

## **U.S. Applications of Hard and Soft Power**

### **Introduction**

Nearly four centuries ago, Nicolai Machiavelli famously proclaimed that it is better to be feared than to be loved. Yet as we observed on December 25, 1991, on the eve that the Soviet Union was dissolved, fear does not always prevail. Throughout the duration of the Cold War, the Soviet Union faced an onslaught of forces that it was incapable of addressing with policies of fear. The spread of democracy and the upheaval of communist governments cannot be linked to applications of hard power, but instead, to the consistent and strategic implementation of strategies that spread goodwill. In 1990, Joseph Nye described this phenomenon of peaceful influence in global affairs as “soft power.”

Today, the United States remains as committed as ever to the implementation of soft power strategies to achieve its foreign policy objectives around the globe. Yet, there remains something inherently different about the new multipolar international structure that inhibits the successful application of soft power. Over the past decade, the United States has demonstrated a failure to balance hard and soft power, instead placing an emphasis on using these two forces in a disjointed and often non-collaborative manner. In fact, it could be claimed that this lack of balance between hard and soft power is a major contributing factor in the increase of failed U.S. foreign policy objectives in the post-Cold War era.

In this paper I will highlight the inconsistencies between U.S. application of soft and hard power during the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. First, I will examine the contemporary

definitions of both hard and soft power. Second, I will analyze the successes and failures in the U.S. application of hard and soft power during the Cold War. Particular attention will be paid to how these applications represent balanced uses of persuasion and force. Third, I will examine the shift in the global power structure that occurred when the Soviet Union collapsed and how this had an impact on U.S. implementation of power.. Fourth and finally, I will conclude with recommendations about how the United States should modify its current policies to increase the successes of its foreign policy pursuits.

### **Hard and Soft Power**

Throughout much of history, the international system has been governed by the paradigm of realism—a philosophy that focuses almost entirely on states’ abilities to accumulate means of coercive force. Military force, political power, and economic clout dominate the realist system. Almost all activities are gauged by the use of “hard power,” or the application of coercive force to influence the actions of other global actors. Hard power has traditionally been used in an aggressive manner aimed at territorial or economic gains.

While the successes of hard power cannot be denied, its relatively poor record of producing long lasting change must also be acknowledged. Coercive force has inherent implications of supremacy and subordination that complicate efforts at international collaboration. Further, the resources required to exert a constant force on any object is finite—it is inevitable that over time, the implementation of coercive force will be lessened and the ability of those subject to its pressures to repulse it will increase. In other words, applications of hard power *can* help achieve foreign policy goals, but unless a state’s resources are infinite, those achievements will be temporary.

With the end of WWII and the increasing threat of nuclear war, there was a marked increase in the desire to seek non-violent solutions to the world's most pressing issues. Moreover, while the presence of the realist system could be felt throughout much of the post-WWII era and into the Cold War, as the century progressed, it became increasingly clear that a change was taking place. Slowly, the paradigm of realism and the implications on global power that accompanied it were being refuted and a new, idealist system made its presence increasingly known. Idealism disposes of realism's focus on hard power, and instead emphasizes international relations and the implementation of "soft power." Soft power, while much less tangible than hard power, plays an equally powerful role in global affairs.

Coined in 1990 by political analyst, Joseph Nye, soft power refers to expression of "political and cultural values that other governments may find appealing" (Hook, 2008:5). International aid, culture, political ideology, financial stability, and inspiring leaders all contribute to a country's soft power. However, like hard power, the successes achieved by soft power alone are short lived. All countries rise and fall in global popularity, making the policy outcomes of soft power hard to predict. Unlike hard power, soft power attempts to persuade individuals (as opposed to states) to take action.

### **U.S. Power Balancing During the Cold War**

During the Cold War, the world was plunged into a bipolar international order as two super-powers attempted to gain support from neutral parties while offsetting the actions of their opponent. This period was marked by what Gaddis (1989) called the long peace. For a period of nearly fifty years, the international system was incredibly stable as the United States and Russia held nearly equal military and political strength. The stalemate that resulted from the matched

hard power capabilities of the two major powers meant that another means of demonstrating global dominance would be required.

The first serious application of balanced power during the cold war period was made by the United States with the institution of its policies of containment. The concept of containment was proposed by diplomat George Kennan in the now infamous *Long Telegram*. Kennan argued that the only way to defeat the spread of Communism was to suffocate it. Containment had two major policies associated with it, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.

Truman Doctrine. In 1946, the United Kingdom informed the United States that it was no longer capable of helping Greece and Turkey resist growing communist pressures, the U.S. announced a robust plan that combined aid pledges of military support to the struggling nations. In President Truman's 1947 address before a joint session of congress, he proclaimed that the United States would "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." The Truman Doctrine demonstrated the U.S. intention to counter any further expansion with military force—the hard power element of containment.

In 1947, the United States presented Europe and the Soviet Union with an ambitious program of financial assistance known as the Marshall Plan. The Marshall plan was proposed with dual intentions: two aid in the reconstruction of Europe and to win the "hearts and minds" of those people most susceptible to the spread of communism. The act of goodwill was accepted by the United States' European allies after a period of negotiations, but was rejected by the Soviets and other members of the Eastern Bloc. The Marshall Plan represented a significant early application of U.S. soft power and the vital non-military aspect of US policies of containment.

Containment represents a major success in balanced applications of hard and soft power. The policies that constituted containment succeeded in forging stronger relationships with “at-risk” countries in Europe while also sending a strong signal to the Soviet Union that the United States would respond negatively to any further Soviet expansion. In fact, so successful was containment, that many experts consider it the leading cause of the Soviet collapse (Ray, 2005:355).

### **Analysis of Imbalance in the Post Cold War System**

Whereas the Cold War served as a period of stability in the international system, the immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union represents a period of significance global turbulence. Formerly Soviet aligned countries were forced to reassign their allegiances, countries previously held together by the forceful hand of Communist ideology were now faced with the task of establishing a new sense of nationalism, and the United States was forced to develop itself as the solitary global leader. These challenges, along with the perceived lack of any serious opposition to the spread of democracy ultimately translated into imbalanced U.S. foreign policies.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States has acted nearly unchecked as it exercised its power that the global hegemon. Throughout much of the 1990s and into the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, United States foreign policy was conducted under the assumption that there was global consensus that the democratic ideals that America stood for represented the highest level of human achievement. In 1991, political scientist Francis Fukuyama even famously declared the figurative “end of history,” a reference to the conflict between thesis and antithesis in Hegelian dialectics. This perceived domination over global ideology meant an end to U.S. attempts to win the “hearts and minds” of the global population (Kennedy, 2005).

The United States increasingly approached foreign policy from a standpoint not that sought to balance between hard and soft power, but instead in a manner that sought to demonstrate further that the United States was the global hegemon. James Steinberg (2008) identifies three primary reasons why this tactic was destined to fail:

First, the United States failed to identify the nature of the new global threat. While its foreign policy changed dramatically following the collapse of the Soviet Union, its military and aid operations remained largely the same. The U.S. military was still situated to address the threats of enemy states, not the decentralized nature of the terrorist threat that was building on foreign shores. In addition, aid deliveries were primarily focused at those countries that previously were the center of U.S. attention due to their “at-risk” status. While the United States continued to focus its attention on territorial threats, a very real ideological threat—one rooted in Islamic extremism—was emerging in Central Asia and the Middle East. The United States did not understand the appropriate means by which to address the new global order.

Second, because the United States foreign policy establishment did not adequately understand the nature of the new threat, it was unable to appropriately address it. As the United States was once again combating an ideology, it would be necessary to approach it from the multi-pronged approach of using both hard and soft power. Radical Islam could not be defeated with brute force as the United States attempted to do in its bombing raids of terrorist training camps in the final years of the Clinton Administration and once again during the first few years of the U.S. War Against Terror in Afghanistan. Only later during the Bush administration, was focus shifted to providing aid to combat those who were “at –risk” of succumbing to the ideology.

Third, instead of reinforcing its actions with soft power, the United State's solitary actions, particularly the war in Iraq, have been *undermining* its soft power. The U.S. faces an increasingly evident lack of legitimacy on the global stage, a direct result of its failures to balance the use of its extensive hard power resources with its soft power reserves. Not only is this lack of legitimacy damaging to U.S. image in developing countries it might wish to influence, but it risks impacting future foreign policy initiatives.

Overall, the shift that occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the positive result of a substantial U.S. undertaking, is creating serious difficulties for the country as it continues to adapt to the news system. Yet, there is already a sense that leaders might have learned their lessons. Early on in his term, President Barack Obama indicated that his administration would neither focus on hard or soft power politics. Instead, U.S. foreign policy during the next four years will be executed based on another one of Joseph Nye's principles- Smart Power (Goldenburg, 2008). Smart power utilizes the method of balancing hard and soft power, much in a manner that was foremost in the policies of the Cold War, but attempts revitalize the concept so that it can work in the multipolar world system that we exist in today.

## **Conclusion**

History provides leaders with the incredible opportunity to make decisions based on the successes and failures of their predecessors. This significantly helped U.S. Presidents during the Cold War who attempted to formulate policies that would have favorable foreign policy outcomes. However, once the global system shifted and our U.S. leaders needed to address a world of new threats that the United States had not encountered before, they had no substantial

historical record from which to draw. We do however have the ability to draw comparisons between the situations we face today and those of the past in a purely theoretical manner.

For instance, based on our experiences during the Cold War, it can be theorized that the implementation of policies of force when combating an ideologically based foe will ultimately result in a negative foreign policy outcome. Force alone emboldens enemies to act and provides them with ideological ammunition that they can use to further their own cause. Likewise, we can extract from history the fact that the application of soft power without the fear of force to further a foreign policy goal will result in a scenario whereby ideological “shopping” occurs as people and states seek to determine how they can achieve their own goals at minimal cost.

Rather than isolated applications of U.S. hard and soft power, the balanced use of political persuasion and fear of force is most suited to achieving U.S. foreign policy goals. Hard power and soft power alone are inherently the same thing—implementation of the will of one country over another. However, when taken together, these two forces create a framework within which actors can produce a meaningful dialogue. The dominant actor has the ability to set a goal and the terms for achieving it, and the subordinate actor has the ability to choose from within a range of policy options that fall within the dominant actor’s terms.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States made several very crucial mistakes in its perception of the world. However, there is hope that with the start of a new administration, there will be significant progress towards once again having a viable foreign policy strategy. The Obama administration’s commitment to Smart Power speaks to a solid understanding of the state’s current affairs as well as a strong sense of the past. As we move forward in the coming years, it can be expected that the United States will once again embark on an ambitious foreign policy agenda.

that seeks to improve the conditions of the peoples around the world while asserting the supremacy of U.S. ideals.

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