

# Is U.S. Soft Power Declining Too?

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It is difficult to open a newspaper or peruse the internet without reading about America's declining power around the globe. These stories which never really go away but seem to have increased in the last few years almost invariably focus on America's reduced economic power as well as the rise of other powerful countries or blocks, most prominently China, but also India, Russia, Brazil and even Europe.

Implicit in much of this sentiment is the notion that because America's hard power, meaning military, political and economic power is in relative decline, it is even more important to cultivate and use America's soft power. Soft power refers to U.S. ability to achieve its goals through a number of different approaches that are not military in nature including things like leveraging the country's enormous cultural presence around the world, providing educational opportunities for people and leaders of other countries, using assistance to help cultivate free societies, and building relationships with foreign civic activists, government officials.

Soft power was a major, and often overlooked, contributor to the U.S. eventual victory in the Cold War, a conflict that was defined by competing visions and ideologies at least as much as by guns and bombs. It also has contributed to many major American foreign policy successes, such as NATO expansion, since the Cold War. However, the possibility that U.S. soft power will decline along with more traditional measures of state power should not be overlooked.

Two specific areas where this has already become a concern is the ability of the U.S. to influence decisions made by countries with whom the U.S. should have ample leverage deriving from soft power, as well as the declining role of the U.S. and an example or model for the rest of the world. The latter issue is particularly significant because of the discrepancy how the U.S. views itself as a model and how it is viewed in other countries.

A major part of the Obama administration's foreign policy, particularly in parts of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union is an effort to reassure and persuade U.S. allies. The administration seeks to reassure these allies of American support while persuading them to do things like reform their domestic political system or resolve conflicts with neighbors. These goals are not pursued by military or economic tactics, but by talk, persuasion and close relations between the countries. These efforts have also not been particularly successful, and not just during Obama's presidency. Few leaders in countries that are considered U.S. allies such as Azerbaijan or Kosovo have been inclined to reduce corruption or liberalize their political system because of informal U.S. encouragement.

The reduced impact of the U.S. as a model is a more direct measure of reduced U.S. soft power and is relevant for ordinary people as well as for leaders. This is a source of significant dissonance for policy makers because much of the theory underlying soft power is that the U.S. still stands for hope and opportunity for much of the world and that by exposing more people to the U.S, we will win more friends. The reality, however, has never been that simple. While there are places where, due to recent history, the U.S. is still extremely popular, including parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, in much of the world, people see the U.S. as a declining power that is unable to be as influential as it would like. The declining American economy and bizarre domestic politics of the U.S. have also contributed to a diminished image of the U.S. and its reduced soft power abroad.

There are still ways for the U.S. to increase and leverage its soft power, but it will require some innovation and should not be taken for granted. Soft power is not just going to happen because of a benign and powerful global presence, but has to be nurtured through programs and approaches which begin with an appropriate understanding of how the U.S. is viewed by both friends and others.