

A Fatal Neglect: On the Significance of U.S. Soft Power Today

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In modern times, U.S. presidential campaign slogans have become a crucial hallmark for what to expect from an incoming administration. Bill Clinton’s “It’s the Economy, Stupid!”, for example, famously encapsulated the president’s promise to focus on economic reform and recovery after the end of the Cold War. In a way, such slogans are, of course, vastly oversimplifying, and their effective explanatory power may be limited in a world of complex challenges. Still, they offer a glimpse into the mind and worldview of a candidate or, if elected, president, and provide insight into a (prospective) administration’s setting of priorities – both with respect to its ends and its means.

This holds particularly true for the incumbent in the White House, Donald J. Trump, and his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” (“MAGA”). The centrality of the slogan was expressed not least in Trump’s inaugural address, the last words of which repeatedly echoed the mantra. After inauguration, the catch-

phrase did not lose any of its significance. On the contrary, not only have the “MAGA” caps sported by Trump supporters become an omnipresent reminder of the slogan, the official webpages of the White House also frequently utilize varieties of it. For Trump himself, as indicated in a January 2017 interview with *The Washington Post*, the emphasis in his quest for “Making America Great Again” lies in a restoration and, if possible, increase of its hard power, exemplified by the president’s references to “jobs,” “industry,” and “military strength.”¹ The U.S.-China trade war, economic sanctions slapped on a variety of actors, the surge in military spending, and the establishment of the United States Space Force are but a few, if arguably among the most striking, expressions of this decided focus on hard power. A crucial dimension of power fatally neglected by the Trump administration, however, is that of soft power.

¹ Quoted in Karen Tumulty, “How Donald Trump Came up With ‘Make America Great Again’,” *The Washington Post*, January 18, 2017, online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-came-up-with-make-america-great-again/2017/01/17/fb6acf5e-dbf7-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html (January 10, 2020).

Whereas the former rests upon military and/or economic coercion, the latter draws upon the forces of attraction in international relations. In Joseph S. Nye's definition, soft power thus refers to "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments."² In this context, culture, values, policies, and personalities can be potent sources of soft power, which frequently even eclipse those of great armaments or economic prowess, as countless examples in the long annals of international relations prove.³

To date, however, the Trump administration has indicated as much disdain for attractive soft power as it has displayed a proclivity toward the coercive instruments of hard power. Whether it is the slow (or even still absent) filling of crucial posts in the state department, major cutbacks in relevant agencies and programs, the termination of various international treaties, or the scorn toward traditional multilateral fora, Washington seems to disregard the tools of soft power to a degree seldom, if ever, witnessed before. Its public diplomacy, crucial for conveying one's message to an international audience and understanding foreign perceptions, is in dire straits today as well. What is

more, an unprecedentedly blunt rhetoric, a high degree of political volatility, and major changes of course have unsettled friend and foe alike. Taken together, these trends have delivered a considerable blow to U.S. credibility, a crucial currency of soft power. Consequently, observers like Stephen M. Walt have already identified the downsides of what Walt called the administration's "bullying approach" to foreign affairs.⁴

In a world facing rising or revisionist powers and vast security challenges ranging from climate change to nuclear proliferation to international terrorism to cyber threats, the forces of attraction are of vital importance. Of course, military and economic power continue to loom large in international affairs. The neglect of the instruments of soft power, however, comes at a considerable price. A president who has set out to "Make America Great Again," therefore, would do well to take them into consideration. This observation becomes all the more glaring given that a major part of America's historical international clout has sprung from its prodigious soft power.



2 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), p. x.

3 Hendrik W. Ohnesorge, *Soft Power: The Forces of Attraction in International Relations* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

4 Stephen M. Walt, "America Isn't as Powerful as It Thinks It Is," *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2019, online at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/26/america-isnt-as-powerful-as-it-thinks-it-is/> (January 10, 2020).