

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**From Attraction to Narration: Rethinking Soft Power in the Age of Networked Communication****Nadeem Khan¹, Dr. Waqar Ahmad²**

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Network Society; Constructivism;
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International Relations Theory**Corresponding Author:****Nadeem Khan**Email: nadeemkhankpk13@gmail.com**License:**

Abstract: The term "soft power" was developed by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), and is now widely used in IR studies of non-coercive means of influence. But this conception of soft power and its workings have changed greatly over time, in the modern context of global power shifts. This paper tells the history and theory of soft power and develops the argument that it has grown from a resource-based basis of cultural attractiveness to a more intricate, discursive 'thing' affected by narratives, networks and digital communications. The argument of this study is grounded in classical realist tenets that emerged from Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979) and that stretch a broader continuum of moving from material to ideational views of power. It then critically discusses constructivist and cultural theory such as Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999), Stuart Hall (1997) and Manuel Castells (2010), to elucidate how the concept of identity, representation, and communication has become a primary way of operating influence. It is this latter set of documents and capacities that make up soft power in the modern "network society," as the paper asserts: in current society, soft power is no longer a product of inert culture; it's a product derived from the capacity to build, present, and carry out a narrative. This research tackles issues around the conceptual confusion of soft power and provides a more analytically sound framework in thinking about the process of soft power and influence in the twenty-first century by reconceptualising soft power as a dynamic and relational process.

Introduction

Power has been the core of International Relations (IR) and has been influencing the study of International Relations as well as tackling how international politics is run. Most of the twentieth century, power was understood mostly in material terms, manifested in the ability of a group of armed actors to wage war, in its economic capabilities, and in its ability to apply force. Classical and structural realism formed the core of the dominant paradigm, which came to define power as military strength, economic power, or coercive power. Theories like those of Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979) have characterized power in different ways, for example as control by one actor over another, or as the distribution of

In this evolving intellectual and geopolitical environment, Joseph Nye (1990) came up with the notion of "soft power," a wholly new way to view the definition of influence in world politics. Coercion or money is not a prerequisite and soft power, as Nye (2004, p. 5) put it, is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment." This redefined the emphasis of power, incorporating 'intangible' powers like culture, political values, and foreign policy, especially when felt as legitimate and appealing by others. Through this it provided a very convincing account of the various ways in which it was able to influence that were not measured by the traditional measures of military power or economic might, such as the United States' global cultural impact, or its dominant liberal democratic norms.

In the past 30 years, soft power has grown into a provocative idea and become a popular (and sometimes controversial) concept in academic and policy circles. It has been included in strategies of public diplomacy by governments, invoked by international organizations in discussions of global governance and used by scholars in various empirical cases. But, this same dispersion has created a great sense of confusion. But whether soft power is a set of resources or a way of acting, or a product of the success of influencing, has been controversial. This is because of the problems associated with measurement, the conceptual stretching of the concept (Sartori, 1970) and the implicit Western bias found in the initial formulations of the concept

The present paper suggests that such vagueness would have come about, in part, due to the fact that the role of soft power did not keep up well with other changes in the global order. Though in past formulations, soft power was seen as a behavioral byproduct of cultural attraction and the appeal of values, in current context, there doesn't seem to be a linear correlation. In an age of the "network society" (Castells, 2010), influence is realized via more decentralized communication channels, digital platforms, and information flows across national lines. In these situations, the power to select narratives, to tell them – in other words, to choose more attractive values – is the power that has become the core of the use of power. In a new turn in the soft power wheels, we see the transition from a resource-based soft power to a discursive and relation-based soft power.

This change is represented by a central argument in this paper: soft power has gone beyond being an attraction based on cultural and political resources, and has become a process of narrative construction, circulation, and contestation in a networked world. This reconceptualization of power does not simply denote a change in how power is thought or perceived, but also in the processes through which it is produced and reproduced: communication, representation, and perception. The paper leverage on Alexander Wendt's (1992, 1999) constructivist perspective as well as Stuart Hall's (1997) cultural theory and Castells' (2010) network theory to situate soft power in a wider framework which highlights identity, legitimacy and mediated interaction.

This reconceptualization is both a theory and practice. It aims at going beyond the traditional perception of a soft power, unlocking its mechanisms, and assuming theoretical responses to the earlier criticisms about soft power. The case for its practical utility lies in the ability it affords to understand the way in which states (and increasingly non-states) try to shape global audiences amidst an information décor and its rapid diffusion as well as contestations of meaning. That is, the effectiveness of soft power relies not just on state attributes or actions, but on their perceived attributes, perceived actions, and perceived representations to a variety of audiences.

The paper continues in this way. This section takes the opportunity to review some classic notions of power and the materialist underpinnings on which the construct of soft power was developed. Then it delves into the original formulation of Nye as it developed, before critiquing and debating major

critiques and contemporary discussions on Nye's concept. Next, the analysis switches to build up constructivist, cultural and communication perspectives that together shed light on the transition to a more discursive understanding of power. In light of these understandings, a new conceptual model is proposed, conceptualising 'soft power' as a storytelling process of development and revision. The concluding sections consider the implications of this architecture for theory and practice in relation to the rising integration and mediaisation of a global order.

This study aims to make a contribution to a more sophisticated and analytically fruitful understanding of influence in the field of International Relations by tracing the historical trajectory of soft power and re-interpretation with contemporary understanding. In this way, it echoes one of the central arguments it makes; that in the twenty-first century, power is manifested not just as physical ability or even cultural desirability, but—as the ability to set the agenda for global discourse.

Classical Conceptions of Power: The Materialist Foundations

Any discussion of soft power should start with the intellectual traditions that it was supposed to change. Throughout the twentieth century, the IR study has been shaped by a materialistic view of power which is best manifested in realist/neorealist approaches. However different in emphasis, they had a common premise: power lies in the real capacities—the military and economic—of its possessor and the ultimate goal of the state is survival in an anarchic international environment.

Hans Morgenthau's conception of classical realism viewed power as the control of the minds and actions of other person(s). Whether at home or overseas, politics for Morgenthau was necessarily a game of power and a basic fact of human life was the desire to dominate, to exercise the superior type of control over those around them. This view brought the word "coercion" to the forefront of politics and made it a central theme, where military power, strategic thinking and national interest became paramount. Morgenthau acknowledged the importance of psychological and moral factors, but these were once again elevated above the bigger picture that focused on power as control and that was to be gained in material ways.

From 1967 onward, and chiefly spearheaded by Kenneth Waltz, a more systematic and parsimonious account of power emerged, the transition to "structural realism." Waltz redirected the focus from the nature of man to the nature of the international system—anarchy—and in his 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics*, made it so. In this anarchistic setting, the state's share a lot of similarity and are mainly distinguished with regard to their capacities. Power, consequently, is now considered as the spread of these capacities in the system. States want to get as much 'squeeze' as they can get, depending on maintaining a 'favorable' balance of powers in order to survive.

Waltz's model was a good explanatory tool, but also an inadequate definition of power. It took influence down to decodable arms spending, advances in science and technology, and GDP, giving it a fair amount of space to concentrate on analysis of ideational factors. It was taken for granted that choice of countries would be formed by stated preferences, not formed or influenced by the concept of culture, identity and legitimacy. Consequently realism came up with a problem in devising an explanation for the kind of influence that did not involve coercion or induction.

Many problems with this materialist paradigm began to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, the Cold War experience showed that military strength doesn't always equate to political achievement. Despite all the material gains that the U.S. had, legitimacy and support in other parts of the world were lacking. In the same way, the Soviet Union's demise questioned the viability of coercive power as an effective means of control; internal acceptance and ideology had also proven to be the more significant forms of control.

Scholars started to look for frameworks which could accommodate the increasing significance of non-material factors as a result of these anomalies. Liberal institutionalists such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's (1977) studies on complex interdependence set the stage for the recognition of the factors changing the nature of global politics through economic integration, international institutions and transnational actors. They implied that the form of power was shifting towards the fragmentation of meaning and its multiplication in more than military and economic fields.

Meanwhile, globalization and an unprecedented communication revolution were adding to the complexity. The acceleration of information streams, the growth of world media networks, and the emergence of new perspectives on cultural exchange made possible a shift in which persuasions, attractions and framing of narratives were used to exercise influence. A place like that, influencing people's choices, was as crucial as forcing them to make their decisions in your favor.

It was in this context that the idea of soft power arose, as a criticism and elaboration of realist thinking. It recognized that material capabilities were essential, but it aimed its analysis to be more expansive than it had become, this time by including ideas, values and perceptions. It did so because one aspect of power had radically shifted from something mostly coercive to one that, more recently, is relational, communicative and symbolic.

However, the influence of realism is still felt in the analysis of power in significant ways. Some contemporary ideas of soft power also come loaded with an implicit materialist baggage, viewing "cultural" and "political" resources as the factors which can be amassed and applied, just as military strength or economic resources are. These are characteristics of the realism assumption, which is still long-standing and lingering among people, and also shows that there is a need to understand power more comprehensively as well as being theoretically integrated.

Overall then, it could be said that although classical and structural realism was an important starting point for understanding international behavior in politics, the modern world's increasingly changing context renders the explanatory power lacking due to definitions of concepts in terms of material capacities. Thus, the rise of soft power can be understood within the broader context of a rethinking of power in multidimensional and nuanced ways, a process that is ongoing and continues to be adapted to the emerging power structures of the twenty-first century.

The Emergence of Soft Power: Nye's Foundational Framework

The demise of materialist ideas of power along with the empirical changes of the late 20th century resulted in the possibility of conceptual change in International Relations. It was in this backdrop that Joseph Nye developed the concept of "soft power" for the first time in the late 1980s and later expanded on it in his highly cited *Bound to Lead* (1990) and the subsequent *Soft Power* (2004). Nye's intervention did not attempt to replace prevailing notions of power—it wanted to broaden them to include the attraction and persuasion in determining international results.

The complex methods of influence Nye was asserting, revolving around persuading others either to do or not to do something -- whether by force or economic pressure -- truly boiled down to one main point: states could accomplish their goals by making people so want something that they must themselves do it. In shaping preferences through attraction, this represents another type of power—one that is less direct, and perhaps even less obvious, than its two other main hard power dynamics. As Nye (2004, p. 5) puts it in his oft-cited definition, soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment."

There are three main sources of soft power, Nye found. First, culture, and in particular culture that is appealing to other people, is a good lever of influence. This encompasses what is known as "high

culture" (literature, art, education, etc.) as well as "popular culture" (films, music, media, etc.). Second, consistent political values (at home and internationally) can improve the credibility and legitimacy of a country. Thirdly, while foreign policy is seen as credible and ethically sound, it can instill confidence and respect in the eyes of foreign states. These combine to make up part of a state's attractiveness but not its coerciveness to others.

A unique aspect of Nye's approach is its understanding that power is not only about resources, is about relationships. Soft power is achieved through co-optive mechanisms, whereby others end up taking to themselves preferences that are perceived to be attractive and legitimate. Contrast this to a command-based approach to articulating the logic of hard power, in which compliance occurs as a result of threat/reward. There is dispute about the very origin of the concept of soft power: as a relational concept, it relies on the views and understanding of the external public.

Furthermore, Nye's formulation was also closely linked with the broader shifts in the world system. He claimed that the end of the Cold War and the rapid pace of globalization had made a greater contribution towards non-material methods of influence, and therefore enabled non-material methods of influence to play a more important role in international relations. The power to control information – and to influence narratives – was an increasingly distinguishing component of power, especially with the development of emerging information technologies and the rising availability of communication channels. This understanding resulted in Nye (2011) categorizing power shifts into two types: transitions in power among states and transitions (or diffusions) in power from states to non-states. This understanding meant that Nye (2011) made distinctions between power transition among states and power transition/transfers (diffusion) from states to non-states – both of which make traditional classification of power transfers more difficult.

However, despite being elegant and intuitive, Nye's framework has its own flaws that have been called into question. As with many other criticisms of the concept, one of the most vocal challenges to the deployment of soft power is the blurring of so-called soft power resources and outcomes. Nye determines culture, values and policies as sources of attraction, but does not explain how these come to have a physical impact. As critics have pointed out, having culturally worthwhile attributes is not any guarantee of desirable political results (Baldwin, 2016). This leaves us with some questions of causality and measurement to entertain, continuing the challenge to empirical uses of the concept.

One of the flaws, too, is the notion that attraction is always good or even popular. The early essays, reflecting a normative optimism in the face of America's global leadership, sometimes demonstrate a fascination with the attractiveness of liberal values and institutions, as well as other ideas. But various other factors, such as the emergence of alternative systems of governance and challenges to the hegemonic norm of Westerners have complicated the assumption. Attraction, later scholars argue, is not universal, but context dependent, which is region and culture and political system related (Vuving, 2009). The soft power of Pakistan is clearly reflective of this inequality: while Pakistan's cultural, diasporic, and diplomatic resources are real, the influence of soft power is consistently circumscribed by a security-focused image in international arenas that makes resources that attract people in another environment less attractive in this one (Shah, Khattak, & Attiq, 2016). A similar conclusion is reached by Saifullah and Qaisrani (2022), who show that Pakistan's foreign policy has increasingly incorporated soft power instruments — development assistance, scholarships, cultural promotion and humanitarian diplomacy — yet these remain under-leveraged relative to the country's underlying cultural and human resources.

However, Nye's contribution is still the basis of it. He introduced the term 'soft power' and opened up a

new area of study which has now been proliferated between empirical contexts and academic disciplines. He also turned the analytical angle from what states need to how they are perceived, thus emphasizing the aspects of legitimacy, credibility, and communication in the international political sphere.

Looking back on Nye, it can be said that it was the fruit of its era and a forerunner to the evolution of learning. It reflected the rising role of culture and values in the post-Cold War environment but failed to account for the impact of digital media, networked communication, and the narrative contestation of it on the new world order of influence. The description of soft power in the Twenty-First Century should go beyond Nye's model of power as tied to resources to a more dynamic view of power as a discursive and networked process, as will be argued in the following sections.

Debates and Critiques: Conceptual Ambiguity and Measurement

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has influenced a great deal of analysis, but also received a number of criticisms focused on its "soft" nature, both analytical and empirical. The growing use of soft power as a force in both academic and policy circles came with two major challenges that stemmed from the very elasticity that made it such a potent instrument. First, definitions, scope and usefulness of soft power were matters of concern. Second, as it became more popular, it came with a lot of issues that could be challenged.

A key ongoing challenge relates to the separation of resources and outcomes. Nye distinguishes between three assets of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy, but has no idea how these assets are used in practice to produce influence. The key to grasping power is not the possession of assets but its impact manifested in who gets what, when, and how, as David Baldwin (2016) puts it. So from the culture side, cultural "appeal" does not always equal political "power," and "admiration" doesn't always equal what most people would call "conformance". The vagueness of this leads to difficulties in operationalizing and reduces the explanatory accuracy of soft power.

This is a closely related problem, to which the issue of measurement comes. While the uses of hard power can be measured by things like military spending or gross domestic product, soft power can be described in terms of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs. The measuring of soft power is not straightforward, nor is it context-independent; different scholars have raised many difficulties, such as Fan (2008). The popularity and influence of nations and territories have been measured in various different ways by attempts to create indices, including, for example, the Soft Power 30 (McClory & Harvey, 2016). Empirical research on soft power often suffers from these problems with validity and reliability. This measurement problem is visible in the case of Pakistan, whose soft power rankings and international image have lagged behind its stated cultural and diplomatic potential for much of the past decade, a gap that Idrees and Khan (2024) trace to the absence of a consistent, whole-of-government narrative strategy between 2018 and 2022.

Another set of criticisms is to the effect that soft power is too broadly conceived, and that the many phenomena it gathers might not be mutually comparable. For example, the indistinguishability between soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding and propaganda is quite common (Melissen, 2005). Nye considers soft power as an act of attraction, while others contend that it is not really soft, as usually, making an impression by means of soft power will require communication games, a kind of persuasion or even manipulation. Normative issues do arise about the true nature of soft power – is it really "soft" or is it a more subtle form of coercive power?

This relates to analyses by others like Bialy Mattern (2005), who postulate 'representational force' as one way soft power can be both implicit and coercive. This perspective argues that the creation of

dominant narratives is capable of excluding other narratives and

In this regard, there is the other criticism, coming from the postcolonial and critical viewpoint that challenges the normativity of soft power. Historians and others contend that the circulation of culture and ideas is deeply embedded in historical and structural inequalities, in favor of certain actors, such as Western states. That the dissemination of Western cultural products is so widespread today may be explained not only by their intrinsic quality but also by the nature of Western communication networks and media industries which exist in monopoly (Tomlinson, 1991). The question is whether or not soft power is to be seen as true attraction, or as a by-product of the power dynamics existing in the world that are more or less symmetrical.

Moreover, there have been growing doubts on the universal appeal of the values of culture and society. Alternative models of governance, and the diversification of global audiences, point to context-specific and contested attractions. However, what is considered okay or desirable in one situation may not be in another. This range of variety renders “soft power” an unstable, unpredictable supply, one that relies on “audience reception and interpretation.”

Traditionally associated with the soft power. It is a breakdown of the relatively linear relationship often assumed by the soft power between sender and receiver.

All of these critiques, viewed collectively, suggest that there exists some ultimate paradox at the core of soft power theory. The idea is important because of attraction, legitimacy and perception, as this is a characteristic of modern international relations. In one sense this idea embraces a salient aspect of the modern international system – the increasing significance of attraction, legitimacy and perception. Conversely, it is quite vague in terms of concepts and has methodological drawbacks that obstruct its analytical distinctiveness. The tension in this mutual reference is the appeal of achieving a finer-grained and theoretically sophisticated account of soft power, beyond the global regime of infrastructural definitions of resources and the more subtle and complex soft power processes of its creation and contestation.

To confront such problems, later scholarship has increasingly focused on constructivist, cultural, and communicative theories that provide the means to be more analytical in considering the discursive and relational sides of power. These views lay the groundwork for soft power which is retooled and given literature reinterpretation in the following section so as to overcome shortfalls and retain the essence of the concept.

Constructivism and the Social Construction of Power: Wendt’s Contribution

Constructivist international relations theory has a different starting point than classical and structural realism, which talked about power as being a function of the material capacities organized within an anarchic system. Alexander Wendt (1992), in his celebrated article *Anarchy is what states make of it* undermines and denies the core assumption of neorealism: a self-help logic of competition and suspicion is inherent in anarchy. Anarchy is, on the contrary, not logico-scientific but socially constructed; its meaning, the identity and interest that states construct in it, are generated. Structures cannot stand alone in that they are determined by a system of common understandings, norms, and practices. This shift in world politics from a materialist to an intersubjective perspective offered one conceptual avenue for later redefining soft power as a relational and interpretative instead of simply resource-based phenomenon.

It means a lot for soft power. Identities and interests are not pre-given, but built, and thus the “attractiveness” of a state’s culture, values, and/or policies can’t be assumed as an inherent quality to those resources. Instead, attraction is a product of interaction—that is, it relies on others’ interpretation

of the state's self-presentation and on social norms and meanings that allow for such interpretation. Wendt's more systematic argument in his 1999 work can be expanded on here to show that legitimacy, threat, or admiration is not a static perception but continues to be negotiated—such as in processes of role-taking and mutual recognition—in an ongoing fashion. This constructivist principle directly tackles one of the ambiguity of the previous section outlined above: that of the unclear links between soft power resources and outcomes. This ambiguity, from a constructivist perspective is not the best thing that could have been removed from language, but rather a design aspect of a process in which meaning creation is continually co-created between sender and audience.

Constructivism also provides a clearer description of the routes that ideas and values follow and of how they become embedded internationally, which is not an area of the original Nye model's framework that was well described. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) developed a “norm life cycle” model that posits that norms progress through phases of emergence (when norm entrepreneurs first construct and present norms as interventions to appropriate norms of behavior); cascade (when greater numbers of actors begin to adopt a norm, with many doing so

This “constructivist” perspective is provided by Hurd (2007), who suggests that legitimacy is a separate power from coercion and material coercion. In his research on the United Nations Security Council, Hurd demonstrates that actors do not act in accordance with rules and institutions merely as a result of their expectations of punishment or reward; they also act in response to their perceptions that the rules are rightful. In this way, legitimacy works as an internal social norm that guides behavior internally, as opposed to being an external one imposed from the outside. This is relevant to soft power: other actors will tend to render the State's foreign policy more loving than it is merely attractive, if it is seen as legitimate, consistent, and rule abiding. Legitimacy thus functions as a constructivist mechanism that helps convert cultural or political appeal into durable influence.

These contributions to constructivism take the list of resources posited by Nye, culture, values and foreign policy, and treat them not as things to be owned and acted upon, but as matters that are subject to a continuous “act-on” process of subjectivity (selfness), norm diffusion (replication), and legitimation (affirmation). Soft power on this interpretation is never merely stowed away but constantly created, challenged, and sanctioned or rejected by other actors. What follows this 'process-oriented' conception of 'meaning-making', and in the next section cultural theory is explored to reveal how these meanings are represented, encoded and circulated in the first place.

Cultural Theory, Representation, and the Politics of Meaning: Hall's Contribution

Cultural theory tackles a more fundamental, and similarly significant, question: How do the cultural and political tools connected to soft power prove to be meaningful to an audience in the first place? While constructivism portrays the possibility of attraction as the outcome of identities, norms, and legitimacy, cultural theory envisions meaning as the product of representation and signification. It is here that it is useful to remember Stuart Hall (1997). According to Hall, representation is not a simple mirror image of reality but an active “constructing” of the image and meaning through the shared use of systems of signs, images and language, which Hall calls “signifying practices.” The meaning is neither a built-in part of an object, policy or cultural product nor does it happen spontaneously; it is produced when codes can be used to encode it and interpretive frames appear to be available for decoding it. Representation, in other words, is always a form of construction, never a neutral transmission.

When Hall applies the framework to the culture, political values or foreign policy of a state, he finds that, to gain traction on a foreign audience's consciousness, it must be represented, meaning that it needs to be selectively framed, packaged as a symbol, and circulated as a recognizable sign. This

transforms Nye's concept of "high" and "popular" culture as a stock of fixed things into a representational process of production and interpretation where the same cultural sign could be interpreted as one thing by its producers, and an altogether different thing by the audience in some other historical, political or cultural time and place. One national symbol meant to instil unity, for example, can be seen as an indicator of exclusion and nationalism as a matter of interpretation on the recipient side.

This space of representation is amplified by the mobility of culture as a translation itself. According to Appadurai (1996), the current era of globalization is characterized by overlapping "scapes" (scapes of people, technology, finance and, importantly, media and ideas) which are now neither moving towards nor away from a single "hub," but traverse international borders in unpredictable and deterritorialized paths. These cultural representations are then translated, hybridized and re-interpreted by the communities they are received by, undermining any single recipe that suggests the state's "products" can have a predictable or consistent impact on an external "audience."

These cultural currents are in motion and their trajectory is just as subject to debate. Thussu (2007) highlights the growing media and cultural flows in the opposite direction, from the global south and east to the west and beyond – as Al Jazeera is the channel for the Arab world and Arab media industries, or as Arabic films are shown in other countries. They challenge the stereotypical Western-driven notions in early soft power theory described in the previous section, as the quality of their representation—where they appear—and their path toward attracting through reciprocal pathways is far from predictable or linear, but actually quite competitive, and multiple actors are vying for access points into this representational field.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the angle of both Constructivism and cultural theory is the following: The concept of soft power cannot be simply said to be the possession of attractive resources, since attractiveness is something that can only be achieved; it is created through processes of identity construction, norm diffusion, legitimation, and representational encoding and decoding leading to the construction of attractive resources. Not yet specified in either of the two theories, however, is the mediated infrastructure that facilitates their more recent production and circulation at a planetary complex level. It is to this question – how in the process of digital and networked communication, soft power becomes soft power that is the analysis availed.

Network Society and the Digital Transformation of Soft Power

Digital technologies and networked communication play an important role in the definition of soft power, rendering it impossible to grasp the development of this power in the twenty first century without taking it into consideration. The age of the Internet, social media platforms and mobile communications has taken a new turn to how information circulates globally, which has led to the "network society" as conceptualized by Manuel Castells (2010). Today, in this context, power is changing to a form of power expressed in communication networks, where the power to influence on information, to narrate, to manage visibility are becoming essential factors in the political and cultural agenda.

In time of the network society, the dynamics of power, says Castells (2010) goes around the ability to shape the meanings of others, their interpretations, with the mediation of information flows. It is a new paradigm for understanding soft power compared to what existed previously. Although Nye spoke about influence in terms of cultural and political assets, the digital age shows that influence can be even more about a mediation and circulation of assets in a distributed network than having assets. Soft power is no longer just about being "attractive" it is about being "visible," "credible" and playing a

"narrative.

The centralizing of power has been one of the most significant impacts of this transformation. What (Nye, 2011) described later as the shift to multipolar power dynamics is a reality in the dynamic between multinationals, media, civil society, and even individual influencers. Non-state actors can also produce and disseminate content that can influence global perceptions, especially when uploaded onto social media platforms like Twitter (X), YouTube and Instagram, where such content may be more agile and have additional reach than traditional state institutions (Manor, 2019). This forces early soft-power theory to step back from its implicit premise that states are the main players in the field of influence.

As a result, the creation of stories is multi-directional and contested. States don't have an exclusive say over their image anymore, but rather they are embedded in a messy, multi-layered ecosystem where stories are co-created, questioned and re-imagined by a wide range of audiences. One viral video, news story and social media trend can quickly make or break how a nation is viewed globally. As commentators have observed, a single viral incident can undo years of accumulated goodwill. This highlights the swiftness and irregularity of the growth of narration in digital space.

In this context, the notion of virality holds a special significance. Emotionally engaging, visually-compelling and easily shared content has been supported by digital platforms, with extreme or sensational narratives often highlighted in their popularity (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Such incidents (political crises, social unrest, violence, etc.) may give an impression of 'reputational asymmetry' as compared to more positive or nuanced representations. One of the biggest challenges for soft power is the ability to attract, and that depends upon how to manage the amplification and interpretation of what is communicated in algorithm-driven systems.

Instead, digital technologies have broadened the public diplomacy toolbox. In addition, governments are now involved in digital diplomacy, in the sense that they are reaching out directly to foreign publics, without having to go through the traditional intermediary modes of communication (Manor, 2019). These involve official social media presences, virtual cultural exchanges and opportunities for direct interaction, for example, at international events. But, such programs are only as effective as their credibility and resonance. With an injection of information in the media, audiences are hesitant to trust and embrace overly promotional messages, but rather seek authenticity and transparency. In Pakistan's case, this challenge is compounded by institutional lag: Habibullah and Xiguang (2022) find that Pakistani embassies have been slow to move beyond one-way, state-centric messaging on social media towards the more dialogic, audience-engaged model that networked public diplomacy requires, though Anwar, Saleem and Mian (2025) note that Pakistani missions have since narrowed this gap, in some respects matching or exceeding larger international embassies in presence and agenda-setting on Twitter (X).

The other crucial aspect of the digital transformation is the rise of mis-, disinformation and multiple understandings of truth or reality (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). All these phenomena serve as a barrier to the operation of soft power, thus creating uncertainty and contestation in the informational environment. Competing points of stories from rival governments can also pose a threat to states, as can distributed story networks built up by a multitude of actors with divergent motivations and agendas. This further highlights the move from a resource-based soft power paradigm to a "narrative competition", and "epistemic credibility" model.

Furthermore, responding to pressure and urgency becomes most important in network society. Delayed and measured diplomacy is not working effectively at the speed of digital media. This means that states face the challenge to build up their capacity to promptly answer new narratives while communicating in

a coherent and consistent way. Otherwise, narrative gaps are quickly filled by another, often worse, story.

Most importantly, the soft power digitalization transforms the domestic-foreign media connection. Entangled in an interdependent media landscape, the concept of internal communication and external communication blurs together. What goes on domestically is instantly exposed to the world for better or worse, the internal governance processes and social interactions and political developments have an impact on everyone else's opinion of you and your country. This is a major lesson to be learned; truth is that soft power starts at home but in this digital era, it does not stop from being projected outwards, either by design or by mistake.

Overall, the transition to a network society marks an important change in nature of soft power. The power to communicate, to create meaningful stories, to manage information spaces is becoming key to gaining leverage over what has traditionally been held as power – attractive aspects of culture and politics. It requires a re-thinking of soft power as a process which is dynamic and fluid, evolving and interactive, and rooted in and shaped by the systems of global communication.

The chapter draws on these understandings to develop a new conceptual account of soft power as a process and dynamic rather than an enduring resource, a concept that seizes the process of narrative construction, circulation and contestation in today's international space.

From Attraction to Narration: Toward a Revised Conceptual Framework

The historical passage from twentieth-century attempts to overcome a materialist definition of power through the notion of 'soft power' to the present-day concern with media, identity, and digital communication has been charted in the foregoing pages. Overall, the developments suggest that the concept of soft power, which used to be rooted in resources, is proving inadequate. Although Joseph Nye's definition is a cornerstone, it needs to be refined conceptually to address the multi-dimensional and more discursive, networked, and contested forms of influence in the 21st century. This part pushes forward in developing this refinement by suggesting that instead of the model of attraction, it should be a model of narration.

The idea behind this reconceptualization is the basic one, but powerful one: soft power is not only about having chiseled resources, but about building, pitching and maintaining compelling stories. The strong appeal in this sense does not apply to culture or values as such, but rather to the "making" of them through a narrative process that makes them meaningful and meaningful to certain groups. This shift from the state's statute making toward the state's interpretation and representation is in line with the work of constructivism, cultural theory, and communication studies.

To operationalize this approach, soft power can be viewed as a three-stage process which includes three stages of soft power: narrative production, soft power circulation and soft power reception.

Narratives focus upon the production of meaning, images and stories to present the State to the world; this is what is first meant by the term narrative. This means, amongst other things, official discourse, cultural products, policies and symbols all of which define a national self-image. This stage can be explained by Hall (1997), who saw this stage as "encoding" leading to particular representations being constructed, with selective framing. Especially important is that national identity is not just stated by the state, it also manifests in the work of cultural industries, media institutions and civil society.

Secondly, narrative circulation is a focus on the means by which these representations are propagated through the interactive networks of the world. If the network society envisioned by Manuel Castells (2010) characterizes the new condition of the contemporary world, circulation is facilitated, de-amplified, or even remediated by connecting digital platforms, new media infrastructure, and

algorithmic logics. At this stage, this is one of the most significant: a narrative—no matter how captivating—must be circulated in order to be influential. Meanwhile, the circulation brings in a line of confusion; stories can be recontextualized, challenged, or changed as they transfer between platforms and audiences.

Third, reception of stories is how viewers process and react to those images. This should emphasize the fact that soft power, like all power, depends as much on perceptions as it does on intentions: the power with which soft power is carried is the power with which others interpret it. We should remember that meaning is co-constructed through interaction as constructivist academics like (Alexander Wendt, 1999) suggest. Narratives are understood differently depending on cultural, political and historical backgrounds, decoding different narratives are decoded in different ways, which leads to different understandings, which can even be oppositional. Attraction, then, comes as a by-product of a successful match of the imagined story with the audience's values and expectations. Empirical work on Pakistan illustrates this reception-side variability directly: Muhammad, Hussain and Vighio (2026) find that Pakistan's cultural assets, media platforms and sports diplomacy generate positive audience response only unevenly, case by case, precisely because the underlying narrative remains fragmented rather than strategically produced and circulated.

There are many advantages to this tripartite approach to analysis. It helps to put an end to the mediation of the edge between resources and outcomes, by emphasizing processes that tie the two together. Cultural and political goods are reconceptualized as part of the input, and not directly as the influence, on the production of the narrative. Second, it introduces communication and media as a key factor – soft power is as effective as the dissemination and reception of the narratives in the complex context of information. Third, it emphasizes the importance of context and contingency: influence is not an automatic right, but must be negotiated continuously.

Following this process-proportional method, the framework also focuses on the three main soft power change mechanisms, that is, erosion, contradiction and distortion.

- “Erosion” refers to the loss of trustworthiness within a State's story and happens over time, because something changes, fails to live up to expectations, goes wrong or because it does not hold in the eyes of the world. In the case of democratic countries with some authoritarian traits, for instance, a slow erosion of the symbolic value of democracy may be taking place.
- Contradiction occurs when elements within the state's narrative are seen as opposite each other and generate a disconnect in the minds of the audience. This frequently points to the separation of intent and action, be it in terms of human rights or foreign policy.
- Distortion is when the story of a state is cleverly skewed by third parties such as media outlets, other governments or digital forums. Now in the age of social media, distortion can be swift and significant and happen at a mass scale, changing a country's self-perception as well.

Such mechanisms emphasize the frailty of soft power in a networked world.” Soft power, on the other hand, is highly subject to contestation and interpretation and therefore cannot be imposed using the vehicle of hard power. Yet this weakness is not a constraint but a result of the very interactive and dynamic interplay of influence in today's international relations.

This means of re-thinking has broad implications. On paper, it transcends static and resource-based notions of “soft power” to provide a more complex understanding based on a plurality of disciplines. Additionally, it answers inquiries relating to ambiguity as well as dimension by identifying the “next steps,” including how influence is created as well as shared. Morally, it reflects the significance of strategic communication, narrative consistency and credibility in the conduct of statecraft.

Overall, this emphasis of switched from attraction to narration does not discard the core tenets of the soft power theory, but rather adds and updates some of them. It understands that in an informational world, where complex communication patterns shape the world, power is not only manifest in what people do and say, but in how they communicate and describe what they do and say. From this viewpoint, one can trace the evolution of the concept of influence in the 21st century and prepare for a more detailed look at its theoretical and practical implications in the end sections of this paper.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The re-thinking on Soft Power as a construction of a narrative, its circulation and its reception have major implications for International Relations theory and the practice of diplomacy and foreign policy. Adopting this approach over a primarily resource-based one not only overcomes the conceptual ambiguities that have arisen since then, it also enables a discussion of concepts of power without losing sight of the realities of today's networked, media-centric world.

This approach from theory has a critical impact which seeks to break away from the long-lasting influence of materialist theories and at the same time to continue the constructivist approach. Realist analysis has been dominated by traditional scholars, including Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979), who view power through the lens of capability and constraint, and have only weak means of approaching the question of how meaning and perception influence international events. Functioning as a useful corrective, the theory of "constructivism" (Alexander Wendt, 1992, 1999) de-emphasises negatives and attaches importance to identity and norms; however, it has the downside of failing to provide a detailed account of communicative processes that project and contest identity and norms.

This narrative-centred approach, developed in this essay, reconciles the above two streams by incorporating the concepts of cultural theory and communication theory, particularly Stuart Hall's (1997) and Manuel Castells's (2010). In the process, it places soft power in a larger theoretical trend in which power is seen as a relational and mediated concept. More broadly, this synthesis will help to better understand the phenomenon of influence beyond norms and identities as well as the processes of communicating, interpreting, and transforming norms and identities.

Furthermore, this has significance for the ongoing debate on measuring soft power. In terms of focus, the concept of soft power is portrayed as a process, rather than a source of capacity, which tends to concentrate on assessing flow of narration rather than assets. This doesn't remove some of the problems associated with empirical evaluation, but offers a more analytically coherent foundation for the evaluation of influence. For example, researchers could look at the extent to which stories about a country actually get produced, that it propagates, and how it is understood by various audiences rather than whether a country has soft power. The discussion of this process-based approach offers fresh possibilities for methodological development, such as discourse analysis, as well as media studies and network analysis.

Normative implications in the framework have also emerged which relate, among others, to the ethics of influence. Questions of representation, authenticity, and manipulation become focal elements if the operation of soft power is through the creation of narration. As writers such as Bially Mattern (2005) have pointed out, it is a slippery slope to attraction and coercion both in how the stories are written and in how other people think about them. The focus on narration therefore opens up a more critical perspective on the implementation of power in discourse processes, and also on the possibilities of exclusion, marginalization and ideological domination.

It's also a very practical issue when you consider how this will impact them. Given the rapid pace at which information moves and the competing explanations of meaning in our society, states need to

realize that soft power is not a passive process, but an active process. Policies will need to evolve from building up cultural and diplomatic assets to being more concerned with developing the strategic management of narratives across several platforms and for various parties.

First off comes the necessity of coherence of narration. States need to have their values and foreign policies consistent with their domestic policies – consistent and reinforcing, not in conflict with. But as pointed out in the previous post, when there is distance between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is meant’ there is a possibility of narrative erosion and loss of credibility. This echoes the mantra of soft power starting at home, but in today's digital world everything is open for critical questioning and assessment by the rest of the world. This is illustrated by how the international image of Pakistan, from that dominated by hard-power associations, can be shifted to a more favorable image through sustained coordinated strategic communication in the cultural, civil, and diplomatic sectors of the country, and not just policy adjustments (Warraich, Rehman, & Ahmed, 2023). This assessment is echoed in more recent comparative work: Butt, Hashmi and Khan (2026) find that Pakistan has continued to lean on humanitarian diplomacy, cultural outreach and appeals to Islamic solidarity to build soft power, in contrast to India's more integrated smart-power approach combining cultural diplomacy with technological and economic leverage (see also Yaseen, Muzaffar, & Khan, 2022, on the components of Indian public diplomacy). China's Belt and Road-linked engagement with Pakistan offers a further illustrative case of how infrastructure projects can double as instruments of narrative construction: Nitza-Makowska (2025) shows how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been packaged as “green” cooperation to project a benign image of Chinese involvement, a strategy consistent with Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira's (2021) broader account of how the Belt and Road Initiative functions as a vehicle for Chinese soft power in relations between China and the European Union. As Gallarotti (2022) observes more generally, soft power of this kind remains fragile and easily contested in a densely networked world, reinforcing this paper's central claim that attraction is inseparable from the narrative work needed to sustain it.

The framework also provides a reminder of the need for institutional adaptation. The traditional system of diplomacy, which had been conceived for dealing with states, is insufficient to function in a decentralized informational space. New competencies are required for effective soft power projection – digital communication, media engagement and strategic storytelling. This encompasses government institutions as well as linkage between cultural industries, diaspora, and civil society actors, all of which are responsible for creating and shaping national narratives.

Third, the focus on narrative circulation highlights the significance of the media ecosystem and dynamics of platforms. The State faces complex informational environments as a result of algorithms, user behavior and transnational networks. This can be done both positively and negatively with digital platforms that can promote positive promotions but can also quickly cross-pollinate negative information or misinformation. This duality needs to be handled both technically and with a balanced knowledge of audience segmentation and content dynamics.

Fourth, the concept of the 'hierarchy' of audience-centredness signals a necessity for reception-focused approaches. It's better to use custom messages and communicate in soft power than to use ‘one size fits all’ approaches. This means engaging and conversing and listening, but it does not involve talking at. In this respect, it is less about broadcasting, and more about engaging in conversations, about soft power.

Lastly, resilience in the face of competing narratives is emphasized. When there are actors that are in constant competition to influence and obscure perceptions, soft power cannot be treated as a fixed

possession, since it is constantly contested and negotiated. In response to these threats, States have started to devise ways to combat misinformation, respond to crisis and preserve credibility

Overall, the reinterpretation of soft power as narration is a more complex and realistic narration of how soft power works in today's international relations. It transcends theories and theoretical differences, tackles the problems of empirical research, and serves as a useful resource for policymakers facing an ever more complex world. Most importantly, it reinforces one of the core ideas: In the 21st century, power is enacted in addition to being done, communicated, and remembered.

The concluding section brings together these thoughts and advocates for the relevance of this shift to the learned and practical study of international relations in general.

Conclusion

In this paper the evolution and transformation of soft power have been sought to be traced in the light of the changes that took place in IR theory and global politics in general. The analysis, which followed the materialist approaches to power that were developed by the classical and structural realists (Hans Morgenthau, 1948; Kenneth Waltz, 1979), for example, showed the dominance of ideas of power that were based on coercion, material resources, and set of constraints. These frameworks were useful in understanding different aspects of state behavior, but were weak in articulating forms of influence other than force and inducement.

Joseph Nye (1990, 2004) introduced a new concept, that of soft power, which added the domain of power—of attraction, legitimacy, persuasion. Nye's framework that holds culture and political values as significant sources of influence put into a framework that was capturing the growing significance of non-material factors in a globalizing world. However, as the paper has demonstrated this is a framework which, although central, is also conceptually ambiguous in a significant way on the nature of the link between resources and outcomes and measurement and operationalisation concerns.

In answer to these criticisms the paper focused on constructivist and “cultural” approaches, with a focus on the work of Stuart Hall (1997) and Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999) who highlighted the issues of identity, legitimacy, and representation in international perceptions. These have changed the thinking from static attributes to “processes of meaning making” to emphasize the relational and interpretive nature of power. The analysis also drew on Manuel Castells' (2010) idea that with digital communication the production and propagation of influence has been changed by a “network society”.

The paper developed this theoretical framework and proposed one central argument: Soft power has changed from a concept of attraction based on cultural and political resources to a narrative construction, circulation and reception process in a networked global environment. This reconceptualization speaks to and remedies important weaknesses of the previous literature, which is ambiguous about the mechanisms by which influence is created and challenged. This also shows the vulnerabilities of soft power, which is vulnerable to the processes of erosion, contradiction and distortion in the information landscape of today.

There are analytical and practical implications to this change. On a theoretical level it suggests a greater merger of the approaches to study of power, a merger that embraces realism, constructivism and communication theory. In its practical way, it emphasises the necessity of coherence, credibility and strategic communication in the art of statecraft. With today's quick rates of information exchange and intensely contentious understandings of what happened, of what meaning to give it, how to remember it, and how to forget it, a way to control the contexts in which events are interpreted and remembered has become a key driver of influence.

Finally, the evolution of soft power can be said to reflect a general shift in the character of international

politics. Power is no longer merely a means of control or resources, or institutions but more and more the ability to set the norms for global discourse. Both states and diverse non-state actors today find themselves in the battle for such a “narrative space”—influential ones are those who can be seen by the audience, recognized legally, and heard by them.

In this context, the concept of soft power should transcend into dynamic ones in order to emphasize the process instead of static and resource-centric view. This work aims to offer a conceptualisation that is more fitting to the complexities of contemporary global politics which treats the concept of ‘soft power’ as ‘narration’. It challenges scholars and practitioners to reflect on both the social organization of power in their own societies and on the processes of communicating, deciphering and reinforcing power in an increasingly interdependent world.

This commitment is crucial: with it, it confirms a key insight in the twenty first century: the battle for power is, at the very least, a battle for meaning – who gets to win it comes down to whose stories are embraced, whose values resonate and whose understanding of the world ends up winning.

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