

How soft power can help meet international challenges



Not going soft. Time for the UK to build on its influence. Photo © Mat Wright.

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As other countries dedicate more resources to their own levers of influence, now is the time for the UK to build on its strengths in soft power rather than risk complacency

This autumn the government will publish its Strategic Defence and Security Review. This comes at a time when the UK is facing increasing international challenges, from migration to extremism, to the issues posed by emerging powers. For some time the UK's soft power has been seen as a strategic resource. Indeed the UK recently topped the latest global soft power rankings. However some are warning of declining British influence. This article examines why soft power is more important than ever and how it can play an effective part of Britain's future foreign policy, helping to secure the UK's security, prosperity, and influence in the face of growing international challenges.

SOFT POWER IN A HARD WORLD

The world today is in many ways a more uncertain place than it has been for many years. The UK faces complex strategic issues on the borders of Europe. Instability in the Middle East and North Africa presents serious threats to its interests. There is the growth of violent extremism in places like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia, as well as in the UK itself. Elsewhere, tensions in the former Soviet Union, the South China Seas, South Asia, and Africa all also present important challenges. Across the world, there are risks for the UK arising from fragile and conflict-affected

states, large unemployed and disenfranchised young populations at risk of radicalisation, and the growing ability of terrorist groups to attract support. Such instability is also a factor in the global migration crisis, including the tragic experiences of refugees across Europe this summer. Against this backdrop the UK will have to consider how best to maintain and develop its full range of strategic assets, including its military and diplomatic resources but also its soft power.

A country's **soft power** is its ability to make friends and influence people - not through military might, but through its most attractive assets notably culture, education, language and values. In short, it is the things that make people love a country rather than fear it; things that are often the products of people, institutions and brands rather than governments.

The new **Portland Soft Power 30** ranking suggests that the UK is perceived as continuing to have a major influence on global affairs. But if anything the Portland report is a call to arms, not an excuse for complacency.

Other countries are increasingly investing in their soft power and catching up fast in many areas

Much of the UK's current soft power rests on the accumulated effect of past actions. Decisions made today could already be affecting the UK's future soft power. And, as the report makes clear, other countries are increasingly investing in their soft power and catching up fast in many areas. China's spending in support of its soft power already dwarfs those of most other nations. By 2020 it is on course to have opened over 1,000 Confucius Institutes around the world. Russia is investing heavily in international news broadcasting. Many other countries are expanding their international cultural and educational programmes to enhance their influence abroad.

Furthermore, soft power is ephemeral nature: stocks of good will that take decades to build up can disappear overnight if the right institutions are undermined or the wrong decisions made. In the next few years the UK will face issues that will have profound implications for its future international influence. It will do so against a background of financial constraints and increasing foreign policy challenges. Some voices have already warned that these risk undermining the UK's influence.

WHY SOFT POWER MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

It would be a mistake to see today's context as entirely without precedent. From countering totalitarian ideology during World War II, through the Marshall Plan and the post-war settlement, to the role of Western culture and values in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastward expansion of the EU, soft power has arguably always played an important role in UK foreign policy in difficult times. But recent reports by the [House of Lords](#), the [British Academy](#) and the [British Council](#) have all reached similar conclusions: that **in the twenty first century soft power is vital to the UK's security, prosperity and influence.**

For a start, the world is increasingly multipolar and hyper-connected, with wealth, power and information being ever more widely diffused. The rise of democracy, social media and direct action mean governments must be increasingly responsive to national and global public opinion. Mass peer-to-peer international cultural contact is on the increase and is changing the nature of cultural relations. Increasing diffusion of information and opportunity due to the internet and digitalisation is leading to a greater diffusion of influence and hence a greater role for soft power, which is largely outside the direct control of governments.

Finally, many of the major challenges of the twenty first century - such as terrorism, mass migration, climate change and infectious diseases – are global in range and indeed exacerbated by globalisation and technological progress. Soft power and influence is key to building the

global coalitions needed to tackle these challenges and ensuring respect for the rules-based international system in general. Prevention – which the persuasive force of soft power does particularly well – is usually better than cure.

Global challenges require global solutions

Given the nature of current challenges, soft power is more critical than ever to securing national interest. Building friendship and understanding between peoples enhances a state's security, underpinning peaceful co-existence. It supports the deepening of diplomatic ties, the sharing of knowledge and expertise, the smooth conduct of commerce, and co-operation on shared areas of interest. It can also fulfil a practical role in strengthening institutions and civil society and stimulating the economic prosperity fundamental to bringing development to fragile states.

HOW SOFT POWER CAN HELP THE UK

The UK's soft power resources offer an important way for it to respond to many of the challenges it faces to its security, for example through programmes in key countries that provide positive pathways for young people by improving their skills, employability, and stake in society; encouraging new ways of seeing and experiencing the world through the development of creativity and experience of the arts; and offering alternatives to extremist ideologies.

Its soft power resources also offer an opportunity for the UK to significantly strengthen its trading links in key emerging economies. These countries are often seeking to create prosperity for their people, but do not always have the schools, universities, skills or creative economies to support their aspirations. To do this they need English language and vocational skills, education reform and research co-operation, and expertise in the creative industries. By building collaborative relationships in these areas the UK could see a significant payback in future trade.

Strong cultural and educational links also enhance the UK's relationships with future world leaders – traditionally an area of strength. Indeed, [one in seven current world leaders studied in the UK](#), with huge potential benefits to the UK's influence. The UK has growing international professional and social networks, running into the millions of learners, teachers, professionals, and the creatively minded. But the UK risks losing these advantages as a new generation comes to the fore in many countries. This risk can be mitigated with continued focus on international educational collaborations, a new generation of scholarships and more digital connections and products.

The growing importance of soft power is acknowledged by the Government's strategy for places at risk of conflict – [Building Stability Overseas](#) – which identifies “Investing in Upstream Prevention: helping to build strong, legitimate institutions and robust societies in fragile countries that are capable of managing tensions and shocks so there is a lower likelihood of instability and conflict” as a key priority.

One of the important ways in which some components of soft power are a fundamental partner to hard power is their ability to help provide alternative pathways for young people. They can do this by enabling them to think creatively, challenge received wisdom, and form and argue alternative views, as well as to develop skills, international connections, and respect for rules-based systems. These can all help people to build up resilience to extremism, particularly in contexts where they have few economic opportunities. Examples of programmes supported by the British Council that can help to achieve these impacts are [Premier Skills](#) (co-organised by the Premier League, including 6,000 coaches, using football as a means of building skills, challenging stereotypes, and providing positive opportunities for almost a million young boys and girls in 25 countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan); [Young Arab Voices](#) (a series of debating clubs in schools, universities and youth centres across the Middle East and North Africa); [Jamaity](#) (a network of civil society organisations in Tunisia that encouraged citizens to ‘take back the beaches’ in defiance of the recent terrorist attack); and a [partnership with Al Azhar university](#) in Egypt, with its vision to spread the peaceful values of Islam (where

almost 1,000 Islamic Studies students have learned English). Similarly, the British Council has scaled up its English language, education, and cultural sector [work in Ukraine](#) and collaborated with Russia as part of the [UK:Russia Year of Culture](#) in attempts to foster people-to-people dialogue at a time of political tensions.

Research by Chatham House has previously identified the UK's culture, education and language as leading factors supporting the country's overseas reputation. [Research for the British Council](#) shows a clear link between participation in UK cultural, educational or English language programmes and significantly higher levels of trust in the UK. UK policymakers have over time helped to build up the many institutions that contribute to these factors. These include organisations with a direct soft power focus like the BBC World Service and the British Council, the nation's cultural and creative industries, global brands like the Premier League, leading universities, and the UK's outstanding diplomatic network and proud record of leadership in international development. In addition the country is fortunate that the [English language is now spoken by an estimated 25% of the world's population](#).

One other important feature of soft power is that relatively small expenditure can go far if deployed in the right way. Compared with the expensive materiel required to maintain military power, **the focussed application of soft power activities has the potential to yield large results in terms of a nation's influence for relatively low outlay.**

Soft power is sometimes looked at to fill a void left by diminishing hard power. Yet, precisely because it is not coercive, soft power on its own will not always be enough, and nor should it be seen as sufficient on its own to replace reduced hard power. The nature and scale of the world's current security challenges usually require the deployment of both hard and soft power. For these reasons policymakers are increasingly focussed on the benefits of combining and aligning soft and hard power into what is often called '[smart power](#)'.

The UK must therefore continue to invest to future-proof its soft power as well as its hard power when it considers its strategic priorities. If it does, the UK will be in a good position to build on its existing soft power assets, martial them into instruments of influence, and use that influence to stand up for the UK's interests and values around the world.

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