

# THE ART OF ATTRACTION

Soft Power and the  
UK's Role in the World

By Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle



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Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World

March 2014

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Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle

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# Executive Summary

The concept of soft power – the ability to influence the behaviour of others and obtain desired outcomes through attraction and co-option – was coined by British Academy Fellow Joseph Nye. Over the past decade, it has been the subject of considerable debate, as governments at home and overseas have sought to exploit their soft power assets in the face of power shifts in order to further their foreign policy objectives. This report published by the British Academy discusses the nature and relevance of soft power in the context of how and why it matters for the UK. It analyses the UK's soft power resources and its ability to mobilise them, examines the main dilemmas, and includes a series of recommendations for policy-makers and wider society.

The UK has at its disposal an important set of tangible and intangible soft power assets. The country is widely regarded as 'a cultural super-power', with a rich cultural and natural heritage, the longest history of parliamentary democracy, and a proud record of some of the world's leading thinkers, scientists and literary giants. The UK's higher education system is world-leading – a major national asset which attracts many thousands of international students each year with wide ranging benefits for our society and the economy. The BBC's global reach – with a weekly audience of at least 150 million people worldwide – also plays an important part in promoting the UK's image abroad. Similarly, the British Council works with over 30 million people across the world, reaching nearly 600 million others through digital media, radio and television.

Despite this abundance of soft power resources, the UK government's ability to mobilise them on a day-to-day basis is limited – and indeed there are serious questions about the extent to which it should do so. Soft power is not easy to translate into policy – and efforts to exploit it may give rise to unintended consequences. It is neither 'on tap' as the armed services theoretically are, nor as tangible as Britain's veto in the



UN Security Council. Soft power can easily backfire if the state fails to take into account its interplay with other, more assertive, external policies when hoping to benefit from the 'power of attraction'. It is susceptible to collateral damage when the values and practices celebrated at home appear at odds with the country's behaviour on the world scene. Similarly, if it is perceived as the velvet glove concealing a mailed fist, the chances of genuinely persuading others to 'want what you want' will reduce to zero. Too overt a promotion or manipulation of soft power can quickly generate scepticism at home and abroad. Furthermore, governments should be aware that over-reliance on the 'power of attraction' can cut both ways, as outsiders do not always admire what we expect them to, and societies are always in flux.

Soft power is, nonetheless, very likely to become more important in the international order over the coming years. UK governments can help themselves simply by recognising the fact, and by trying to get the best out of existing resources. A balance must be struck that avoids overt interference while ensuring cultivation rather than neglect. If the state does not provide enough resources for the development and maintenance of its long-term assets – such as language teaching in schools or the university research base – they will both diminish in scale and lose their distinctive national character. It is not simply a matter of applying cheap cosmetics in the form of public relations. Moreover, the assets that really matter are the deeper, slow-moving qualities of a society and not the surface glitter of a successful Olympics or royal wedding. Governments would be well advised to recognise that the key quality of soft power is its primary location in civil society. Soft power begins at home, as reputation and trust are both intimately linked to the nature of domestic achievements.

For its part UK foreign policy is too often conducted in a compartmentalised manner, with the would-be benefits of soft power either judged to be outweighed by security concerns, or simply never taken into account. Despite their relatively low cost to the public purse, higher education, cultural organisations, arts and museums, the BBC World Service, and other soft power assets have not been protected from financial cutbacks. Neither have the substantial advantages of proper investment in them been fully recognised. If governments are patient enough to wait for the long-term gains, they will reap more benefits than by striving too hard to deploy these potential assets or by running them down for the quick fix of improving a budget deficit.

**Governments** would be well-advised:

- To refrain from direct interference in soft power assets.
- To invest in and sustain soft power institutions such as the BBC, the British Council, and the education system over the long term, and at arm's length.
- To recognise that hard and soft power, like power and influence more generally, reside on a continuum rather than being an either-or choice.
- To understand that the power of example is far more effective than preaching.
- To pay careful attention to the consequences of official foreign policy for Britain's reputation, identity and domestic society, ensuring that geopolitical and socio-economic goals are not pursued in separate compartments.
- To accept that the majority of ways in which civilised countries interact entail using the assets which make up 'soft power', whatever political vocabulary we choose.

For their part, **citizens and voters** need to accept that:

Some hard power assets, in the forms of the armed forces and security services, are necessary as an insurance policy against unforeseeable contingencies, and for use in non-conventional warfare against terrorists or criminals threatening British citizens at home and abroad, although not regardless of cost. Even diplomacy will sometimes need to be coercive (i.e. hard power) in relations with otherwise friendly states in order to insist on the UK's 'red lines', however they may be defined at the time. Because soft power excludes arm-twisting, it will never be enough as a foreign policy resource.

Lastly, **those engaged in the private socio-cultural activities** which contribute to soft power need to be aware that:

They are to some extent regarded as representative of their country's interests. They need not and should not compromise on such principles as academic or artistic freedom, but it is excessively innocent to imagine that their work takes place in a vacuum, untouched by the manoeuvring of governments and the competing narratives of world politics – especially when they are beholden to the taxpayer for funding. Whether they like it or not, universities, orchestras, novelists, sportsmen and women, archaeologists – and indeed the British Academy – are all part of the 'projection of Britain abroad'.

# 1. Introduction

Since Joseph Nye first launched the idea of soft power, or the ability to get what you want through attraction and co-option, it has been the subject of considerable debate in the academic literature of International Relations (IR) and has featured extensively in a series of think tank publications. The soft power debate has also pervaded the wider political arena, with the concept constantly referred to in policy documents and in speeches by world leaders, as well as becoming a familiar term in the media.

Much of the discussion about soft power has focused on the assets that give states an advantage in world politics, and on the way in which they can be exploited by national governments. But in their eagerness to get ahead in the 'race for soft power' (Holden 2013), policy-makers are in danger of misunderstanding the concept and – intentionally or unintentionally – ignoring the risks associated with its use.

In this British Academy report, we discuss the nature and relevance of soft power in the context of contemporary international politics, with particular reference to the United Kingdom, although we acknowledge that soft power is also wielded by a range of other states and indeed by some non-state actors. We draw primarily on the IR literature but also on other areas of the social sciences and humanities. Almost all fields covered by the Academy, from law and languages to archaeology and area studies, are relevant to soft power in that they provide important illustrations of the many ways in which societies inter-connect in the modern world, generating resources which could, in principle, be harnessed for the benefit of public policy. The report is directed not only at academics and policy-makers but also at the informed public, with the aim of identifying both the advantages and the complications of attempting to use soft power to exert influence in international politics. After a brief discussion of the conceptual issues, the report moves on to an assessment of how and why soft power matters to the UK, proceed-

ing via an audit of the country's soft power assets to an analysis of the main dilemmas facing public policy. It ends with eight recommendations for the consideration of both policy-makers and wider society.

## 2. Soft power: the core concept

### a) What is soft power and where does it come from?

The term 'soft power' was first coined by the Harvard academic Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, and has been developed since (Nye 1990a, 1990b, 2003, 2004a, 2004c, 2004d, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). It is defined as the ability of one actor to influence the behaviour of another to obtain the outcome that it wants through attraction and co-option rather than military and/or economic coercion – the latter being the means of 'hard power' central to the realist tradition (Dahl 1957, Lukes 2005, Wilson 2008). Instead of threatening each other with 'sticks' (the use of force or sanctions) or tempting each other with 'carrots' (the more conditional forms of financial assistance, sometimes to the point of bribes), states get others 'to act how they want them to act', by shaping their preferences and eliciting attraction. Nye (2004b) summarised the process as follows:

*"If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place – in short, if my behaviour is determined by an observable but intangible attraction, soft power is at work. Soft power uses a different type of currency, not force, not money – to engender cooperation – an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values."*

The success of this strategy relies on two factors. Firstly, the state must be able to generate an image that the rest of the world considers desirable and worth emulating. This is achieved through intangible resources such as: a nation's culture, defined as a set of practices that create meaning and identity for a society; political values, when lived

up to home and abroad; and foreign policy, when regarded as legitimate and having moral authority. Secondly, others must be aware that the state possesses these qualities, which places a considerable emphasis on the latter's ability to communicate. Thus, soft power is extremely difficult to measure, although Jonathan McClory and colleagues have produced some interesting indices (McClory 2010, 2011, 2013). Key components like image, reputation, trust and the like are difficult to operationalise even via opinion polls, but in terms of the attitudes of foreign decision-makers the task becomes impossible, because the data are simply unavailable. Furthermore, overall judgements of soft power rely so much on the aggregation of incommensurable indicators (such as numbers of cultural missions abroad, asylum seekers admitted, and the international ratings of universities) that they are extremely vulnerable to challenge. Even small changes in a particular quantitative indicator, such as a decline in foreign aid spending, could skew the overall picture unjustifiably.

The analysis of soft power is thus best done through a qualitative focus on the structural assets or weaknesses of a given country, which governments deploy with greater or lesser intelligence and degrees of priority in relation to the harder forms of power. In this, they have three options: they can make use of traditional diplomacy, defined as 'the relationship between the representatives of states or other international actors'; they can work through public diplomacy, which involves creating direct relationships between diplomats and the publics, home and abroad, who are now as much their targets as foreign governments (Melissen, in Melissen 2005); and they can work with private associations in a state-private network (Parmar 2012). But whichever path is chosen it must be remembered that soft power is primarily an instrument and not a policy. It may represent desirable values in that it stresses cooperative rather than coercive approaches, but otherwise it tells us little about the content of strategies to be followed.

## **b) Why has soft power become significant in the last decade?**

States have always interacted using a variety of instruments along a spectrum from coercive intervention at one end to bland expressions of friendship at the other – suggesting that the current soft power discourse is simply a way of focusing on the non-coercive aspects of international politics. However, the concept has attracted increasing attention in the last decade. Part of this is intellectual and political fash-

ion – and fashions always fade. But there have been more fundamental forces at work. More specifically, two significant ‘power shifts’ that have altered the context in which states wield influence and formulate policy options (Matthews 1997, Nye 2012).

The first of these shifts is a transition of power from West to East, and to some extent to the South. The developed countries of the West are still recovering from the effects of the global financial crisis, meaning they have fewer military and economic sources at their disposal and are searching for more cost-effective ways of retaining their influence in world politics. Concurrently, the emerging powers, including the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) are turning their economic resources into greater political and military power, occupying increasingly prominent roles in the international system in the process (Hurrell 2006, Zalman 2012). More profoundly, there has been a slow but significant shift away from the preponderance of Western power in the world, albeit temporarily disguised first by victory in the Cold War and then by the US’s return to hard power after 9/11. The increasing evidence of the latter’s failure in Iraq and Afghanistan damaged Britain through its association with the US. Accordingly, Britain, like most other Western states, has suffered from a crisis over how best to pursue its international goals – through power and self-assertion, or multilateralism and consensus-building?

The second shift is a diffusion of power away from states and towards civil society. While states remain the most important political bodies in the international system, their ability to influence people and events is being rapidly eroded by technological advances, especially in computers and telecommunications (e.g. the Internet and mass media). The speed and ease of access to information across cultural, societal, political and national boundaries has created a more informed and, arguably, more activist global public debate that increasingly challenges the legitimacy of established regimes, and spills over easily from one state to another (Tehranian 1997). This is not a new phenomenon, as the events of 1848, 1917–19, 1968 and 1989 illustrate. But the international environment has certainly become more complex and multi-layered, with the result that the instruments of efficient armed force and strategic deterrence (traditionally important to Britain) are becoming far less relevant to the concerns of a modern European society.

Part of this set of changes is technological and economic globalisation, a process that generates flows and connections across territorial



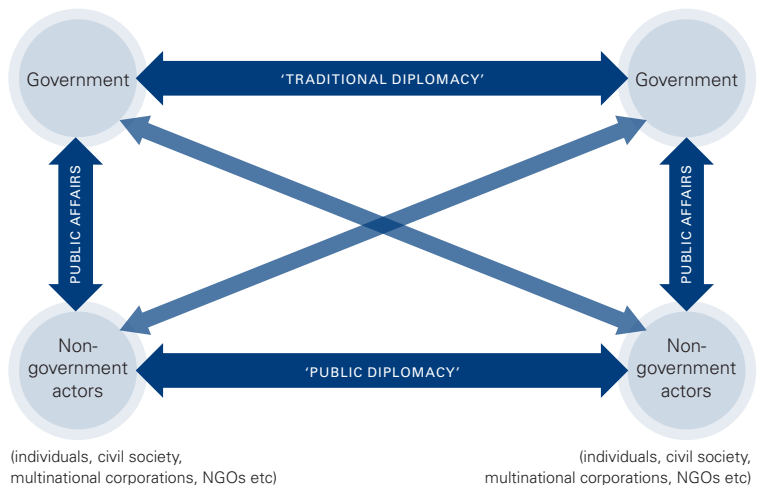
boundaries, but also across regional and cultural divides (McGrew in Budak and Gessner 1998). This has enabled a range of (benign and malign) actors – intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), identity groups and the media – to play a more active role in politics than ever before, and on a much larger scale. These *transnational* players produce networks on a range of diverse issues, blurring the already fuzzy boundaries between foreign and domestic politics and thus complicating policy at home and abroad (Hill 2003a, Castells 2007). Yet such *processes* do not necessarily produce the universalisation of values on which soft power might be thought to rest. While they can act to dissolve existing power structures, the result can be the uncovering of sharp clashes in belief systems, as the fall-out from the 2011 'Arab Spring' demonstrates. Thus, on the one hand soft power becomes more important, because the ideas and beliefs of ordinary people have come more into play in international politics, while on the other it is by no means clear who will be attracted to what model or set of attitudes.

A related development is the fact that the internal composition of most developed societies is becoming less homogeneous as the result of both permanent migration and more transient forms of personal mobility (e.g. temporary migrant workers and foreign students). The presence, behaviour and political attitudes of diverse ethno-cultural identity groups mean that governments can no longer assume that the support of their domestic environments can be taken for granted, or mobilised in the form of nationalist enthusiasm (Anderson and Paskeviciute 2006, Hill 2013). It also challenges the idea of the national interest, raising some uncomfortable questions about identity, about what a country's role in the world should be, and about whom foreign policy ultimately serves. On the other hand, ethno-cultural minorities are in themselves potentially a source of soft power – their levels of integration/assimilation, their social and economic 'success', their feeling of 'belonging', all speak to the outside world about the success of the community they belong to – as with the image conveyed by the London Olympics of 2012. Conversely, if the balance between diversity and integration is not handled well, this can quickly tarnish the picture which a government is seeking to project outwards.

The increasingly complex and arguably 'non-polar' (Haass 2008) international order has forced states to change their approach to the conduct of international politics in two substantial ways, both of which create favourable conditions for the use of soft power. Firstly, they

must reconsider their approach to diplomacy so as to find new ways of engaging their audiences, particularly given that straightforward propaganda (defined as the 'deliberate attempt to influence the opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values to serve the interest of the propagandists and their political masters' (Welch 1999)) is no longer such a viable option. Secondly, they must engage with the various traditional and public diplomacy networks that operate in the international system (see Figure 1.1), given that threats like crime, terrorism, pandemics, climate change and environmental degradation require extensive cooperation between state and non-state actors. The funnel model by which public participation in international relations takes place mostly through the medium of government is long out-of-date. Furthermore, *transgovernmentalism*, where the sub-units of governments come together across national boundaries to solve particular global issues and engage in a range of new ways with various sections of the public, is now also an important feature of world politics (Slaughter 1997, Keohane and Nye 1998). Indeed the borders between governmental and societal networks are inherently fuzzy because elites generate a vast array of professional and personal networks across state boundaries – occasionally on public view at jamborees like Davos. In the British case this applies more to the transatlantic and Commonwealth scene than to that of the EU, given the nature of shared legal traditions and long-standing security relationships.

Figure 1.1: Traditional and Public Diplomacy Networks



### 3. Does soft power matter?

While some continue to voice doubts over the efficacy and relevance of soft power – the former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously stated that the United States could rely on its vast hard power capabilities alone – it is widely regarded as an indispensable way for states to exert influence in today's world.

The mechanisms of soft power are apparently well-suited to cope with the conditions of globalisation. For one thing, they provide governments with the reach that is required in a 'world of global markets, global travel, and global information networks' (Slaughter 2004). Traditional state-to-state relations can be maintained through existing bi- and multilateral diplomacy networks like the United Nations (UN) and its specialised agencies (e.g. the World Health Organisation), the World Bank, the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These provide the fora in which to coordinate action, whether on a universal basis or in groups of the like-minded. Participating in these networks also has practical advantages in that it offers states the ability to shape the agendas and rules of the multiple regimes which characterise modern international life. Additionally, states can use the instruments of public diplomacy via the media and Internet to communicate with other societies in the hope of shaping their perceptions and their environment (Bollier 2003, Wallin 2013). This strategy is becoming increasingly important as governments realise that international politics is as much about 'whose story' prevails as about military or economic supremacy (Nye 2010b). They simply cannot afford to neglect the several billion people worldwide who use the web every day, or to let their image be constructed wholly by outsiders.

A second advantage of soft power is that the mechanisms associated with it are regarded as a legitimate way of conducting international relations by a variety of actors – weak states as well as strong; non-

state actors as well as governments. In a world where attempts to exert 'command power' are increasingly regarded with suspicion, co-optive power presents a welcome alternative. As such, soft power strategies are perceived to be benign and positive in their impact, whereas hard power can damage the status of even a superpower. The United States is a case in point: its overt reliance on *force majeure* – most evident during the Vietnam War, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global War on Terror (especially the detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay) – as well as its tendency to take a unilateral stance on major global issues such as climate change and international criminal justice – has resulted in a 'crisis of credibility' (Brzezinski 2004) and a loss of prestige that are difficult to recover (Kurlantzick 2005). In contrast, multilateral diplomacy conducted in organisations like the UN and the EU is generally deemed more acceptable: the former because it represents almost every country in the world and embodies universally desirable goals such as peace, international security, global justice and human rights (Popovsky and Turner 2008, Toshiki 2010), and the latter because of its self-styled character as a 'civilian' and 'normative power' (Hill 1998, Manners 2002).

This is not to say that hard power is no longer relevant in international politics – no amount of soft power is able to move Iran or North Korea away from developing nuclear weapons if they are not ready to be persuaded (Jervis 2013). Moreover, realist commentators like John Mearsheimer and Robert Kagan are still highly sceptical of what can be done with soft power, understandably given that sovereign states by definition pursue distinctive interests. Much conflict therefore has a zero-sum element. Yet it is becoming more and more difficult for states to justify the use of force, in its various manifestations. Even developed countries confident in their hard power assets increasingly understand that in normal conditions attempts to impose solutions deliver relatively few of the goals that are important to them. Indeed, the historical record has shown that hard and soft power need to work in conjunction with each other in order to deliver the desired result: the British could not have sustained their Empire through hard power alone, even if the territory had originally been taken by force. Co-option and bluff were crucial (Darwin 2009). The same was true for American influence in Western Europe after the Second World War, as their massive troop presence was not useable against the countries in which it was based (Cooper, in Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2004, Corthorn 2013). Conversely, it may be argued that the collapse of the former Soviet Union was (in part) due to its failure to combine hard and soft power successfully. The USSR started well in space in 1957, but lost the race to the moon. The sporting

successes which it shared with its Warsaw Pact allies were soon seen to be tainted by excessive control of the athletes and at times the use of drugs. In post-Soviet Russia, Vladimir Putin has learned some of these lessons, in that he combines tough-minded nationalism with cultivating his personal charisma – a mix which seems to appeal to the peoples of the Russian-speaking, Orthodox, world.

The combination of co-option and coercion – referred to as ‘smart power’ (Nye 2003) – is an important tool in the arsenal of states even in the military sphere, as it recognises that winning wars may rely as much on an appeal to hearts and minds as it does on success on the battlefield. This means consolidating a victory so as not to ‘lose the peace’, often by restoring a country to a point of stability and fostering the conditions which might prevent further conflict and/or terrorism. As such, Hillary Clinton has said that smart power is an essential element of ‘21st century statecraft’ (*The Daily Beast* 2013). Its value has also been implicitly recognised by President Obama’s acknowledgement that while the leaks by the CIA employee Edward Snowden have damaged security they have also allowed for a useful debate on surveillance and privacy which might ultimately help rather than hinder the US’s need for a positive global reputation. Yet, for the moment, this signal of a possible change of approach is heavily outweighed by the reputational damage incurred through the drone attacks in Pakistan, Somalia and the Yemen.

It is not surprising that many countries have already taken considerable steps to increase their soft power capabilities, albeit for smart power motives. China has been particularly proactive in this regard. It has become much more active in traditional diplomacy, attempting a ‘good neighbour’ policy towards Southeast Asian countries, facilitating nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea, participating in UN-sponsored peace-keeping missions, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Most notably it has established over 300 Confucius Institutes all over the world to promote the Chinese language and culture (Bates and Huang 2006, Lum et al 2008, Gil 2009). At the same time, it has hardly renounced the classical instruments of great power self-assertion, through its increased naval presence in the South China Sea, and its move to develop a significant capability in space.

Russia, conversely, has woken up to the limits of a reliance on hard power even if it believes that it has scored successes in that realm in Chechnya and Georgia. It has been active in promoting its culture, sport and language through bilateral and multilateral negotiations as well as

via NGOs and institutions like the Caucasus Institute for Democracy, the Free Europe-Moldova Foundation, and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Baltic, the Caucasus and the Balkans (Hill 2006, Popescu 2006, Tsygankov 2006, Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2010). Brazil has also acquired considerable prestige in international affairs through its prominence in global health diplomacy, a commitment to effective tobacco control, the provision of bilateral and multilateral aid and the winning of the competitions to host both the World Cup and the Olympic Games (Lee and Gómez 2013). India has made similar strides, via successful cultural products like Bollywood, yoga and Indian cuisine, and the growing reputations of institutions like the Indian Institutes of Management and Technology (Blarel 2012, Mullen and Ganguly 2012). Its successful launch in 2013 of a space mission to Mars is undoubtedly as much about international image as for any immediate practical benefits.

While some Western countries have been slow off the mark in embracing the soft power agenda, others have recognised the potential value that these assets can provide and have set out to exploit them. After a period when its considerable soft power resources were overshadowed by war, the US has moved to rebuild its global image through educational and cultural exchange programmes (e.g. the '100,000 Strong Initiative' to encourage Americans to learn Mandarin, and the 2011 International Strategy for Cyberspace). It has also committed to humanitarian assistance (e.g. the significant funds which the Bush administration committed to the battle against HIV/AIDS in Africa, and the rapid mobilisation of help after the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines). The Obama administration has been more cautious about the benefits of soft power in its dealings with countries like Iran and Russia (Kurlantzick 2005, Lagon 2011, Jones 2013), but even here it can see how foreign publics may well be more sympathetic to American culture than their governments want to accept. Since most instruments of foreign policy lie on a continuum between soft and hard power, rather than falling clearly into one category or the other, the behaviour of great powers like the US will thus tend to combine the two, thereby blurring the distinction between them, even if they are not always 'smart' in so doing (see Section 6, and Hill 2003).

There are some important traps, moreover, into which enthusiasts for soft power can fall. The concept tends to lead us towards the view that image is all, neglecting the substance of actual foreign policy and its tangible impact on the lives of others – for good and ill. This is a serious form of self-deception. Equally, in its association with ideas, values and

culture, it necessarily downplays the significance of geography, locality and the differences between societies, and this can inhibit the impact of soft power. This is not to restate the objections from classical realism, but rather to note that if a country hopes to project influence through attracting others, it must be prepared to acknowledge that they will be doing the same, and that international diversity means a degree of zero-sum competition in soft as well as hard power. Lastly, while countries like the UK have had to draw in their horns since the end of empire in terms of ambitions to a 'global role', the idea of soft power could seduce them back into over-estimating their importance in theatres and regions outside their own neighbourhood. A stress on the ideational character of foreign policy can produce new forms of ethno-centrism and misperception, as we have already seen with the pursuit of democratisation and good governance. If we add in the virtual dimension encouraged by soft power there is an even higher risk of detachment from the realities on the ground, and the resentments at perceived arrogance which are likely to follow.



## 4. Mapping the UK's soft power assets

Soft power has gradually come to be the subject of considerable interest in the UK. Organisations like the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Chatham House, the Institute for Government (IfG), the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy and the British Council have generated publications and workshops discussing British soft power (Harvey 2010, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy 2010, McClory 2010, 2011, 2013, Holden 2013). Soft power has also reached the front line of British politics, featuring in the speeches of senior politicians (Blair 2007, Cameron 2010, Hague 2010a, 2010b, 2012, Howell 2012) and being scrutinised in both the House of Commons and House of Lords Select Committees.

The majority of these outputs have focused on identifying the resources that generate Britain's soft power, and the ways in which they could be exploited. Particular emphasis has been placed on tangible assets like culture, education and human capital, business and innovation, government and diplomacy. Although these by and large correspond to Nye's original categories of culture, political values and foreign policy, there has been considerable debate about the extent to which they really provide us with clear parameters of soft power. While culture, political values and foreign policy may appear to be straightforward, they are difficult to determine in practice, thus running the risk of defining soft power as 'everything and nothing' (Gelb 2009). For instance, culture includes a broad range of sub-variables including human capital, music, film, sport, food, science and technology. Does it then constitute an aggregate component of soft power, or should we break things down by sector? A similar argument can be made for nation-branding, an empirical tool adapted from the private sector, which uses categories including export, governance, culture, people, tourism, investment, immigration, diplomacy, education, foreign policy direction and commercial brands

(Anholt 2004, 2005, 2007). If identifying a country's power is always a 'tricky business' then the intangible dimension is even more elusive (Kagan 2012).

These difficulties have not prevented creative attempts to pin down soft power by the use of measurable indicators, leading to the rankings close to the heart of modern bureaucracies (McClory 2010, 2011, 2013). There are many opinion poll surveys of countries' reputations, but the Institute for Government/Monocle Soft Power Index breaks new ground by attempting to identify where individual countries' strengths and weaknesses lie, beneath the umbrella claims about soft power. On its major sub-indices, for example, the UK is ranked highly on culture, diplomacy and education, but quite low on government and on business (McClory 2011). The scores for Sweden are almost the reverse. Such observations are thought-provoking, but most reactions are likely to be sceptical, as with any quantitative approach to political action, given that the analysis is dependent on the original definitions of the terms used for measurement, which are inherently subjective, if not actually arbitrary. How many observers, for instance, would think that the UK political system (for its faults) is not a comparative strength, while only its *higher* education system can plausibly be deemed a strength? Furthermore, what real insight is there to be had from ranking Italian culture as the eighth most attractive in the world, four places below Australia and two places above Russia? Such precision is inherently contestable.

If we accept the underlying assumption of the Index – namely that soft power can be defined in terms of the resources that are thought to generate attraction on the part of others – then we can still focus on culture, political values and foreign policy without straining to quantify them. Britain undoubtedly has a wealth of such assets, and the issue is less how they compare to the portfolio of others than how (if at all) they may be used for the national benefit. The advantages the UK possesses are examined in more detail below, together with the instruments which project them. For reasons of simplicity, they have been divided into two sections: general societal resources (culture and heritage, language, education and human capital, socio-cultural institutions, business and innovation, sport) and state resources (political values, diplomacy, the Monarchy).

## a) Societal sources

### Culture and Heritage

There is a widespread consensus that Britain is a 'cultural superpower' (Haugevik and Bratberg 2011) with a substantial influence on the rest of the world. For one, the country has a rich cultural and natural heritage that is disproportionate to its size. Its historic landmarks (including 25 UNESCO World Heritage sites), areas of outstanding natural beauty, castles and gardens are visited by millions of foreign visitors every year (Visit Britain 2011a, 2011b). This is true of many other countries as well, but Britain has reasonable claims to stand out by virtue of having the longest history of both parliamentary democracy and industrialisation. The country also has an impressive intellectual heritage, having produced a stream of the world's most influential thinkers – Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, John Maynard Keynes, William Beveridge, H.L. A. Hart and Eric Hobsbawm. A similar roll-call of pioneers in science and technology can be compiled, including such names as Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Charles Babbage, Alan Turing, Tim Berners-Lee, Francis Crick, Rosalind Franklin and James Watson, Stephen Hawking and Peter Higgs. Shakespeare heads the list of British literary giants read worldwide, followed among others by Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, Salman Rushdie and John Le Carré. Popular twentieth century authors like Douglas Adams, Agatha Christie, Beatrix Potter, Terry Pratchett, Phillip Pullman, and J.K. Rowling have also dominated the international bestseller lists, with some also drawing large numbers of visitors to their homes, real or imagined, in Britain (MacArthur 2009, Rogers 2012). These successes have not simply been a matter of the accessibility of the English language.

Britain also has a rich artistic and musical heritage. The top five attractions in terms of visitor admissions in 2012 were museums and art galleries (Association of Leading Visitor Attractions 2012). Together with the British Museum, the National Gallery and Tate Modern, London possesses a world-class concentration of artistic expertise, reinforced by the major auction houses of Sothebys and Christie's (both now foreign owned, but still widely associated with Britain). The British Film Council's Chief Executive Officer, John Woodward, described British cinema as 'one of the most powerful cultural agents of the last 100 years,' with films like *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Blowup*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Chariots of Fire*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and *The Full Monty*, as well as the *Bond*, *Monty Python*

and *Harry Potter* franchises, associated world-wide with Britain – notwithstanding the international nature of most modern film-making. Sometimes, these films have even led to cultural changes: *Bend it like Beckham* had a significant impact on the development of all-women football in India, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is credited with a widespread change in attitudes towards the gay community because of actor Simon Callow's character (Media 2009). British actors, directors and technicians figure prominently in the Oscar awards, and have a high profile inside Hollywood. This is in part because Britain also has a vibrant tradition of theatre, with thousands of tourists flocking to the West End to see musicals, plays, opera and ballet performances, many of which transfer to Broadway in New York or to other foreign capitals. For its part the British television industry has a world-wide light entertainment profile, with programmes like *Doctor Who*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, *The Office*, *Downton Abbey* and *Top Gear* shown in a wide range of countries (PACT/UKTI 2012). Each of these generates its own stereotypes, but the healthy diversity of British creative life means that they probably cancel each other out.

The British music industry is also very influential. Since around 1963, British talent has been as prominent as American talent in the world music industry, given the success of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Elton John, George Michael, Amy Winehouse, Adele, Coldplay and many more (Rolling Stone 2011). In the classical realm, Britain has an outstanding collection of orchestras, choirs, chamber music ensembles and venues. The country can thus offer festivals and concerts for all kinds of musical tastes, from Glastonbury and the O2 to the BBC Proms and the Three Choirs Festival. These attract thousands of foreign visitors who spend several hundred million pounds in the UK every year (UK Music 2011).

These are the traditional pillars of British cultural appeal. But the country also attracts attention through the way in which it has changed over the last half-century, through successive waves of immigration, from the Commonwealth and then from the EU. While it would be wrong to paint a rosy picture of race relations and social integration, there is no doubt that members of ethnic communities and foreign countries tend to see Britain as a far more welcoming and inclusive society than most of its European partners, which came later to the issue of diversity. This image of a successful multicultural society is often set back by events (as well as sitting somewhat uneasily with that of thatched cottage England [sic]) but it does now have a significant degree of international credibility.

## Language

The English language is another important British soft power asset as it makes it easy for 'Brand Britain' to project itself successfully. While it is true that there are now many 'world Englishes', it is hardly a disadvantage for the UK that English is the single most widely used language in the world – spoken by some 427 million native speakers and an estimated 950 million people as a second or foreign language – and the official language of more countries world-wide than any other (Saville-Troike 2006). In this polyphonic environment, programmes like Cambridge English Teaching set benchmarks which many are happy to follow. Yet countries like Denmark are now teaching English from so early in the school curriculum that their citizens will soon rival those of the UK in terms of the written and spoken command of the language needed for professional success. Indeed, this is already painfully evident when German football fans visiting England sing the lyrics to 'Football's coming home' with no little *schadenfreude*.

English is widely held to be the language of international business – not least because of its prominence on the Internet. It is increasingly being integrated into the education systems of other countries, with university courses in continental Europe (even in Paris) now often taught in English (Michaud 2012). Of course this too cuts both ways, in that students may no longer choose to come to the UK to acquire English, especially when facing high tuition fees. Moreover, while the global demand for English – particularly in the rapidly growing economies of Africa and Asia, but also in the EU – does give the UK a notable advantage, it acts as a weakness in that it encourages complacency over the learning of foreign languages among native English-speakers (Rose 2008, British Academy 2013a, 2013b, also section below). The Prime Minister's exhortation to expand the teaching of Mandarin in schools is a tacit recognition of the two-edged sword.

## Education and Human Capital

The British education system is generally seen as another potential source of soft power. Like culture, it has had a large international impact, with 3.1 million overseas pupils attending British-style private schools. In 2012, 6,300 international schools were in operation, on this model, up from fewer than 2,600 just over a decade ago (Paton 2012). Britain also plays a substantial role in promoting education abroad: notably through UNESCO's Education for All, and the Education for Sustainable Development and Literacy programmes.

The British higher education system is a major asset in world terms, with potential for soft power exercised indirectly and in the long term. Apart from the US, no other country in the world has more Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) among the world's top 100 universities. Among these are institutions recognised internationally as among the very best places to study, and accordingly tending to educate a cosmopolitan elite. The Times Higher Education World University and Reputation Rankings (THE), currently have the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge in the top five, and another five British institutions in the top fifty. The other main international audit, Shanghai's Academic Ranking of World Universities, has Cambridge and Oxford in the top ten and another three in the top fifty. Given that France has no single university in the top fifty in the THE rankings, and only two in Shanghai's (Germany has only one in each), this is a notable result for the UK (Times Higher Education 2013, Shanghai Rankings 2013). These high-calibre institutions, together with many other high quality but less well-known ones, attract thousands of international students each year. Records from the Higher Education Statistics Authority have revealed that some 435,000 international students studied at UK universities in 2011–2012 (a 1.6 % increase from the previous year); with China, India, Nigeria, Malaysia and the US being the top five non-EU sending countries, and Germany, Ireland, France, Greece, Cyprus and Poland being the five top EU countries (Higher Education Statistics Authority 2013). Thirty-seven per cent of postgraduates now come from abroad, despite recent obstacles with visas created by nervousness over both security and immigration levels. Short courses and exchange programmes like Erasmus and the British Universities Transatlantic Exchange Programme give a taste of what Britain has to offer, with some specialised offerings like the Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis setting international standards for training. What is more, British universities now have around 25 campuses overseas, particularly in Asia, where the University of Nottingham has been in the vanguard.

The human capital invested in education is important in terms of the benefits that it provides for the UK. Firstly, the research that is conducted in British HEIs creates, attracts, and maintains the scientific and technological skills needed to inform government policy and sustain a post-industrial economy (House of Lords Science and Technology Committee 2010). Studying at UK universities also has immense potential in fostering inter-cultural communication given that international alumni return home with the ideas and values acquired at UK HEIs. The Government hopes that they will form a 'lasting attachment with Britain in the

process' (Hague 2012). Additionally, foreign students and international graduates bring specific skills (e.g. language and cultural knowledge) that British businesses need to develop in order to break into new markets (Brown 2009). In any case, universities contribute substantially to Britain's wealth. In 2011–12, they were responsible for supporting 378,250 jobs UK-wide, and were a major UK source of invisible exports, with overseas students alone generating £10.2 billion of income for Britain in the year through fees and private spending (Universities UK 2013a).

### **Socio-cultural Institutions**

One of the most valuable cultural soft power institutions is the UK's state-funded public service broadcaster, the BBC, which runs the World Service networks, a globally popular set of websites, as well as its domestic radio and TV channels. From its inception in 1922, the BBC grew steadily to become the world's largest and most respected broadcaster, broadcasting in 27 languages (as well as English), reaching an estimated weekly audience of ten million people across the UK and at least 150 million people worldwide (Sehgal 2009). This global reach has played an essential part in projecting Britain's cultural image and showcasing the country's more attractive assets. In part this has been through the coverage of high-profile state occasions (such as Princess Diana's funeral) and of major events hosted in Britain like the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The BBC has established a distinctive and invaluable reputation for editorial independence and being factually trustworthy. British society, and even the British government, benefit indirectly from the trust vested by foreign listeners and viewers in the BBC, but it is by the same token vulnerable to missteps, both its own and governmental. After all, foreign governments still sometimes choose to paint the BBC as the mouthpiece of Whitehall even when they know better. But generally, the Corporation's status as a public broadcaster largely un beholden to advertisers gives it a unique and envied advantage over its rivals.

The British Council, which according to Nye 'discovered and practised soft power effectively since 1934' (Nye 2010a), has also made substantial contributions in this respect. Working with over 30 million people worldwide – and reaching nearly 600 million others through digital media, radio and television – the British Council has been highly successful in developing cultural relations with the emerging powers (particularly Brazil, China, India, Russia, South Korea and Turkey but also Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa) by connecting British teachers,



learners, artists, sportspersons, scientists and policy-makers with their counterparts around the world, irrespective of the relations that exist between governments (British Council 2013b, British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union 2013). This is far nearer to soft power, i.e. the exercise of cultural influence, than to 'second track diplomacy,' which seeks to enable governments to use institutions of this kind as covers in order to make contact on issues whose sensitivity would normally inhibit regular diplomacy. Such things do happen, but if cultural diplomacy is exploited too often for *realpolitik* reasons its soft power advantages will soon risk being compromised and lost. Such initiatives should be largely about creating the conditions in which positive images of the UK can develop over the medium and long terms, improving the prospects for trade and for political relationships in their turn.

### **Business and Innovation**

Britain also has considerable assets in business and innovation. Although manufacturing industry has been generally in decline for decades, the country is still ranked 10th in the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) Innovation Index, which considers factors such as government and fiscal policy, patents, technology transfer, business performance and creative and scientific research outputs (Dutta 2011). As a notably open economy, with many entrepreneurs from immigrant backgrounds flourishing, for many foreign investors Britain represents a vibrant country of opportunity – even if it does not always seem that way to its citizens. It is striking, for example, that the country's new nuclear plant at Hinkley Point in Somerset, is to be built by a French-Chinese joint venture.

Yet British companies still have some important strengths. They are 'leading the way in sustainable construction solutions' according to Vince Cable (cited in Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013b), which has allowed the industry to gain a number of lucrative international contracts. Britain also has a comparative advantage in, and the ability to exploit, some areas of advanced manufacturing (e.g. aerospace and life sciences), the knowledge-intensive traded services (e.g. professional and business services, information economy and the traded aspects of education) as well as parts of the oil, gas and nuclear waste industries (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013a).

The British automotive industry retains some influence on the rest of the world, even if all its historical marques are now overseas-owned and run. Iconic British brands like Aston Martin, Jaguar, Land Rover/

Range Rover, McLaren and Rolls Royce continue to generate a favourable image of British style and quality, although their reliability has been much improved through foreign makeovers such as BMW's for the Mini (originally designed in the 1950s by a Greek immigrant, Alec Issigonis). It is perhaps fitting, given the large Indian-origin community in the UK, that Jaguar and Land Rover are flourishing under the ownership of the Mumbai-based Tata Motors Ltd. The British car market is still one of Europe's most vibrant, and a large proportion of the EU's cars are assembled in Britain in plants which represent both considerable inward investment and a successful export industry. Furthermore, small but high-tech British firms supply most of the cutting-edge technology used in Formula One, dominating the design and manufacture of components used in the main motor racing teams (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders 2013). Even Italy's patriotic Ferrari team was brought back to the top in the late 1990s by the British engineer Ross Brawn.

The British design and fashion industries also have an excellent reputation for innovation and are global leaders in design and retailing (Oxford Economics 2010). London is of particular importance in this context, being one of the shopping capitals of the world and producing a disproportionate number of influential fashion designers and luxury brands (Calder 2007, O'Byrne 2009, Brand Finance 2013). Yet the capital has even greater importance through the financial strength of the City of London, one of the world's major centres for banking and share-dealing. It constitutes the world's largest insurance market, while the metropolis more generally is Europe's most attractive in terms of foreign direct investment, cultural diversity, opportunities for young talent and the service industries – advertising, public relations and marketing are other sectors in which London remains strong.

London is truly a world city. One double-edged consequence, however, is that property has become highly attractive to foreign investors seeking a safe haven for their money in a stable, attractive and relatively law-abiding environment. The buying-up of large amounts of the prime residential areas of London and the South East has led to an over-heating of house prices, creating serious problems for local people on standard incomes and an unhealthy contrast with the rest of the country (Ernst and Young 2012). Rightly or wrongly successive governments have concluded that London, and the City of London in particular, are so critical to British wealth and influence in the world that strategic decisions have tended to privilege the financial sector, often with implications for wider European policy. This view has also produced

agonising indecision over big ticket transport issues such as the possible expansion of Heathrow Airport or the High Speed 2 rail proposal.

## Sport

Sport is another major asset in terms of soft power, not to be underestimated. Most sports have their origins in nineteenth century Britain, leading to traditions and spectacles followed the world over, especially now that live broadcasts globally via television and the Internet are commonplace. The English Football Premier League in particular is acknowledged to be the most competitive and cosmopolitan in the world. Foreign owners clamour to buy into its popularity (and profits), as they do into the British horse-racing and breeding industries. Local fans of the top English clubs are now vastly out-numbered by those abroad, especially in Asia, where fanatical scenes often greet the tours of clubs like Manchester United. Cricket continues to be popular in some Commonwealth countries (Australia, Bangladesh, India, New Zealand, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), while rugby (Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) has also been successfully exported to France, Italy and Argentina. In golf, the rules of the sport are still administered by the Royal and Ancient at St. Andrews, in conjunction with the US Golf Association. This heritage is not only beneficial in terms of projecting a favourable image of the country but can also help build relationships with a variety of actors in the international system (employees, corporate partners, politicians, regulators and the media) through sponsorship and high-profile sports personalities like David Beckham, Jessica Ennis, Mo Farah, Lewis Hamilton, Andy Murray and Bradley Wiggins (Melnick and Jackson 2002, Cornwell and Amis 2005). The economic and public relations advantages of sport to Britain are clear, but whether they also amount to 'power' is, as with other cultural categories, another matter altogether.

## b) State sources

### Political Values

Britain's political and institutional values – democracy, civil and political rights, freedom of speech and conscience, respect for diversity, and the rule of law (Kirkup 2011, Hague 2010b) – are a source of soft power in that they make the UK an attractive destination for work, tourism and study. It is a multiculturalist society with a more accepting approach to new arrivals than many other countries (which is not to say that it is wholly free of racism or xenophobia). It practices religious tolerance, has encouraged ethnic minorities to maintain their own traditions, and has

recently given same-sex couples the same rights as married couples. Its citizens are also generally welcomed abroad, with the UK ranked joint first with Finland and Sweden in the 2013 Henley and Partners Visa Restrictions Index of countries whose citizens have visa-free access to other countries (Henley and Partners 2013). Its legal system is regarded as a model of fairness and professionalism, to the point where Russian oligarchs choose to settle their disputes in London.

Britain's commitment to its democratic values is demonstrated by consistently high rankings on various indices of political rights, civil liberties and good governance (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2013, Freedom House Democracy Index 2013). This is in spite of diminishing levels of trust in the Establishment from British citizens themselves in the aftermath of scandals over MPs' expenses, *News International's* phone-hacking, police malpractices over the Hillsborough, Stephen Lawrence and Jean-Charles de Menezes tragedies, and the role of GCHQ in the activities exposed by Edward Snowden, all of which have generated damaging international headlines.

### Diplomacy

Diplomacy is the most tangible source of soft power for the UK, in terms of both its nature and its resources. Diplomacy represents the value of persuasion, through the mix of reasoned argument, subtle manipulation (which blurs into hard power) and the mobilisation of solidarity. Over recent decades, British governments have regularly placed an emphasis on pursuing policies which could be regarded as being ethical, and might therefore produce sympathetic reactions in other states (depending on the policy and on the state). Unfortunately the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined what diplomatic capital might have been accumulated through, for example, a generous foreign aid programme, intervention to help the Muslim citizens of Kosovo in 1999, and leadership on climate change negotiations. Nonetheless, Britain has an extensive diplomatic network which bestows significant advantages. It is officially represented by 270 diplomatic posts in 160 countries around the world, with plans to open up to eleven new Embassies and eight new Consulates or Trade Offices by 2015 after Foreign Secretary Hague reversed the decline in morale and representation which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had suffered over previous decades (Howell 2012).

Britain is also one of the best networked states of the international system, being represented in a very large number of multilateral organi-

sations. Beyond the developed OECD world, it has privileged relations with poorer countries via the Commonwealth, which comprises 53 member states (some never part of the Empire but still drawn to join) and 1.7 billion people (25% of the world population). These interact with the diverse character of modern British society, sometimes complicating foreign policy, as with the Tamil protests in London over David Cameron's participation in the 2013 Heads of Government Conference in Sri Lanka. Another possible external consequence is that ethno-cultural communities with a Commonwealth background may tend towards Euroscepticism, preferring global links to continental involvement and thus reinforcing Britain's sense of distance from the rest of the EU. Probably more significant in this respect, however, is the tendency of Eurosceptics in general to be hostile towards both European integration and increasing multiculturalism (Van Schendel and Aronstein 2010).

The UK is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and as such plays a leading role in the UN and its specialised agencies. It is likewise a key state in the EU, NATO, the OECD, and the Group of Eight (G-8). It also wields considerable international influence through a few close bilateral relations, notably with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US (a group which, as the 'five eyes' of cyber-espionage, also exercises hard power). The ability to combine extensive networks with diplomatic sophistication has enabled Britain to exercise influence in many quarters, as with its role in the International Contact Group which secured the Mindanao Framework Deal between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front on October 7, 2012 (i.e. well outside the UK's normal spheres of influence), and its role in securing an unprecedented co-sponsorship for the UN Olympic Truce from all 193 UN member states (Hague 2012). The British Diplomatic Service is universally agreed to be of high technical quality, even by critics of British political aloofness within the European Union.

Many domestic civil servants now participate in the soft power aspects of external relations. Indeed, on the back of the successful 2012 Olympics, the Government made a concerted effort to involve all departments through the GREAT Britain marketing campaign, now funded to the tune of £30 million. The Departments of Business, Innovation and Skills, and Culture, Media and Sport are particularly involved in the effort to promote the tourist industry and British exports, under such headings as Technology, Culture, Heritage, Innovation, Shopping, Creativity, Entrepreneurs and Countryside (all, so it seems, also 'GREAT').

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) remains the main source of Britain's diplomatic expertise. Yet it too has increasingly understood that it needs to mobilise a much wider range of activity than has been traditionally associated with foreign policy. This has produced, variously: a project in Jakarta where the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst delivered media training to the Indonesian Armed Forces through the Emerging Powers Programme Fund (EPPF); an anti-corruption project in Mexico where people to people links were fostered in the hope of strengthening institutions and an open economy; a trade and investment project in Chile which seeks to grow UK influence in this emerging venture capital market; and a conference in London to share expertise about cyber-terrorism and cyber-crime (Hague 2012). Diplomacy also benefits from the links created by the Royal College of Defence Studies, which educates senior military and defence personnel from over fifty countries, not all of them 'like-minded'.

The FCO has also funded projects that overtly aim to promote Britain's political values. Of particular importance are the Human Rights and Democracy Programme (HRDH), which promotes the development of local civil society organisations, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), a non-departmental public body sponsored by the FCO to support the development of political parties and democratic institutions. It has also lent support to projects aiming to promote long-term democratic reform (e.g. the FCO–DFID Arab Partnership Fund), mainly through financial assistance, but also technical and personnel support to election observer missions and democratic institutions. In recognition of the importance of public diplomacy, the FCO has shed its dowdy image by developing a strong online presence, especially in social media, with Facebook, Twitter and Google+ accounts as well as maintaining websites in 53 languages around the world (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2011). All this is far removed from past attempts to seek influence over local elites through embassy hospitality.

### **The Monarchy**

The Monarchy is another source of soft power and has an international reach through the Queen's role as head of the Commonwealth, which she exercises in impeccably subtle fashion, helping to keep the institution together in the face of periodic outbreaks of acrimony. Arguably, British influence is also disseminated through the seemingly insatiable appetite of foreign publics for the soap opera of royal family life (thus the birth of Prince George of Cambridge was described imaginatively as

a 'source of real-world power' by none other than Joseph Nye himself (Nye 2013b)). The Queen's exceptionally long reign has given her a personal prestige which has mostly counter-balanced the less than diplomatic performances of some other members of her family. She is helped by the pomp and circumstance of the Monarchy as an institution, via the ceremonial occasions that the British state specialises in, epitomising British history and political civility – for it is known that since 1689 the Monarchy has been reduced to a position of minimal power without the need for violent revolution. It provides some of Britain's favourite attractions for foreigners (Brand Finance 2012, Khandogiy 2013). These attractions are converted into tangible assets in that the Monarchy contributes an approximated £44 million per annum to the British tourism industry, while royal memorabilia and products endorsed by the Royal Family (i.e. through Royal Warrants) sell to customers from all over the world (Cooper 2013). Although the British taxpayer spends c. £36 million a year on the Crown, this is put into context by the fact that the German presidency costs approximately the same, but without attracting tourists (Warner 2010). Against this, if Britain were to become a republic (not on the cards), while it would cause uproar and amazement overseas, it would be unlikely to diminish Britain's soft power significantly.



## 5. Dilemmas for UK Public Policy

As we have seen, Britain has no shortage of soft power assets that can be (and have been) put to use. Yet it is worth noting that there are five sets of dilemmas arising from the concept which if not understood could limit the country's ability to benefit from them in practice, and/or damage the UK's reputation in international affairs. Taken together, they raise serious questions about the extent to which Britain is able to deploy these resources strategically – and should do so.

### a) The hard/soft power continuum

The first issue arises from the problematic distinction between hard and soft power. Whilst operating at opposite ends of the coercion-influence spectrum of power (see Figure 1.2), soft and hard power are inextricably linked because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one's purpose by changing the behaviour of others. That is to say, even though soft power is generally regarded as a more legitimate and desirable form of statecraft than hard power, it still implies purpose and instrumentality, whereas influence is also sometimes an unintended – if not necessarily unwelcome – consequence of independent activities, or structural features. For that reason, the use of soft power can itself be regarded as a form of manipulation or coercion, which in turn can lead to resentment (Zalman 2013). As Nye (2006) put it,

*"Nobody likes to feel manipulated, even by soft power [...] if I want to steal your money, I can threaten you with a gun, or I can persuade you with a false claim that I will save the world. The second means depends upon attraction or soft power, but the result remains theft in both instances."*

**Figure 1.2: Hard and Soft Power on the Coercion-Influence Spectrum (Nye, 1991)**



A related issue is that it is often difficult to distinguish between power and influence, which, depending on the context and the actor interpreting it, is fluid and subject to change, further blurring the line between hard and soft power. This is particularly the case in economics, which can attract as much as it can compel. The EU is a primary example: prospective member states must fulfil a series of economic and political criteria – including a free market system and effective democratic governance characterised by the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities – before being allowed to join the Union. This is leverage through conditionality but also through emulation.

The lack of a sharp distinction between power and influence on the one hand, and hard and soft power on the other, means that when the government becomes actively involved in the promotion and exploitation of its soft power assets by financial means, their use may become 'sticky' or unproductive, in the terminology of Brian Hocking (Hocking, in Melissen 2005). For instance, the US's involvement in disaster assistance programmes around the world – flood control in Pakistan, earthquake relief in Japan and Haiti, tsunami relief around the Indian Ocean and famine relief in the Horn of Africa – could be regarded as sticky power due to its inherent association with US strategic interests; as could China's extensive investment in sub-Saharan Africa (Wagner 2012). Conversely, the British government's efforts to foster closer cooperation and increase engagement with the emerging powers of Asia (particularly India and China) and with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, are clearly geared to expanding Britain's trade, whatever the reputational damage in terms of pushing human rights down the foreign policy agenda. Russia has come under fire because its use of soft power in the Baltic barely conceals a coercive intent, and is in any case of dubious legitimacy given the state's oppressive influence over the Russian print and broadcast media. The fact that its attempts at co-opting business and political elites into pro-Russian networks may rely on financial incentives (bribes) or outright corruption (Grigas 2012)

actually damages Russia's image abroad. In such circumstances, soft power appears to be little more than a public relations exercise, resulting in suspicion and mistrust by others.

These problems are further compounded by the fact that soft power often rides on the back of significant hard power resources. This is particularly true for the US, whose ability to fashion a 'new world order' after 1989 based on the values of liberal internationalism stemmed from the military and economic power which had brought it victory in both the Second World War and the Cold War contest with the Soviet Union. This also applies to Britain, which can only 'punch above its weight in the world' (Hurd 1993 in Hollowell 2003) as the result of the wealth of hard power assets acquired during the period 1713–1945. As Mattern (2005) points out,

*"Given that soft power may, in the end, not be all that soft, it is worth considering the ethical dimensions and dilemmas that arise when using it as 'a means to success in world politics'."*

The problem, however, is practical as well as ethical. If soft power is seen by its targets as little more than the velvet glove concealing a mailed fist, the chances of genuinely persuading countries to 'want what you want' will reduce to zero. If they fall in line, it will be for familiar reasons of strategic calculation; equally their resentment could reinforce a determination to go their own way. Nye's 'smart power' concept was an attempt to find a way past these conundrums.

## **b) The subjective nature of soft power**

The second dilemma facing Britain is that soft power can be generated and sustained only if the resources from which it arises are deemed attractive, desirable and legitimate. However, different actors are likely to have different opinions about a country's culture, political values and foreign policy. This implies that attraction is a social construct rather than a universally accepted cosmopolitan concept (Mattern 2005). What is loved in one country might be despised in another, while some assets might be deemed more attractive, desirable or legitimate than others, with diverse views appearing inside even apparently homogeneous cultures. For example, French opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, and France's traditional suspicion of 'le défi américain', did not diminish the attractiveness of American culture – embodied by Hollywood, popular

music, and brands like McDonald's. Indeed, McDonald's France was in 2004 the company's most profitable and fastest-growing subsidiary in Europe (Associated Press 2004). Similarly, cultural appeal can quickly turn sour if the response that is generated seems to threaten core values in the recipient state. The passing of the Toubon law – which mandates the use of the French language in official publications in an attempt to halt the advancement of 'Franglais' – is an example of how positive popular feelings towards one aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture can produce reactions which then harden into an antagonistic official policy. For these reasons, the use of soft power should not be regarded as a 'bet to nothing', for it can repel as well as attract. In countries where the source is already disliked it may even produce resentment and rage (Joffé 2006).

Such paradoxes present a significant challenge to the UK, which has become a multicultural society characterised by the presence of a significant number of ethno-cultural diverse groups and extensive diaspora networks (Hill 2013). As these groups are likely to have varying opinions on the attractiveness of the British model, and are now able to communicate them more easily over a considerable distance, it is difficult for policy-makers to take the same message to them all, even if minorities made to feel at ease within a democratic state can help to mediate between their new and old homelands. Yet the subjective and intangible nature of soft power makes it difficult for governments both to deploy it and to control its impact, especially when the very sources from which it stems are generated by civil society.

A related issue is the fact that soft power has little practical use if the foreign policy of the state wielding it fails to live up to the values professed, or (worse) conducts its foreign policy in a way that is regarded as illegitimate. Nye (2013a) made this point with regard to the political leaders of China and Russia:

*"Neither [Hu Jintao] nor [Vladimir Putin] seems to have understood how to [use soft power to] accomplish his goals. Establishing a Confucius Institute in Manila to teach Chinese culture might help produce soft power, but it is less likely to do so in a context where China has just bullied the Philippines over possession of Scarborough Reef. Similarly, [while] Putin has told his diplomats that the priority has been shifting to the literate use of soft power, strengthening positions of the Russian language [...] in the aftermath of the dispute with Georgia, Russia has to use hard power, including military force, because it lives in a much more dangerous world."*

The UK has also recently been accused of failing to follow this principle during the debate about the collection of intelligence from the Internet and the violation of privacy. The FCO objected to a Council of Europe proposal to investigate the human rights implications of official data-gathering, leading Shami Chakrabarti, the respected Director of the pressure-group Liberty, to say that the government risked 'turning Britain into an arrogant bad boy on the world stage. The nation that led the establishment of post-war human rights now jeers at the Strasbourg Court and tolerates no scrutiny for spooks or privacy for ordinary people' (cited in Watt 2013). Whatever the merits of the case such condemnations from within risk turning claims for soft power into a bad joke.

Nor is this a new problem. While stating that it would not issue export licenses for goods that 'might be used to facilitate internal repression' or 'might provoke or prolong regional or internal conflict,' the British government has promoted arms contracts with states on its own list as human rights abusers, including China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia. While this has brought in an estimated £12.3bn in export earnings, such actions also undermine the claims that Britain is a standard-bearer for upholding human rights (Sengupta 2013). In the same vein William Hague's decision not to use the term a *coup d'état* in relation to the removal of the democratically elected Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi led to accusations of double standards which inevitably undermine the hopes for soft power (Osborne 2013). Such decisions might be regarded as inevitable or justifiable, but in that case the costs in terms of image and reputation should be factored in. On the other hand, some issues, like that of the legitimacy of the Morsi regime, are so toxic and divisive that they epitomise the impossibility of pleasing all of the people all of the time, and therefore also the inherent limits of soft power.

Tension between foreign policy and the domestic politics of the country attempting to wield soft power is an additional obstacle to effectiveness. If the UK, for example, is attempting to convince the world of its commitment to dialogue between religions, at the same time as anti-Islamic sentiment is growing at home to the point where mosques are being fire-bombed, the official message to the world will fall flat. These days it is impossible to keep everything hidden, whether within a family, a corporation or a state.

### c) The cost of soft power

Another sticking point in the soft power debate is Nye's claim that states which add the 'soft power of attraction' to their toolkit can 'economise on carrots and sticks' (Nye 2013a). Whilst it is logical to assume that attraction is cheaper than coercion – after all, it does not require troops, equipment or munitions – this is only one side of the argument. For the resources that produce attraction require a substantial amount of investment in order to generate soft power, which is largely a long-term and structural phenomenon. It is not simply a matter of applying cheap cosmetics in the form of public relations.

This presents a particular dilemma for current public policy because it pits the need for the funding of key soft power institutions like the FCO, which needs more and better trained diplomats to deal with the increasingly blurred lines between traditional and public diplomacy (Copeland 2010), against the pressures to reduce public spending. This, coupled with the difficulty in assessing the exact costs and benefits of soft power, means that these entities are likely to suffer disproportionately in comparison to their hard power counterparts. Indeed, the BBC, British Council and FCO have already been left with extensive cuts in their budgets, reducing their ability to function effectively. Under the 2010 Spending Review, funding for the BBC World Service transfers from the FCO to the BBC licence fee from 2013–2014, with an inevitable loss of jobs given that the BBC is having to tighten its belt considerably (HM Treasury 2010). Seeing as the cancellation of five of its language services has already seen it lose an audience of over 14 million, this change is likely to further diminish its ability to promote 'Brand Britain', both at home and abroad (BBC News 2013). The British Council was also to see its FCO funding fall from £185 million to £154 million by 2014–15 (a 26% reduction), which will place it under 'great strain' according to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (Thomas 2012). The Spending Review also made significant reductions in the FCO's budget, which was to fall by 24% over a five year period – compared to the Ministry of Defence's 7.5% reduction and the Department of International Development's 36% increase (HM Treasury 2010). Other departments, including Business, Innovation and Skills and Culture, Media and Sport are also facing cuts in their budgets (25 and 24% and respectively). The 2013 Spending Round by and large reaffirmed these measures (HM Treasury 2013). Thus soft power institutions, which are cheap by comparison to the big budget items of public expenditure, are paradoxically *more* vulnerable to cuts on economy grounds. Their failure to earn

the ring-fencing extended to the NHS and DFID is in part because by definition not all can expect special status, in part because the FCO, BBC and British Council have few powerful defenders in political life, and in part because their support implies investment for the future without any immediate or tangible payoffs. Yet if soft power institutions are important, they precisely need consistent and sustainable funding and a long-term perspective on investments.

#### **d) Contamination of societal soft power assets as a result of government interference**

Another dilemma for UK public policy is that the government's overt interference in societal soft power assets can seriously undermine their effectiveness. This is because the value of these resources consists in their independence, freedom, creativity and the very fact that they connect people rather than governments or policy positions (Bound et al. 2007). Take the example of the Chinese Confucius Institutes, which have been accused of pursuing a political agenda rather than promoting independent academic education, given that they are directed and funded by the Office of the Chinese Language Council International, which in turn answers to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (Mosher 2012). The same dilemma has serious implications for institutions like the British Council, seeking to mobilise soft power.

Only 22% of the Council's turnover derives from an FCO grant-in-aid compared to 27% in 2010–11 – the rest coming from teaching, contracts and partnerships (FCO and British Council 2013a). Its roles and expansion in other countries will thus inevitably be viewed as following UK foreign policy. Even where there is no good reason for suspecting its independence, it is all too easy a target for hostility towards Her Majesty's Government, as in Russia during the tenure of Ambassador Tony Brenton, when the dispute over the murder of Alexander Litvinenko led Putin's regime into retaliation against the British Council.

Public diplomacy always has the potential to shade into subversion or mere propaganda, especially when government sees things through the lens of an information battle. American public diplomacy in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is an excellent example: the Bush administration's aggressive 'information assault' on the Arab and Islamic world alienated rather than attracted its intended audience (Zaharna

2009). Less dramatically, Tony Blair squandered goodwill at the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh by using the occasion to promote UK plc. Domestic audiences are no less resistant to crude forms of branding. New Labour's wish to (re)brand Britain – dubbed 'Cool Britannia' by the media – was met with widespread derision at home, where people felt that the campaign either had failed to capture the country's diversity or was little more than kitsch (Werther 2011). Sometimes listening would appear to be a more effective strategy than talking, and certainly than preaching.

### e)The problem of complacency

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the problem of complacency: to yield advantages and remain effective, most soft power assets need to be cultivated – and certainly not neglected. In the UK, this can be illustrated by reference to two key societal soft power assets: languages and higher education.

#### Languages

If the UK wishes to exert international influence in a changing world power structure, one of its key priorities must be the cultivation of foreign language competence amongst its population. Learning a foreign language not only fosters the skills needed to communicate effectively with others, but also provides the immersion in foreign cultures which is essential if another society is to be truly understood (British Academy 2013a). Taking the long view, this can open up business opportunities, enrich cultural exchange and improve general educational levels, especially in the contemporary environment, where parochialism is self-defeating (Matussek 2003). Britain is often viewed on the European continent, for example, as having a sophisticated elite but a lumpen mass society, which limits its appeal as a role model. Language skills are also vital to both traditional and public diplomacy as they reduce the incidence of misperceptions and misunderstandings. They have been recognised as critical to the work of the security services, which in the post-9/11 era have been forced to rely on foreign nationals for help with an ever wider range of languages and dialects (British Academy 2013b).

Notwithstanding these arguments, many Britons are content to forego learning a foreign language, relying on the rest of the world to speak their version of English. According to a survey published by the European Commission, two thirds of UK respondents spoke only their native



tongue – by far the highest proportion among the EU countries polled. In comparison, the EU average showed that 56% spoke at least one foreign language (Robb 2004). A poll by the travel association ABTA showed that almost two-thirds (65%) of British holiday-makers were unable, or unwilling, to learn the local language, preferring to speak to the locals in English instead (ABTA 2013), and thus upholding the stereotype of the inward-looking British. The study of foreign languages at university has steeply declined according to research by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and by the University of Stirling (Garner 2008). Britain has also trailed behind the rest of Europe in terms of learning foreign languages at primary and secondary school level: most UK students do not learn a foreign language before the age of eleven, while pupils in almost all other European countries start to learn their first foreign language at the age of eight or nine, and as early as three in Spain and the German-speaking parts of Belgium (Hanke 2010).

Some steps have been taken to reverse this trend, which otherwise undercuts some of the aspirations to exercise soft power. At the higher education level, tax-free bursaries of up to £20,000 are now available to students studying modern foreign languages as part of their Postgraduate Certificate of Education (Department of Education 2013), and some universities even offer their students free-of-charge language courses alongside their degrees (University of Bath 2013). Ethno-cultural diversity also adds linguistic skills to the social base, although as a country we have not yet found a way to turn this into a strategic asset, and need to think about how to do so. But there is a limit to universities' ability to change attitudes if progress has not already been made at school level, or if a strong lead is not forthcoming from government (British Academy 2013a, Murray 2013). Learning Mandarin is now being encouraged from an early age, but this is clearly for economic motives, with ministers apparently unwilling to encourage language learning for wider reasons. The multilingualism of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg is both unusual and potentially even a weakness in the Eurosceptic climate which increasingly characterises British politics. The example set by Tony Blair's 1998 address in French to the Assemblée Nationale in Paris has had no effect on Westminster culture.

### **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)**

The British government needs to be alert to the need to keep investing in its world-leading research universities in order to remain at the forefront of innovation and to continue to attract some of the world's best brains to the country (Russell Group 2010, Kreager 2013). At the

moment British higher education does remarkably well, attracting a high percentage of foreign students, having a genuinely open labour market which imports much foreign talent (at the expense of reduced opportunities for local PhDs) and attracting a disproportionate share of EU research and development funding. But it would be wrong to assume that this state of affairs will continue in the face of what is now sharp international competition. The UK's annual expenditure on higher education is considerably lower than that of most other OECD countries and is outpaced by the US, Australia, Canada, Korea and Japan (OECD 2013). The disparity threatens the long-term ability of Britain's leading universities to compete with HEIs elsewhere, notably in the US but also now in Asia and Australia. Although the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006 was in part a recognition of the problem, it cannot be a fundamental solution given that students paying fees have become 'customers' who naturally demand that the universities spend more on teaching. Lecturers have seen their salaries fall in real terms, while student numbers and centrally-driven managerialism have both reduced and squeezed the time available for thinking and innovation. Further investment – and strategic decisions – will be necessary in the future if government talk about Britain's world-leading research role is not to sound increasingly hollow (Universities UK 2013b).

## 6. Conclusion

While Britain has a range of significant soft power assets, its ability to mobilise them on a day-to-day basis is limited. Soft power raises real problems of agency, because it primarily denotes structural advantages which help over the long term but are not easy to translate into policy – and may rebound if efforts to do so are made. It is neither ‘on tap’ as the armed services theoretically are, nor as tangible as Britain’s veto in the UN Security Council or its opt-outs in the EU. On the other hand, most routine foreign policy activity relies anyway on attempts to influence, persuade and convey a good image. The assets on which such attempts are based are therefore neglected at the country’s peril, whether accessible through official entities like the FCO or the British Council, or indirectly influential through societal channels like the BBC, education, sport and culture. Indeed, soft power assets require a conscious effort to accumulate them over a longer period than the average politician is prepared to envisage, which makes them worryingly vulnerable to attrition and decay in a tight funding climate.

This analysis entails a further set of paradoxical conclusions: soft power is not only difficult to convert into concrete action, but it can also be damaged if government interferes with its sources too much (which are largely non-governmental and flourish in direct proportion to their independence). Equally, as soft power is inherently subjective – as well as plural in its composition – it can all too easily backfire if a state fails to take into account the impact of its other, more assertive, external policies when hoping to benefit from the ‘power of attraction’. Too overt a promotion or manipulation of soft power will quickly encounter scepticism at home and abroad. Yet, on the other side of the coin, if the state itself does not provide enough resources for key long-term assets, whether diplomacy, public broadcasting, language teaching in schools or the university research base, they will both diminish in scale and lose their distinctive national character through being left to the vagaries of the international private sector. Government needs to take the long view

by investing but not expecting immediate returns, either economic or in terms of useable instruments of foreign policy. This is certainly a big ask in modern fiscal and electoral politics but not impossible, as illustrated by defence procurement, as well as by energy pricing and investment where governments actively insist on looking over the horizon.

Short of a major global conflict, soft power is likely to become more rather than less important in the international order over the coming years. British governments can help themselves simply by recognising the fact, and by trying to get the best out of existing resources. On many issues, indeed, they have little option but to seek collective solutions through cooperation with like-minded states and other actors using bilateral, multilateral and cultural diplomacy. Their extensive Commonwealth, EU, NATO and UN links are an asset here, so long as the impulse to play too many nationalist cards can be resisted (Evans and Seven 2010, Menon 2010). Equally, they should be aware that short-term gains in terms of improving a budget deficit will create long-term damage by withering the very assets on which soft power rests, whether at home or inside international organisations. International cultural relations are a long game and a matter of strategic relationship-building rather than short-term tactical advantage (Nye 2004c). There is thus the world of difference between using foreign aid, say, to buy influence or win contracts – both of which are dubious practices from all points of view – and investing in the institutions and practices which provide a platform for intelligent, constructive diplomacy. And beyond deterrence (of whom?) and effective counter-terror strategies (some of which also rely on a ‘hearts and minds’ approach) what actually are Britain’s needs in terms of *hard* power?

## 7. Recommendations

On the basis of the data and analysis provided above, this report makes the following abbreviated recommendations. **Governments** would be well-advised:

1. To refrain from direct interference in soft power assets.
2. To invest in and sustain soft power institutions such as the BBC, the British Council, and the education system over the long term, and at arm's length.
3. To recognise that hard and soft power, like power and influence more generally, reside on a continuum rather than being an either-or choice.
4. To understand that the power of example is far more effective than preaching.
5. To pay careful attention to the consequences of official foreign policy for Britain's reputation, identity and domestic society, ensuring that geopolitical and socio-economic goals are not pursued in separate compartments.
6. To accept that the majority of ways in which civilised countries interact entail using the assets which make up 'soft power', whatever political vocabulary we choose.
7. For their part, **citizens and voters** need to accept that some hard power assets, in the forms of the armed forces and security services, are necessary as an insurance policy against unforeseeable contingencies, and for use in non-conventional warfare against terrorists or criminals threatening British citizens at home and abroad, although not regardless of cost. Even diplomacy will sometimes need to be coercive (i.e. hard power) in relations with otherwise friendly states in order to insist on the UK's 'red lines', however they may be defined at the time. Because soft power excludes arm-twisting, it will never be enough as a foreign policy resource.

8. **Lastly, those engaged in the private socio-cultural activities** which contribute to soft power need to be aware that they are to some extent regarded as representative of their country's interests. They need not and should not compromise on such principles as academic or artistic freedom, but it is excessively innocent to imagine that their work takes place in a vacuum, untouched by the manoeuvring of governments and the competing narratives of world politics – especially when they are beholden to the Treasury for funding. Whether they like it or not, the universities, the orchestras, the novelists, the sportsmen and women, the archaeologists – and indeed the British Academy – are all part of the 'projection of Britain abroad' (Beloff 1965).

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The concept of soft power – the ability to influence the behaviour of others and obtain desired outcomes through attraction and co-option – was coined by British Academy Fellow Joseph Nye. Over the past decade, it has been the subject of considerable debate, as governments at home and overseas have sought to exploit their soft power assets in the face of power shifts in order to further their foreign policy objectives.

This report published by the British Academy discusses the nature and relevance of soft power in the context of how and why it matters for the UK. It analyses the UK's soft power resources and its ability to mobilise them, examines the main dilemmas, and includes a series of recommendations for policy-makers and wider society.

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