Foreign policy for wimps

BY RICHARD NOSSAL

Soft power is a fashionable word these days. Its usage has become popular in recent speeches and essays. Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy has even used the term in his speech to the Canadian Parliament in 1999. But what does it mean? What is soft power? And how useful is it in Canada's foreign policy?

The idea of soft power was first used by an academic, Joseph Nye Jr., a political scientist at Harvard University. In 1990, Nye defined soft power as the ability of a state to influence the actions of others through attraction rather than coercion. According to Nye, soft power is based on cultural, economic, and political factors that make other states want to align with or emulate a state's policies.

One important aspect of soft power is cultural influence. A state with a strong culture can attract other states, as seen in the spread of American culture around the world. The United States has a strong cultural influence that attracts other states, but Canada does not. Canada's culture is not as influential as the United States,

The attractiveness of American ideas, the pervasive spread of American culture, the influence of American language: these elements, as much as the hard power of the American military, were key to the continuation of American dominance in world politics. Nye's book already says it all: The United States is Round to Round. The book was launched in 1988, but it is still relevant today.

The United States hasRound to Round. Nye's formula offered a prospect that was far more promising than the dispassionate stonewall and negative assessment of the decliners.

But for Mr. Axworthy to accept this idea and then to apply it to the foreign policy of a country with a smaller population and a smaller economy is a slap in the face of all the decliners and a slap in the face of all the small countries and a slap in the face of all the countries that have less power than the United States.

Soft power, if it is as "soft" as its enthusiasts claim, has no effect at all. Power comes in many forms and guises, but all forms of power are not the same. One key commonsense: Power is the ability to prevail in a conflict of interests with someone else. If you cannot put, the ability to get your way over others. Power is thus always and necessarily highly negative, at least for the one being prevailed against.

You can call it "soft" power, but that does not mean that what you want" power if you want, but we already have perfect good words in English: "pressure" or "influence" or "persuasion" or "inducement."

We should be convinced of the value of Nye's ideas, but we should also be aware of the limitations of his approach. The concept of soft power is limited to the ability of a state to influence the actions of others through attraction rather than coercion. It is not a complete answer to the complex challenges of international relations.

The use of soft power, as Nye suggests, can be effective in the short term, but it is not a sustainable strategy in the long term. A country that relies too heavily on soft power will eventually have its influence eroded by the actions of others.

In conclusion, soft power is an important concept, but it is not a silver bullet for Canadian foreign policy. Canada must also have a strong military presence and be prepared to use it when necessary. A balanced approach, combining hard and soft power, is the best way to ensure Canada's security and prosperity in the 21st century.
Why ‘soft power’ is the right policy for Canada

I was interested in the April 23 article, “Foreign policy for wimps,” by Prof. Kim Richard Nossal on Canadian foreign policy. Unfortunately, it shows just how out of touch some members of our academic community are in understanding the changing world forces that face Canada.

Mr. Nossal seems to be exercised that I use the term “soft power” coined a few years back by an American thinker, Joseph Nye, in reference to U.S. foreign policy. I suppose this means that Mr. Nossal does not read the views of American, British, Russian, Brazilian or other foreign writers to garner the best thought available. It is too bad that such isolationist tendencies cut him off from international thought.

It must be said, though, that in reading the views of Mr. Nossal I detect a strong whiff of Hans Morgenthau, the American advocate of hardline power politics.

More serious is his misinterpretation of what is meant by the term “soft power” in the Canadian context. The reason I use this phrase in my speeches is that it exemplifies the Canadian talent for drawing upon our skills in negotiating, building coalitions and presenting diplomatic initiatives; in other words, for influencing the behaviour of other nations not through military intimidation but through a variety of diplomatic and political tools.

The author grossly misrepresents my remarks when he claims this is foreign policy on the cheap, and does not require improved peacekeeping, political or developmental resources.

Quite the opposite is true. We are pursuing an active foreign policy in resolving conflicts in such places as Haiti, Central Africa and Bosnia using our skilled peacekeepers. We have developed a peace-building strategy, with a separate fund attached. We deployed our military resources as part of the UN coalition in Iraq, and we are actively participating in developing a security network in Southeast Asia — all of which Mr. Nossal ignores.

Worse, he appears to be completely unaware of our efforts to deal with emerging human security issues. Unlike the Cold War approach that is the template of Mr. Nossal’s thinking, foreign policy now involves tackling global problems such as drugs, terrorism, human-rights abuses and child labour — matters that directly affect individual Canadians.

To address these issues we need new international co-operation, covenants, rules and collective behaviour. This is where much of our foreign policy is being directed: witness our role in the land-mines treaty, in developing a drug strategy for the hemisphere, in initiating protection for exploited children, in working on international anti-terrorism efforts, in negotiating for an International Criminal Court, or in countering American extra-territorial laws such as Helms-Burton.

These efforts put a premium on “soft power” techniques, the very ones that are decried in Mr. Nossal’s article.

Far from being wimps, we are in fact very robust in our defence of Canadian interests, and in the re-shaping of international norms and institutions.

What is clear from Mr. Nossal’s remarks is that many academics, like generals, are still fighting old wars on old issues, not those of the present or the future.

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