favourable to potential allies and adversaries. Sun Tzu's belief that "the best way is to avoid what is strong and strike at what is weak," provides a starting point for understanding soft power as a strategy, but the observation sits at the end of the soft power spectrum adjacent to hard power (Sun Tzu VI:30). Deterrence comes next, as a manifestation of a reliance on hard power without using the tools of hard power for their intended purpose. The gaps in deterrence as a strategy reinforce the continued growing importance of soft power, which can obviate the need (at least partially) for conflict and even provide a platform for prosperity and peace.

Where soft power stands alone, not as an extension of or response to specific hard power shortcomings, it represents a range of strategic opportunities for states to engage with each other through attraction for the purposes of mutual benefit as well as conflict avoidance. India is arguably better known for Bollywood than its nuclear arsenal (Sasikumar 2018), and Norway's reputation for environmental responsibility makes it easy to forget that its sovereign wealth fund, with $1.37 trillion[1] in assets under management, is filled with fossil fuel revenues (Norges Bank Investment Management 2021). Soft power can redefine not just how a state engages with others, but how others engage with that state.

While soft power strategies can be incredibly important, relying on them exclusively is as unrealistic as relying on hard power exclusively. The time, effort, and imprecision involved in the application of soft power strategies can leave gaps, particularly because absent the immediate, flawless, and hermetic implementation of all-protective soft power bubble, states will continue to need hard power capabilities. Sometimes efforts fuelled by soft power to prevent or deter conflict will be unsuccessful, requiring a broader view of strategy that includes access to hard power – and possibly the need to deploy it.

Soft power efforts by Libya and North Korea offer a study in contrasts. The former saw an attempt to develop a robust tourism business in order to reshape world perception of the country fall apart as a result of a wave of revolutions that swept through the region. Ultimately, the failure of Libya's soft power strategy came down to a fundamental misalignment between the strategy itself and the nature of the underlying state – similar to the outcome associated with a corroded foundation below an otherwise secure house. North Korea, on the

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[1] Norges Bank Investment Management reports the fund's value at approximately NOK12 trillion on January 17, 2022, with an exchange rate of US$1 to NOK8.738 (OANDA).

other hand, has deftly used its Arirang cultural event as a soft power mechanism. In addition to highlighting the characteristics of which the state is most proud, it offers an opportunity for worldwide engagement – and in a way that still offers outlets for diplomatic surprises, as described later in this article.

Ultimately, states need both soft power and hard power strategies, and the more they interact with each other the better. After all, "[s]trategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century," which means that nations have to be able to communicate who they are to the international community, and what that means for how they plan to interact (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Laughlin 2014: 71). Executing on that, of course, has become exceptionally difficult. Almost from the instant a narrative is proposed, it can be opposed, and in a competitive international environment, in which soft power is a staple, such competition is to be expected – and best countered through soft power strategies.

How soft power is a strategy

Soft power strategy, as an idea, requires a specific examination of its three components: power, what constitutes the soft variation of it, and strategy. By stripping the concept to its fundamental elements and subsequently reconstructing them, the extent to which soft power can exist as a standalone strategy becomes evident, and its utility is highlighted in an examination of how the components interact with each other. Power, according to Lake, "is the ability of one state to get another to do something it would not otherwise do" (2007: 51). Gompert and Binnendijk explain that power "spans a spectrum, from offensive military force at one end to routine diplomacy at the other" (2016: 2). Within that spectrum, soft power is "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers," which can be accomplished via "coercion, payment, or attraction and persuasion" (Nye 2017), although coercion does lead toward the harder end of the power spectrum. Fusing elements along the spectrum, from coercion to attraction, soft power platforms can be used to pivot to hard power execution.

Like power, strategy can be difficult to define, which makes the digest of definitions that Baylis and Wirtz offer particularly useful. Of the nine definitions they curated, five refer to some variation of war, military, force, or "armed coercion," with the remainder sufficiently flexible to to accommodate Nye's notion of soft power, which consists of "attraction and persuasion" (2016: 4; 2017) above, along with other shades of power along the hard/soft spectrum. Foster's thoughts about "effectively exercising power" are open to interpretation beyond use of force, and Wylie's view is wider still, discussing the use of a plan to accomplish something in particular, which in turn resonates with Osgood's thoughts on planning and Murray's and Grimslay's on "process" (2016: 4).

Freedman, further, states that strategy is "about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest" (2016: 4).

Fusing Nye's definition of soft power with the examples gathered by Baylis and Wirtz shows that soft power is indeed a strategy. However, there are limits to it. Soft power can be difficult to initiate and subsequently control. The basic challenge is that the tools of soft power – "culture, values, and policies," according to Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Laughlin – are not the sole (or even primary) domain of the state (2014: 73). Unlike hard power, the state does not have a monopoly on soft power, forcing it often to have to compete with nonstate actors, including its own citizens, in attempting to use the resources of soft power to define and communicate its narrative, shape global perception, and influence state-level relationships (including those with non-state actors).

The savvy needed to develop and implement soft power strategies has become a crucial element in a state's overall strategic posture, with Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Laughlin observing that over the past decade that "a major state without a soft power strategy, in practice if not in name, has become the exception" (2014: 71). To operate without one is to revert to a "might makes right" philosophy, which as the underpinning of strategy, can be expensive and risky, and evolving beyond the Hobbesian "state of nature" requires strategies for prevention or avoidance of conflict to make security more stable and threats less imminent (Curley 1991: 100).

Soft power offers two advantages – one defensive/ preventive and the other accretive. For the former, soft power can prevent the risk of conflict and destruction by shaping the environment. A state can position itself as non-threatening to other states, and perhaps even make itself attractive (in the sense offered by Nye) to other states as a partner, be it in trade relationships, alliances, or other matters. Alternatively, a state could use soft power to show strength, essentially feeding a deterrence approach to avoid conflict, "showing a presumed enemy that he is better off by not taking inimical action" (Gray 1990: 4). In both defensive and accretive scenarios, the state invests in being seen in a way that makes it less likely to become engaged in conflict. The fact that soft power has both defensive and accretive benefits is reflective of the continuum of soft power, from concepts adjacent to hard power out to those that are purely reliant on Nye's "attraction and persuasion" (Nye 2017). Deterrence, one step further away from hard power than the decision to avoid a fight, takes a preventive posture regarding conflict, in which soft power resources can be engaged for strategic use.

Soft power: from deterrence to accretion

Deterrence involves the accumulation and positioning of hard power assets to prevent the need for their active use (Davis 2009: 96). While deterrence may seem to focus mostly on hard power, the importance of positioning and persuasion should not be overlooked. In fact, according to Gray, "deterrence works only because a policy maker … decides that it is deterred" (2000: 256). That decision to be deterred requires some amount of persuasion (coming in the form of either attraction or coercion), which is where deterrence can take on soft power or hard power characteristics. Gray observes that the choice to be deterred results from coercion, but that presupposes a deterrence relationship in which coercion is the means of persuasion.

Deterrence, therefore, is at least a limited manifestation of a soft power strategy. It requires the use of coercion and persuasion in a way that the positioning of hard power resources to bolster the credibility of the message that such resource would be used if necessary. Rather than simply demonstrating the "political will to have to resort to effective force," the increased use of soft power resources in deterrence would shape the conditions and perception around a state's investment in hard power tools, convincing other states of the situations in which they would be used (Lake 1990: 13; Gompert and Binnendijk 2016: 3). Hard power tools can fit into a soft power strategy, provided they are used to attract instead of attack.

The dual characteristics of deterrence provide an important starting point from which to understand soft power as a strategy. Deterrence requires a hard power investment and the readiness to act on it, not to mention the role of coercion in securing the compliance of the deterred. However, even coercion requires credibility, and coercion could be seen as the basest form of persuasion (Honig 2013: 27). Deterrence's soft power elements are further noted in recognizing that "you cannot buy it directly" (Gray 2000 257). Spending requires attendant effort to develop credibility. Ultimately, to be effective, deterrence requires total commitment. As Gray explains, "If one wishes to derive a single lesson from the arms race experience of the 1930s, it would be that the half-hearted conduct of a race against a wholehearted adversary is a prescription for disaster" (1977: 27). The greatest risk regarding deterrence is that it could "break down and active use may ensue" (Davis 2009: 94). Partial measures can leave openings for escalation, and once that begins, the value of a deterrence plan collapses quickly.

Because it at least appears to include elements of soft power strategy – namely persuasion and credibility – deterrence offers an important conceptual bridge between hard and soft power. If credibility is breached – i.e., if the soft

power component fails – then deterrence has failed, because the situation would default to the use of hard power strategies and resources. The effectiveness of soft power as a strategy is easier to realize in more evolved approaches than deterrence. Instead of using soft power merely to convince other states of its ability to defend or attack, a state could take an approach to soft power that is value-accretive by convincing other states that it could become a reliable trading partner, or simply that it is not a threat and thus could easily be left alone.

Simply, if likability is too lofty an objective, perhaps showing that a state is not planning to cause any trouble is good enough.

The preventive and non-escalatory nature of soft power contributes to its benefits for cost and risk reduction, as well as in support of economic growth and prosperity. The effective use of soft power can help a state show that it does not intend to be a threat or otherwise disruptive force in the matters of other states, which forms part of the process of advancing beyond the state-of-nature environment in which monitoring for and defending against existential threats is nearly all-consuming. The simple benefit of such a message (i.e., of not being a threat), if conveyed effectively and genuinely, is that other states would not have to invest in extensive defense capabilities relative to that particular state, freeing resources for other purposes. As a corollary, soft power obviates the risk of escalation and subsequent conflict, in that offers an alternative to the threat-and-response loop that constitutes escalation.

If preventive and non-escalatory positioning offers the mildest benefit to a state investing in soft power, and sufficient results from soft power efforts result in even greater savings from reduced hard power spending, then a soft power strategy that is value-accretive represents further advancement along this spectrum. When states develop and implement soft power strategies, they position themselves for opportunities involving economic growth, redeployment of state financial resources into peaceful domestic initiatives (such as infrastructure and public welfare), and improved relationships with other states, to further such value-accretive initiatives.

Soft power has been conveyed as a way for a state to improve its "brand," shore up its "reputation," or otherwise shape a narrative (Haigh 2020: 10; Yun 2018: 3). Ultimately, all that comes down to how a state can shape how others perceive it in a positive (or at least non-negative) way. Further investments in soft power could yield tangible returns from attaining political stability to driving economic growth and prosperity. States benefit from commitments to soft power strategies because they can be preventive and non-escalatory, as well as cost- and risk-reductive by limiting the need to invest in or resort to hard power and even value-accretive, both through the freer and broader conduct of trade and through the redeployment of financial resources originally intended for hard power use.

Libya and North Korea: A study in contrasts

The notion that soft power strategies are slow and imprecise has some merit. However, the skill with which soft power is wielded, and the planning that goes into it, can profoundly affect the success a state achieves. Soft power requires a considerable amount of self-awareness, and states that align soft power strategies with their cultures and characteristics are more likely to realize faster and greater results. A state that aspires to a soft power strategy inconsistent with its own political stability or genuine objectives runs the risk of failing quickly. Meanwhile, a state that is culturally attuned to its preferred soft power strategy and has objectives aligned with it could realize considerable success. Soft power, like hard power, conforms to Sun Tzu's belief that "[i]f you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles (III:18).

Below are two examples of soft power strategies with vastly different outcomes. Libya sought to position itself as a safe and welcoming tourist destination, which would have been value-accretive and helped the state shed its authoritarian reputation (at least a bit), but it suffered from salient misalignment between the plan and the state's characteristics. North Korea, on the other hand, has turned a cultural platform into a delivery mechanism for global messages regarding strength and capability, mixing soft power with deterrence, while using the military (in this context) as an input into soft power capabilities. By contrasting the two cases, it is possible to see how soft power can be used as a strategy to significant effect, as long as it aligns with the reality on the ground.

Libya: Soft power strategy misalignment

The slow and imprecise nature of some soft power strategies means that near-term challenges faced by a state can derail even the most thoroughly planned and resourced of strategies. To succeed, such strategies must be aligned with the characteristics of the state sponsoring them. Failing to do so can lead to degraded results at best and abject failure at worst. Libya experienced the latter in 2011, when it sought to position itself as a tourist destination, safe and welcoming of outside visitors. However, underlying political instability conflicted with the state's ambitions. Just as its efforts to become a tourist destination were gaining momentum, the Arab Spring cost Libya its plan.

Libya's efforts to position itself as a travel/tourism destination were evident with flight arrivals increasing from 2007 to 2008 – the first increase since 2003 (World Bank 2021). Moreover, that development signaled a change in what had been a downward trend going back to 1995. By 2011, Libya was chosen by Conde Nast Traveler as one of "15 places whose time is now" (Payne 2011). Such a prestigious recognition would offer the opportunity for revenue inflows and

an upgraded perception of a nation that struggled with an image led by dictator Colonel Moammar Al-Qaddafi and was tied to such global atrocities as the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 (Simms 2010; Ghannam 2000: 18).

The timing, unfortunately, was neither right nor now. While ostensibly showing progress relative to its reputation as a state sponsor of terrorism, Libya suffered sufficient underlying political instability to become vulnerable to the spread of regional instability, as well (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2019: 9). The "Arab Spring" reached Libya shortly before Conde Nast Traveler published the article (Sehgal 2011). Libya quickly saw its soft power effort evaporate in a manner that would have been embarrassing, if not for the greater crisis the state faced. The fact that Libya "collapsed into a protracted civil war" demonstrates the salient misalignment of the state's ambitions with its own stability internally, let alone that of the region (Anderson 2001: 6).

Libya sought to exercise soft power in a way similar to many other states that aspire to outside tourism revenue, not to mention the implication that tourism implies safety and stability. Efforts to shape Libya's perception around the world were headed in the right direction, but the realities of political stability manifested sooner as a result of the mismatch between Libya's objectives and current circumstances. The lesson on the use of soft power from this case is that the exercise of soft power strategies requires not just investment and a desired end state but a realistic assessment of the risks that could threaten such a progression. There is no substitute for the combination of self-knowledge and respect for the constraints within which a state operates. A soft power strategy that is all ambition for the future with no links to the present could collapse under its own weight.

North Korea: Targeted results from cultural platforms

North Korea demonstrated that an ongoing investment in cultural activities could be directed in focused manner as needed to turn soft power from attraction and persuasion to something a bit sharper, although still short of coercion. In 2000, only a few weeks before what would become one of the closest U.S. presidential elections in history, North Korea used the Mass Games to influence (and embarrass) U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, sending a message to the international community and perhaps specifically to U.S. voters. In doing so, North Korea showed how an established soft power platform could be wielded in a specific way to achieve near-term objectives. While it could be difficult to develop and implement a soft power program for such purposes, using one that is already in place can be highly effective.

The Mass Games is a cultural display and soft power tool, clearly aligned with North Korea's culture, ethos, and regime ambitions. Yet it is also a genuine and impressive form of art in its own right. The event is often called "Arirang" or the "Arirang Festival," although that refers to a specific story (based on a folk song) that was conveyed via some of the Mass Games, and it goes back as far as 1946 (Jung 2013: 96; UNESCO, Koryo Tours 2018). North Korea's premier cultural event, the Mass Games "*is* North Korea at its highest moment [emphasis in the original]," according to Jung, and it "displays the contours of the state by way of arranging and appropriating a mass of bodies for calisthenic and performative arts representing the leader as the Father" (2013: 96).

With such a clinical description, it is important to note the scale of the performance, which involves more than 100,000 performers and has been de-scribed as perhaps "the most spectacular artistic performance in human history" (Abrahamian 2018). The Games can go on for two months and feature "a distil-lation of the country's narrative and is meant to awe and inspire" (Abrahamian 2018). However, what U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright attended with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in October 2000 was also clearly intended to nakedly advance a specific state agenda (Perlez 2020).

Coming only a few weeks before the Bush/Gore election that would come down to "dimpled chads" in Florida (Borger 2000), the 2000 Games offered the Kim regime the opportunity to prepare the environment for future U.S./North Korea negotiations – ostensibly making it a strong display of diplomacy through cultural engagement. North Korea seized the moment, projecting the ongoing soft power investment in Arirang into a message to both U.S. presidential candi-dates. According to Perlez, "[T]here were some images in the show that must have unnerved Dr. Albright, including one depicting the launch of a long-range ballistic missile, superimposed on the wall of the stadium in front of her" (Perlez 2020). Of course, that display featured the weapon that was the subject of the negotiations for which Secretary Albright flew to Pyongyang.

Although the Mass Games has its roots in something much deeper than cultural diplomacy, the alignment among the event, the message North Korea wants to send to the rest of the world, and the underlying nature of the state itself is strong. This stands in stark contrast to the case of Libya, in which political instability undermined its ambitions. North Korea's maintenance of the Arirang cultural platform provides ongoing value while also offering the opportunity for specific, targeted use to achieve specific outcomes, as demonstrated by the per-formance Secretary Albright witnessed.

Successful soft power integration requires a right fit

Soft power strategies can be highly effective, as long as they are developed and executed in a manner that is consistent with the aims, culture, and characteristics of the state involved. North Korea shows how the savvy development of soft power capabilities can make significant ongoing security contributions while also offering a platform for broader strategic activities (to include coercion). The to the effective development and use of soft power, though, clearly lies in alignment with a state's underlying culture and characteristics. The need for cultural alignment for soft power strategies is no different from the need for cultural alignment in any other form of strategy. Hoffman, for example, makes clear, "The notion of strategic culture as a frame of reference for beginning to understand one's adversary and the distinctive … approaches to conducting war clearly has some analytical value" (2017: 138). A state cannot plan and execute what is not in its culture to conceive.

Conclusion

Soft power has become a staple among major states, smaller states, and even non-state actors, signalling an end to the era when military might alone offered sufficient narrative. While it is easy to try to shorthand the role of soft power as something akin to brand-building, the reality is far more nuanced. Soft power strategies serve states along a broad spectrum – from bolstering deterrence postures through attracting alliances, trading partnerships, and other positive state-level interactions and relationships. The finesse necessary even to affect seemingly blunt efforts at soft power – such as those in which North Korea engages – is considerable. "Under the new conditions of the information age, more than ever," Nye writes, "the soft sell may prove more effective than the hard sell" (2008: 101).

Simply pushing out a narrative without tethering it to the values and characteristics of the sponsoring state, as evidenced by Libya's attempt to portray itself as a friendly tourist destination, does not guarantee results – and may, in fact, guarantee the opposite. Preaching at foreigners is not the best way to convert them," Nye explains, despite the fact that some states communicate from a belief that, "if [the audience] simply knew what we know, they would see things our way" (2008: 103). The alignment of words (or content), deeds, purpose, and culture ultimately make soft power strategies successful, although soft power alone will struggle without dovetailing into an overarching strategic framework that includes both hard and soft power elements (Wilson 2008: 115).

Soft power requires more than careful planning and deft execution. Such strategies can only be effective if they are aligned with the states plying them. Libya found it could not sell an image to the rest of the world that did not exist at home, regardless of how savvy and coordinated the messaging was. It is not possible to apply a misaligned message on a long-term soft power strategy and expect success, just as a military campaign cannot persist beyond a state's abilities to secure equipment, ammunition, and personnel. Sun Tzu was right: "He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks" (III:17). With Libya, the spirit was not the same at home as it was in the view of itself the country hoped to portray in the rest of the world.

North Korea, on the other hand, far more successfully adhered to its underlying culture in developing its soft power strategy, as regards the Arirang Festival. The performances showed discipline, structure, order, and commitment. Those characteristics are consistent with the "Juche" ethos of North Korea (Byman and Lind 2010: 52), which loosely translates to "self-reliance," and they perhaps counterintuitively align with an autocrat's expectations, which effectively shines a positive light on a regime that otherwise is highly criticized worldwide (Freedom House 2021). As a result, North Korea has demonstrated that lockstep alignment with its culture could yield powerful results, a consistency no doubt embodied by the Arirang Festival itself. Soft power is indeed a strategy and is at its best when integrated with hard power strategies in a manner that reflects the state as closely as possible.

Hard power will likely always remain an important part of most states' overarching strategies, but soft power's long-term efficiency (particularly for cost) and potential for value accretion make the process of attraction more attractive. After all, fighting is expensive. Deterrence is less so, but still costly. Soft power can reduce the expense of defence while fuelling prosperity, or at least buying a state a little more breathing room among adversaries. After all, years of Arirang Festival productions likely fall far short of the $36.6 billion it would cost North Korea to upgrade its 4,300 first- and second-generation Soviet T-class tanks (Dangwal 2021; Kim 2020)

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