

Soft Power: More than Hearts and Minds

Norman Seip

Leading up to the Presidential Inauguration, the use of military “Soft Power” has been roundly debated as military policy evolves under the new administration. The conventional thought process on how and why militaries conduct soft power operations, non-traditional missions involving humanitarian assistance, disaster response and infrastructure development in foreign nations, has been to view these missions as a means to increase the ‘attractiveness’ of American culture. In fact, the *Los Angeles Times* even likened these missions to getting “what you want through attraction rather than coercion...” (*Joseph Nye, Los Angeles Times, Jan 21, 2009*).

But to cast Soft Power as simply a ploy to win hearts and minds is to miss the larger goal. When U.S. forces open a clinic to treat patients in remote regions, our nation’s image is not the doctor’s motivation. When Air Forces exchange ideas on how to work together during natural disasters, influencing trade policy isn’t part of the flight plan. And when a soldier sits down with a village elder to discuss assistance in erecting a bridge, whether or not the population finds American culture appealing is not in the blueprints.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has personally called for a resurgence in Soft Power practices. Air Force leadership recently committed millions to fund ‘Operation Southern Partner,’ a biannual, two-week exchange program with Latin American and Caribbean nations to share tactics, techniques and procedures in more than 25 military career specialties. Air Forces Southern medical technicians annually complete more than 30 medical readiness deployments in 14 countries across the region. In 2009, the USNS Comfort is again headed across the U.S. Southern Command area of focus to provide medical care and infrastructure projects to coastal communities.

Contrary to popular belief, Soft Power *cannot* change hearts and minds — American policy and media coverage of these effects is far too pervasive to be forgotten. Personal relationships built during mil-to-mil or mil-to-civilian interactions can move individuals, but a soft power campaign itself will not stop an insurgency or change a nation’s sentiment towards America.

So what are the goals of military Soft Power projects? In the U.S. Southern Command area of focus, and in Air Forces Southern, our stated objective is to promote security, enhance stability and enable partnerships across the Americas. Countering narcoterrorism, promoting human rights and providing humanitarian assistance to partner nations are some of the programs in our toolkit — ‘influence’ is never the objective.

Soft Power missions foster increased security and stability within partner nations, thereby increasing the conditions necessary for free peoples to prosper. Soft Power helps to emplace infrastructure, the rule of law, the internal ability to effectively respond to natural disasters and professional militaries to enable citizens to freely exercise rights and make responsible choices about their nation’s destiny. In addition, Soft Power missions develop strong partnerships and open communication channels, allowing nations to collaborate in solving regional challenges. On the other end of the spectrum, instability and insecurity tend to breed dictatorships, offer safe havens to narcoterrorism and repress human rights.

The enduring effects of Soft Power missions benefit both civilian and military institutions; for example, the continued professionalization of partner nation enlisted forces is bolstered through non-commissioned officer academy mobile training teams. Fixed wing subject matter exchanges with partner nation Air Forces preserve the sovereignty of a nation's airspace and close air routes for drug smugglers while cooperation teams focused on airport security protect ports for tourism, travel and commerce.

A sustained Soft Power campaign may do more to avert the next conflict than an arsenal of missiles or massing of troops. The future of our nation's military will surely see the rise of more diverse units — equipped as a strong, expeditionary force able to adapt missions to focus on Soft Power or traditional military operations. Tactics will shift from the 'cult of the offensive' to "any mission, anywhere, any time."

In the future, Soft Power will be applied across the spectrum of military operations, combining kinetic effects (Hard Power) with economic, political, cultural and military Soft Power campaigns — a concept termed "Smart Power" by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her confirmation hearings. For military members, Soft Power employment must become part of the services' core competencies, second nature to the warfighter and planner.

In doing so, militaries will have to involve other vital contributors — *an evolution as dramatic for the services as the "joint" movement of the 1980s* — such as Department of State, government agencies, law enforcement, non-governmental organizations and private enterprise. Other nations may provide additional expertise; for example, Operation Southern Partner will surely mature from the one-to-one exchanges began last year to include partner nation experts teaming with U.S. Air Force subject matter experts to share techniques with Air Forces from other regions.

In many circles, professional military education has already begun to teach future battlefield commanders that Soft Power isn't simply the mission of Civil Affairs or Public Affairs detachments; it's a responsibility of all commanders and the second-order mission of every Soldier, Sailor, Airmen and Marine.

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