**[Why soft power counts](https://www.dawn.com/news/1753271/why-soft-power-counts)**

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THE debate continues over the value and role of soft power in the conduct of foreign policy. It has long been acknowledged that international perceptions are consequential to a country’s standing and even its geopolitical clout in global affairs.

The evidence is compelling that when soft power is deployed as an integral part of a country’s diplomatic strategy, it pays rich dividends by building trust and influence. This, in turn, helps that country to more effectively promote its foreign policy goals. States that earn respect from their conduct benefit from a soft-power effect that enhances their global reputation.

In a recent article in the Financial Times, the well-respected journalist Janan Ganesh disputed this and claimed that the “once influential concept looks dated in a world where hard power counts ever more”.

He cited the example of countries such as Australia and South Korea, who had long relied on the projection of cultural attraction to build their reputation, but were now turning to hard power as a result of “the exigencies of sharing a region with China.” That meant returning to increased defence spending and loading up on the “lethal kit”. From this, he concluded that the world today is witnessing “if not the end of soft power as a useful concept, then a brutal exposure of its limits”.Softassets, he also wrote, can neither replace nor rival hard ones.

But soft power was never envisaged to replace hard power. It was always seen as supplementing hard power in a country’s strategy. It is, after all, one among a range of tools for a country to deploy in pursuit of its goals. It is not an either-or choice.

American scholar Joseph Nye, who introduced the notion of soft power, defined it as the ability to shape the preferences of others and achieve outcomes through “attraction” rather than coercion or economic incentives. True that he counterposed soft power, “the power of persuasion and co-option,” with the “power of coercion” represented by the hard power of military and economic strength. But by introducing the concept of “smart power”, he sought to correct the misperception that soft power was enough on its own to produce a successful foreign policy.

For Nye, smart power is the capacity to combine the resources of hard and soft power and deploy whichever one is judged more effective in a specific context. Arguing that a rigid approach can be counterproductive, he offered the example of several countries that successfully followed smart strategies. In his influential book, The Future of Power, he cited the case of China, where leaders invested in soft power and efforts to make the country more appealing to accompany the increase in its military and economic power.

International perceptions are consequential for a country’s reputation and standing.

In fact, the conduct of big, middle and small powers today indicates that they all seek to complement their hard power resources by deploying soft power assets, which together help to enhance their clout and enable them to engage more effectively in international diplomacy.

This doesn’t at all signify “the end of soft power.” A country’s reputation and positive image continues to count and play a key role in the battle for influence. Global powers that possess substantial military and economic strength integrate soft power in their strategies, and spend generous resources on this as it helps to expand their influence.

China today is engaging in vigorous soft power projection. Its recent mediation of rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has increased its soft power. It is also stepping up efforts to shape the global narrative. Western nations have of course been successfully doing this for a much longer time.

Countries such as Singapore and Qatar have also used soft power to secure significant weight at the global level; this has helped reinforce their economic strength. In fact, soft power assets are especially useful for small and middle countries, providing them the means to project their influence and increase their international outreach and standing in a crowded global environment.

For them, being ‘liked’ becomes a force multiplier, encouraging cooperation from the international community and often enabling them to punch above their weight.

The Global Soft Power Index 2023, put together by the London-based company, Brand Finance, places Singapore and Qatar at number 21 and 24 out of 121 countries evaluated in several metrics of soft power. The US is ranked number one (although it slipped in rankings during Donald Trump’s presidency due to his unilateralist and disruptive policies). China is at number five and Canada at number seven.

Pakistan has consistently figured among the bottom half of countries in these rankings, and is at 84 in the latest report.

Pakistan incurs reputational damage by being seen to be perpetually in crisis, which hardly creates positive international perceptions of the country. But crisis isn’t all there is to Pakistan. Every country has strengths and weaknesses. So does Pakistan. In fact, the country has many soft power resources. But successive governments have paid little, if any, attention to identifying them, much less incorporating them systematically into its international diplomacy.

Given Pakistan’s longstanding international ‘image’ problem, in part due to mischaracterisations but also because of on-ground realities, it is all the more essential for it to undertake soft power efforts to correct misperceptions, and, more importantly, to project its positive socioeconomic attributes and rich heritage of arts, civilisation, music and culture. This involves the country defining itself so that others, including its adversaries, do not misrepresent it or seize the narrative to its disadvantage.

Today, narratives at the international level are shaped in large part by soft power strategies, especially as a hyperconnected and multipolar world offers unprecedented opportunities to influence multiple actors across the world — beyond governments. But our policymakers remain shy of changing how we conduct our diplomacy when ‘nation branding’ is deemed to be so essential.

There is no reason for Pakistan not to do better in the Global Soft Power League by raising its diplomatic game. For this, it is necessary in the first instance for our officials to acknowledge the importance of soft power, identify the country’s soft power resources, and then imaginatively incorporate them in our foreign policy strategy and diplomacy.

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