

Openness is the key to soft power¹

By Irene S. Wu

Version: September 24, 2024

Executive Summary

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Cold War began to end, people walked westward, not eastward, pulled by the magnetism of the West's soft power. If we are on the precipice of another Cold War, the importance of soft power will arise again. My new book *Measuring Soft Power in International Relations* re-conceptualizes soft power from the perspective of the influenced, rather than the influencer. The result is the Soft Power Rubric, a method for measuring soft power of countries that makes possible country comparisons, historical analysis, and regional assessments. This policy brief ranks soft power countries from 1990 to 2020, compares the soft power strengths of Russia, China, and India; and identifies countries like Canada, Spain, South Africa, and Australia, where their soft power exceeds their economic and military influence in the world.

Policy Implications

- The foundation of soft power is social interaction among people across national borders. The more open a country is, the more likely its soft power will grow. The more closed it is, its soft power will diminish over time. The policy implication is that domestic conditions, including specifically in policy areas such as migration, education, tourism, and media, have a direct impact on a country's global soft power standing.
- The Soft Power Rubric calculations show that measurement based on indicators like immigration, international education, and international travel, produce results that resonate with the experience of foreign policy experts and other soft power measurements largely based on public opinion polls. The Rubric's advantage is that data are already published regularly, without the need for opinion survey which are costly, and necessarily must be limited to a small number of countries. This creates new vistas for policy analysis. Soft power influence can be compared across countries and across time. Now, also possible would be to study the soft power of aggregations - regional groupings like ASEAN, economic groups like the OECD, or military alliances like NATO.
- Much as GDP calculations, which began in earnest after World War II, spurred more official attention to industry production statistics, the Soft Power Rubric will stimulate more interest in the collection and public dissemination of statistics that document social interaction between peoples of different countries.

¹ Thanks to Shihoko Goto for her support and to Blair Ruble, J. P. Singh, Renee Marlin-Bennett, and Judit Trunkos for their valuable comments.

1. The Intuition Behind the Soft Power Rubric

Suppose we think of soft power as generated not only by nation-states but also by ordinary people expressing their interest in foreign countries. Suppose further that our country has soft power when foreigners think of us as “we” rather than as “they.” In effect, soft power relationships exist when others include us as part of their community; we become friends of their nation.

Measuring soft power in international relations introduces the Soft Power Rubric, which brings together relevant, observable, and measurable activity that captures a country’s potential scope for soft power influence—the number of cross-border interactions its people have with foreign countries. While this parsimonious approach cannot capture the quality of the interaction, any more than gross domestic product (GDP) can capture the quality of production, it does outline the outer bounds of potential soft power.

Reconceptualizing soft power in this way opens new vistas for future investigations. It offers the possibility of empirical measurement across countries and across time. It connects the lived experience of individuals to the collective understandings of communities, which in turn informs the behavior of states. These vistas combine to make culture and values as tangible as money and firepower in the study of international relations.

The Soft Power Rubric can track changes in the volume and direction of interactions that people have with foreigners. Three elements are direct people-to-people interactions: emigrating, studying abroad, and traveling abroad. The fourth element is a mediated interaction: watching foreign movies. Emigration reflects a person’s ultimate integration in a foreign society, permanently moving family and home to another country. Studying abroad reflects a person’s serious interest and commitment to understanding another society by spending substantial financial resources and formative time in a foreign country. Visiting a foreign country reflects a short-term interest in a foreign society. Watching a movie expresses an interest or curiosity about another country. For each of these series, government international institutions collect and publish quantitative data for many countries.

Figure 1.1 shows that these indicators range from short-term attraction, such as buying a ticket to see a movie from another country, to long-term attraction, such as emigrating to a foreign country. What matters is not how many movies a country produces but rather how many foreigners choose to watch them. Data for over 200 countries from around 1960–2020 are available from public sources.

Figure 1: The Soft Power Rubric: Indicators of Social Integration Across Borders

<i>Short-term attraction</i>	Watch a movie	Visit a country	Study abroad	Emigrate	<i>Long-term attraction</i>
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The quantitative data in the Soft Power Rubric reflects the extent one country is integrated with others. The change in the number of immigrants, combined with changes in the other indicators within the Soft Power Rubric, is the change in soft power relationship between countries. This measure of soft power makes it possible to discuss the United States’ soft power relationship with Canada as distinct from its soft power relationship with China, or with countries in Europe.

The Soft Power Rubric measures soft power resources, the potential for a country to have a soft power relationship with another. GDP, a measure of economic power resources, sums the financial value of goods and services produced by an economy. The numbers of military bases,

aircraft carriers, or personnel are measures of military power resources (Global Firepower, 2023). More resources likely mean more success, but there is no guarantee. A bigger GDP does not guarantee the upper hand in a trade negotiation. More military bases do not ensure victory in war. However, more resources make success more likely, and the depletion of resources heightens the risk of failure. Similarly, the Rubric reveals the volume and intensity of people-to-people interactions that form the basis of many individuals' views of foreign countries and the foundation of a country's soft power resources. More soft power resources no more predict greater political cooperation than more military resources predict victory in war. However, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of major soft power resources itself alters perception and behavior.

This paper briefly discusses the evidence that having soft power has benefits and the role of trust communities, social capital, and collective action in understanding soft power. A global ranking of countries based on the Soft Power Rubric shows results similar to other soft power rankings. There is further discussion of the flexibility of the Rubric, its application to other kinds of soft power analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of how the Soft Power Rubric connects the personal to the international.

2. Evidence of soft power at work

Thirty years after Joseph Nye defined soft power, there is broad consensus today that soft power is important and substantial evidence of its effects (Nye, Jr., 1990). Empirical research shows that foreign public opinion can influence foreign policy outcomes. For example, foreign countries with more positive public opinion of the US were more likely to send troops to join the US in Iraq in 2003, than those that did not (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012). In terms of trade, importers prefer to trade with exporters from countries that are seen as positive influences in the world (Rose, 2019).

Direct social interaction has more correlation with public opinion than trade, research shows. In a study of US military bases around the world, the more foreigners had direct contact with US military personnel, the higher their opinion of the US, its government and people, compared with those who only knew someone who interacted with Americans or those who only benefited economically (Allen et al., 2020). In his study of anti-Americanism, Monti Datta found no relationship between popularity of US brands Coca-Cola and Starbucks in a country and good opinion of the US. Instead, he found those who traveled or studied in the US are more likely to have a favorable opinion of the US (Datta, 2014).

In contrast with scholars who use public opinion surveys as indicators of a country's soft power, Singh and MacDonald identify quantitative measures of activities of foreigners, such as visits and foreign investment, that reflect their interest and attraction. As input variables they test soft power resources including level of democracy, political and civil liberties, GDP per capita, literacy levels, and the number of its cultural institutions. Overall, they conclude that to attract more foreign students, tourists, foreign direct investment, and friendlier UN General Assembly voting, the main factors are greater democracy, economic prosperity, and international cultural institutions that are networked with other countries (Singh & MacDonald, 2017).

Of the many types of direct social interaction, the research suggests education is the most influential channel. Many studies show when students study abroad in democracies, they bring democratic values home. Spilimbergo's study using global data on international education from 1960 to 2005 shows that the effect on sending country political institutions is observable within a few years of sending students abroad (Spilimbergo, 2009). Atkinson finds that foreign military officers, even those from authoritarian countries, bring back democratic norms when the training includes extensive interaction with Americans (Atkinson, 2014). For migration and travel, early

research suggest there may be similar impacts (Beine & Sekkat, 2013)(Tuccio et al., 2019)(Sobocinska, 2013).

3. Trust communities, social capital, collective action

Soft power is not just about which countries people like, but which countries people stand in solidarity with, and possibly sacrifice for. Social science work on trust, social capital, and collective action are directly relevant to soft power.

Elinor Ostrom's conception of "trust" is not simply an act of faith but a choice based on experience and self-interest. She showed that among strangers, trust can be built over time through repeated reciprocal actions (Ostrom, 2003). Similarly, Gary Fine shows that people create and perform culture as they interact with each other. His term, "tiny publics," builds on Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of "minute associations," small groups of people—like a book club or a team of video gamers—who work together, hold common values, share a past, and look forward to a future. He argues that big social forces get started in small-scale places. To understand how cultural forces came to be, we must start tiny and work our way up to big (Fine, 2012). To understand global dynamics of influence and attraction among countries, we must start with individuals engaging with foreigners and work up to global trends.

Trust is the basis for building social capital, a willingness to cooperate. Robert Putnam and other scholars focus on the kinds of bonds that hold society together and enable people to work together. They explore several types of bonds among people that can lead to cooperation: formal and informal, thick and thin, inward and outward, and bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2002). My own work *Forging Trust Communities* shows how this social capital, built through reciprocal actions over time, including transnational communities, can be created for one purpose, like a cultural festival, and quickly refocus on another goal, like humanitarian work. Soft power relationships are the social capital among nations (Wu, 2015).

Karl Deutsch developed the idea that the volume and intensity of social interactions can be used to identify cultural integration. Communities can be thought of as observable networks of communication channels (Deutsch, 1966). For example, in the mid-eighteenth century, there were more pieces of mail among the various colonies in the United States and the United Kingdom than there were between the colonies themselves. However, by the early nineteenth century, the volume among the US states grew to be greater than the mail between it and the United Kingdom (Merritt, 1966).

Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities* points to the rise of printing, especially the development of newspapers in the eighteenth century, as critical to developing national consciousness. The regular act of reading a newspaper connected people together—cultivating a common language, symbols, and memories—creating a community of the mind, "imagined," if you will, rather than a community defined by physical boundaries (Anderson, 1983). In *Forging Trust Communities*, I take this concept into the twenty-first century. The more recent technologies of telephones, televisions, mobile phones, and internet each in their turn create the potential for new trust communities. This potential is converted into actual communities when the people included interact, reciprocate, and build trust (Wu, 2015).

Just because a postal system is created, does not mean that colonies become more integrated; the evidence of that integration is that people use the system to send mail. Just because a newspaper is printed and distributed does not automatically create an Andersonian "imagined community"; what creates the imagined community is that people choose to read it regularly. Finally, just because there is a social media platform available does not mean there is a "trust community"; when people form ties with each other through regular interaction, that is what forges a trust community. The

Soft Power Rubric's quantitative data points us to where there is likely to be a soft power relationship, only further investigation into the specific dynamics, context, and history can illuminate the quality of the relationship.

4. Global soft power rankings: validating the Soft Power Rubric

The Soft Power Rubric is radically parsimonious in identifying only a single category – transnational social interaction – as the most relevant activity to measure soft power. Does this produce a result in line or divergent from other methods of soft power measurement? Creating a global ranking of countries with the Soft Power Rubric and comparing it with other rankings shows that its results are similar.

Rankings are not how the Soft Power Rubric is primarily useful, but they are straight forward to construct. These rankings are constructed based on how many immigrants live in a country, how many foreign students are enrolled in its universities for a degree, and how many foreigners visit.² Using the Soft Power Rubric, Table 1 shows the top ten soft power countries from 1990 to 2020.

Table 1: Soft Power Rubric Global Rankings, 1990–2020

Rank	1990	Rank	2000	Rank	2010	Rank	2020
1	US	1	US	1	US	1	US
2	France	2	France	2	France	2	France
3	Canada	3	Germany	3	UK	3/4	Germany
4	Russia	4	Russia	4	Germany	3/4	UK
5	UK	5	UK	5	Russia	5	Spain
6	Italy	6	Canada	6	Italy	6	Russia
7	Australia	7	Italy	7	Canada	7	Canada
8	Spain	8	Spain	8	Spain	8	Türkiye
9	Saudi Arabia	9	Australia	9	Ukraine	9	UAE
10	Japan	10	Switzerland	10	Australia	10	Italy

Table 1 is calculated by taking a country's rank in terms of number of immigrants, foreign students, and visitors, and summing those ranks. Further details on public data, methods, and sources, are in *Measuring soft power in international relations*.

In public policy discussions, one of the most widely referenced soft power rankings is the Soft Power 30. Calculated between 2010 and 2019, in more recent years, its report was presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.³ The Soft Power 30 rankings are calculated based 70 percent on objective data and 30 percent on subjective data, every year with a revised combination of criteria. The report include six sub-indices of objective data: Culture, Digital,

² For movies, the number of foreigners who buy tickets is available for a much smaller set of countries, which makes country-to-country comparisons possible but not global rankings.

³ As of September 13, 2024, the most recent Soft Power 30 rankings are from 2019.

Education, Enterprise, Engagement, and Government. For subjective data, the analysts conducted their own survey. In 2019, 500 people in twenty-five countries were interviewed, for a total of 12,500 individuals (McClory, 2021).

The 2020 Soft Power Rubric and the 2019 Soft Power 30 rankings look similar, with the same four countries in varying rankings within the top five: the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Therefore, despite its vastly different methodology, the Soft Power Rubric successfully captures the soft power zeitgeist of the moment.

Table 2 unpacks the Soft Power Rubric rankings for 2020. The US leads in number of immigrants and foreign students, and is second largest host of foreign visitors. France is first for visitors, seventh for immigrants and eighth for students. Germany hosts the second largest immigrant population in the world, is fourth for students and 14th for visitors. United Kingdom is third for students, fifth for immigrants and 12th for visitors. Russia is fourth for immigrants, fifth for students, and 24th for visitors.

Table 2: Soft Power Rubric Elements Data: US, Germany, Russia, UK, France⁴

Country	2020 Immigrants	Series rank	Country	2020 Students	Series rank	Country	2019 Visitors	Series rank
US	50,632,836	1	US	957,475	1	France	217,877,000	1
Germany	15,762,457	2	UK	489,019	3	US	165,478,000	2
Russia	11,636,911	4	Germany	333,233	4	UK	40,857,000	12
UK	9,359,587	5	Russia	282,922	5	Germany	39,563,000	14
France	8,524,876	7	France	246,378	8	Russia	24,419,000	24

Behind the numbers in Table 2, it is possible to further unpack the specific countries that send immigrants, students, and visitors to these top soft power countries.

This method for creating a global ranking is only one way to use the Soft Power Rubric. There are several obvious alternatives, and no doubt other scholars will think of more.

Relative Weight of the Different Series. My global ranking approach gives equal weight to each of the three elements: migration, education, and travel. These series could be weighted differently.

Measuring Foreigners Coming in, or People Going Abroad, or Both. These results are based on the top host countries, but how about those that send people abroad? In terms of reciprocal action and mutual feeling, looking at where people from these top soft power countries go when they emigrate, study abroad, or travel, creates a companion analysis. The resulting study can present a picture of a country's soft power network – who it attracts and to whom it is attracted – which can change over time. In *Measuring soft power in international relations*, the chapter on India discusses this in detail.

Total Figures or Per Capita Figures. My global ranking table ranks on absolute numbers. In some cases, calculating the number of foreigners per host population would be more relevant.

Other Data Series on Social Interaction. The Rubric is a framework. I have introduced it with four main elements, but other elements that track transnational social interaction could easily be added, including different forms of communications.

⁴ UNESCO, UN Population Division

Beyond the nation state as a unit of analysis. The Soft Power Rubric method can be applied to study cultural institutions or sporting events as a way of investigating their impact on a country's soft power resources. For example, in a recent work I examined how the Air and Space Museum is a favorite among foreign visitors to the Smithsonian Institution (Wu, 2023). Another approach is to examine cultural events like arts festivals, religious observances, and sports events.

5. Beyond rankings – application of the Soft Power Rubric?

While the Soft Power Rubric can be used to create global rankings, that is not its primary purpose. The Soft Power Rubric is less an answer and more a pathway to further questions. For example, the Rubric enables a longer historical lens. Also, the Rubric allows for direct comparison among countries. Finally, the Rubric can be used to analyze countries that are regional leaders, not just the global ones. *Measuring soft power in international relations* includes several case studies on movies and popular culture, international education, Russia and China, India, Southeast Asia. A few snapshots from those chapters illustrate how the Rubric can be applied.

China and Russia's Openness Compared

In 2020 Russia's immigrant community was 11.6 million, the fourth largest in the world, behind the United States, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile China's immigrant community was about one-tenth of Russia's, at just above 1 million in 2020, ranked fifty-fourth in the world. Figures 3 and 4 show the origin countries of immigrants into Russia and China; Russia has connections to a wider array of countries around the world.

Figure 3: Immigrants to Russia: Countries of Origin, 2020 *Source: UN Population Division.*

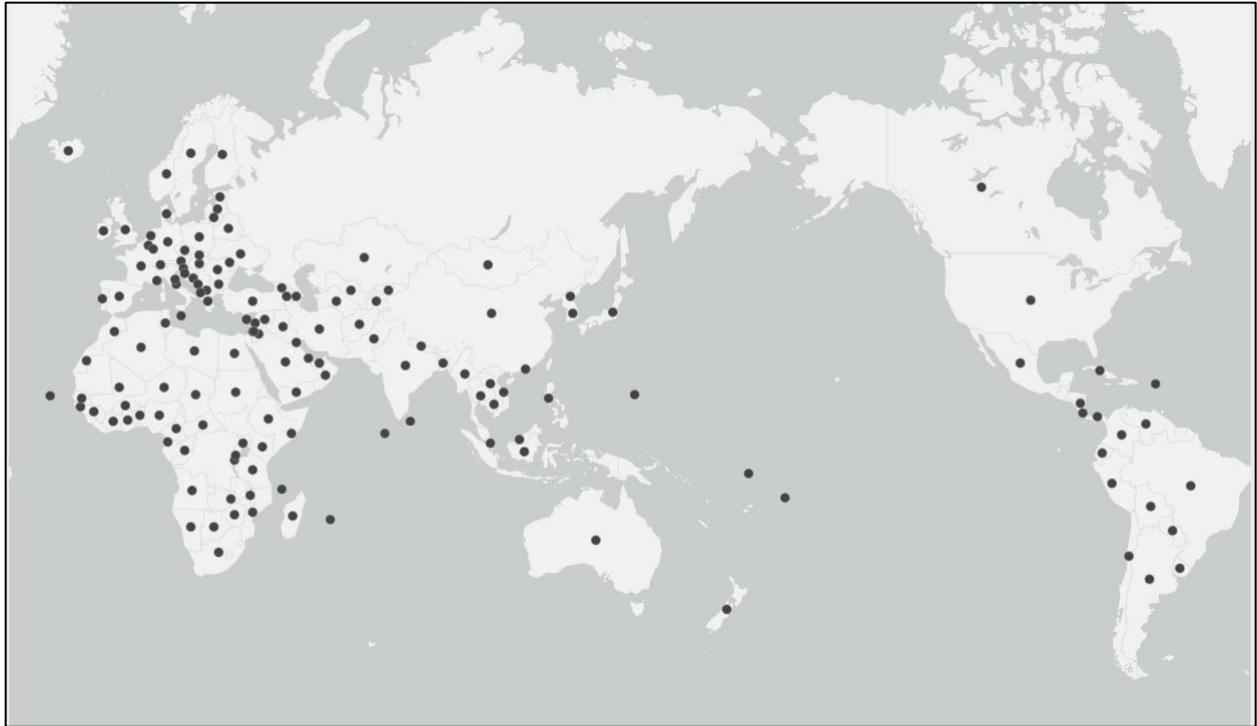
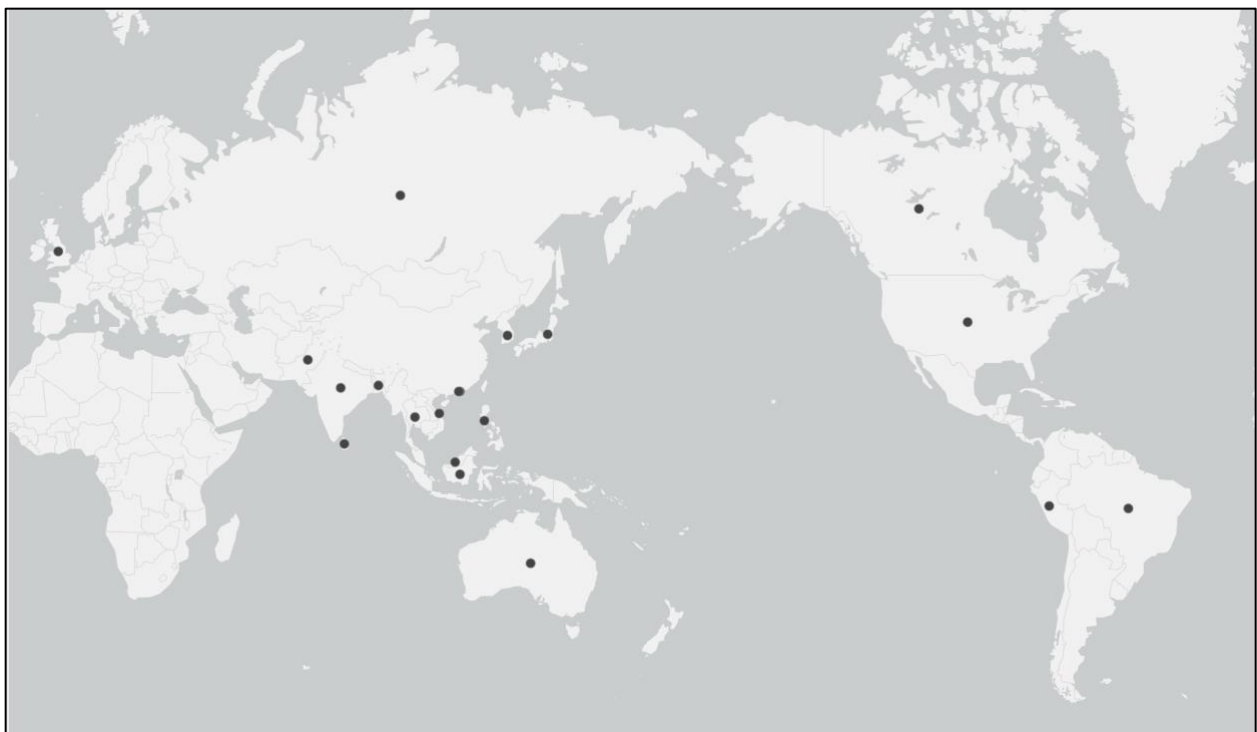


Figure 4: Immigrants to China: Countries of Origin, 2020 *Source: UN Population Division.*

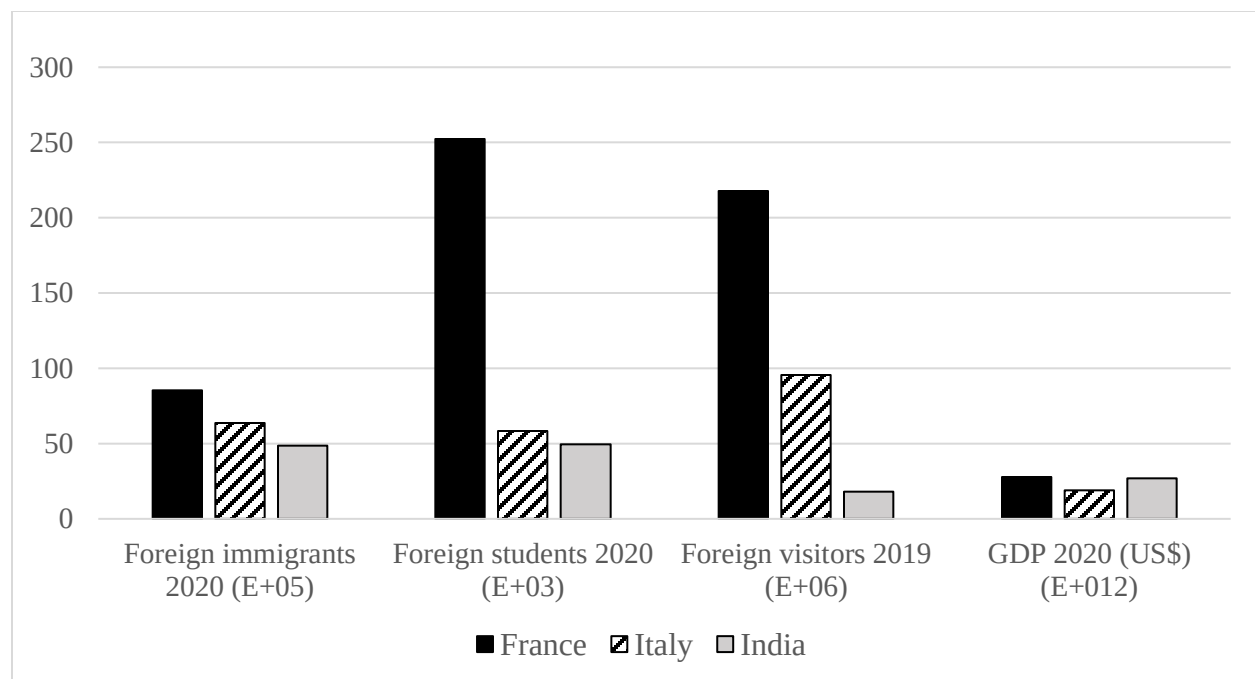


In general, Russia has a longer history of being more open to foreigners -whether immigrants, students, or visitors, although Western sanctions since its invasion of Ukraine make it harder for foreigners to go to Russia. In contemporary times, China under Mao was closed to the outside world, and only began to open under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. However, foreign visitors ballooned from 1.7 million in 1990 to 162.5 million in 2019, prior to the COVID pandemic. The more China opens to the world, the more opportunity there will be to cultivate soft power relationships. However, opening to the world also opens the country to being influenced by others.

India's Soft Power and Economic Power Compared to France and Italy

India is part of the G20, but not part of the G7, even though its economy is larger than some G7 members. Might soft power influence be as important a factor in joining the G7 as economic size? Figure 5 compares India's Soft Power Rubric data to France and Italy, both G7 members. Whereas in terms of GDP size, in 2020, India is already at a level comparable to France and Italy, in the other arenas of hosting foreign immigrants, foreign students, and foreign visitors, France and Italy attract more foreigners.

Figure 5: India, France and Italy: GDP and Soft Power Rubric Elements Compared⁵



In 2020, India has 4.9 million immigrants compared to Italy's 6.4 million and France's 8.5 million. In terms of hosting foreign students, France hosts five times more students than India. In terms of attracting foreign visitors, in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, France hosted over 200 million, Italy over 95 million, and India, 18 million. For India, with its myriad monuments, historic, and cultural sites, attracting more foreign visitors is a soft power opportunity. The Soft Power Rubric is one way to capture the intangible attraction that foreigners have for a particular country.

Countries With More Soft Power Than Economic or Military Power

⁵ UNESCO, UN Population Division, World Bank

There are countries with more soft power than their economic or military significance. For example, South Africa became an international model for delivering social justice after a long history of racist exploitation. There is a cluster of studies of South Africa's soft power in the Africa region, especially as it transformed from international pariah to a moral authority on peace and reconciliation after apartheid ended. It is now the only African country in the G20. Building on its moral standing, South Africa's relaxed immigration policies, and hosting of international events augments its soft power (Ogunnubi & Isike, 2015). Table 3 shows data for South Africa and several other countries in terms of economic size, armed forces size, and Soft Power Rubric ranking.

Table 3: Spain, Canada, South Africa: Indicators of Soft, Military, and Economic Power

Country	Soft Power Rubric 2020—Rank	Armed forces personnel, total 2019—Rank	GDP (current US\$) 2020—Rank
Spain	5	33	14
Canada	7	8	12
Australia	12	66	13
South Africa	23	56	39

Spain, Canada, and Australia are countries with more soft power than military or economic influence. Spain is among the top five countries for foreign visitors; Canada is among the top ten countries for immigrants and foreign students. Australia is second only to the US in hosting international students. Their openness to foreigners is the key to their soft power resources.

6. Connecting the personal to the international

In soft power discussions, sometimes people discount the significance of personal or family tie. For example, people will sometimes suggest that “real” foreigners visiting a country may be more significant than emigrants abroad returning for a visit with family. If we think of soft power as a kind of social capital to be used in collective action, if a country were in crisis and in need of defense, would it not more likely come from those foreign countries where there are large diaspora communities? The Soft Power Rubric makes this connection between the personal lives of people and the world of international relations.

The Soft Power Rubric not only connects foreign policy with research on trust, communications, and social capital, it also connects foreign policy with the research on media, travel, international education, and migration. For example, from the study of migration, transnationalism brings attention to the multiple, hybrid identities of individuals (Vertovec, 2001). From the study of international education, the push-pull model that explains the decision-making process of students applies to other areas as well (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Migrants are pushed out of a country by war, economic crisis, or political turmoil. They are pulled into a foreign country by an oil boom or the outbreak of peace. Tourists are pulled into traveling with big cultural or sporting events or an advantageous exchange rate.

From the study of tourism and travel, comes the idea of destination image and place identity, how communities are viewed by others and how they see themselves (Karl et al., 2015) (van Rekom & Go, 2006). The distinction between destination image and place identity helps clarify the value of

feeling and sentiment in understanding soft power. For example, some may argue that people migrating to join family abroad are making personal judgements, while others deciding where to go on holiday are making a more impersonal, and therefore more objective, assessment of how attractive a country is. However, if soft power is when foreigners think of us as “we,” not “they,” then personal ties matter more than those freighted with less emotion.

7. Conclusion

Joseph Nye has won the argument that military, economic, and natural resources alone do not fully explain a nation’s influence abroad. How attractive foreigners find its society and values also plays an important role in its soft power influence. However, the scholarly literature still lacks consensus on how to measure soft power, a gap that weakens soft power policies as an option in a realpolitik world. Bureaucratically speaking, if it cannot be measured, how can we know we fostering it or investing in it? Reconceiving soft power as when foreigners think of us as “we” rather than as “they,” the ultimate empathetic posture, makes it possible to draw on several theoretical insights and empirical resources to connect quantitatively a country’s domestic appeal to its international status. If we accept that soft power resources are created through people’s interaction with foreigners, a major implication of this work is that the more open societies are to foreigners, the more likely they will have soft power influence.

For policymakers, highlighting the importance of the four elements to the Soft Power Rubric brings to the forefront arenas that are not usually the main focus of foreign policy. While international education has long been an important long-run tool for building alliances and common worldviews, travel and tourism are usually treated as a commercial activity, not a central concern of foreign policy. Visiting is an intermediate step between forming an image of a foreign country based on movies and media, and making a bigger commitment like enrolling in a foreign university or migrating. Similarly, migration more frequently figures in foreign policy as a problem—a brain drain for some countries or a crisis for countries on the receiving end of many migrants. From the Soft Power Rubric perspective, both immigration and emigration are also opportunities to build transnational social relationships that have long-term consequences for how all countries involved view each other. Finally, movies do figure highly in soft power discussions, but mostly in how they are made, less in how they are distributed, and even less in audience reaction to them. Newer technologies like on-demand video platforms and social media are making it easier to shift focus to audience reaction, demand, and even participation in transnational media production.

The Soft Power Rubric’s new approach, a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative investigation, is one step toward reinvigorating our inquiries to unpack the influence of culture and values and to demonstrate the impact of relationships, not just force, in the world. It also underscores how we are all involved in creating soft power relationships. How we welcome foreign visitors, students, and immigrants, and the decisions we make whether to go abroad, where to go, and for how long, all have implications for soft power relationships and the standing of the communities in which we belong.

Measuring Soft Power in International Relations is published by Lynne Rienner. The book’s technical appendix discusses data, sources, and availability. Limited historical data is available at <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1088920>.

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