Soft Power as Standing: What International Relations Theory Can, and Cannot, Take from Composite Rankings

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Abstract

Soft power rankings are often seen as showing where a country stands in the world, but their measures can mean different things. This conceptual paper uses the published methods of the Soft Power 30 and Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index to ask what a rank shows in International Relations. Soft power is looked at in three ways: as a resource, as a constructivist concept, and as a status given by other states. The Soft Power 30 used objective data and polls. Brand Finance asks people how well they know a country, what they think of it, how influential it is, and whether they would recommend it. Both measure what a country has or how people see it, not whether another state accepts its position or changes its behavior. Countries use their rank to say they have been recognized, but a rank by itself shows an attempt at statecraft and not recognition from another state. Standing has to be seen in how other countries act, such as consulting a state, giving it a role, or deferring to it. The United Kingdom, which ranked in the top two while losing votes at the United Nations, is used as an example.

Keywords: soft power; status; recognition; ranking; nation branding; statecraft

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1. Introduction

Composite rankings are now widely used by states (Cooley and Snyder 2015; Kelley and Simmons 2019). Governments use rankings to demonstrate to citizens and to the world that a change in their ranking position means that the state is viewed differently. States refer to their position in commercial indexes as proof that they have adopted a strategy that is being recognized by others. Global rankings can be said to exert pressure on states, as they name states, rank them, and offer ways to compare them with one another (Kelley and Simmons 2015; Cooley and Snyder 2015). A soft power rank is one such ranking, and it asserts that what is being measured is a form of power.

A state can be well known, well regarded, and a place others want to visit, yet still not be seen as influential. The Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index measures how familiar a state is to others, how well regarded it is, its perceived influence on other nations, and whether people recommend the country. The Soft Power 30 took a similar approach and also added objective measures to determine the rank of states. Several measurements included in these rankings can speak to whether a country is influential to others, but they are not definitive enough to determine whether it has been recognized by other states as having this influence. How others perceive a state is not a sufficient answer (Haigh et al. 2026; Zhang and Wu 2019; Barnett and Duvall 2005). Improving how rankings are calculated will not resolve this problem. Analyses of the uncertainties in rankings can show what impact changing the ranking method has on states' positions, but again, what is being ranked must first be understood (Nardo et al. 2005; Gallarotti 2020).

What is being measured when a rank is assigned to a soft power score, and can it show whether states are gaining recognition? If a rank cannot show this, what should be measured instead? The question is not whether one state is more powerful than another in this context. This paper argues that a rank by itself shows an attempt at statecraft. It does not show that the state has been recognized by another state. Status is given by others (Larson and Shevchenko 2010), so standing has to be seen in how other countries act. Other authors have criticized soft power indexes for what they include, how they are calculated, and whose values they use (Yun 2018; Zhang and Wu 2019; Gallarotti 2020). Beaumont and Towns (2021) look at who benefits from nation brand rankings, and Fan (2008) argues that being attracted to a country does not mean it has influence. Less has been said about whose recognition a soft power rank would have to show. This paper adds to these studies by looking at the two indexes through the literature on status, where standing is something other states give. An index can show what a state has and what the public thinks, but standing depends on what other states do. These two indexes were chosen because they are built in different ways. The Soft Power 30 used objective data and polls, and the Global Soft Power Index uses only surveys. This is a conceptual paper and it provides no rankings or data of its own. It uses only the methodology documents provided by the two indexes and the articles that analyze these indexes. Countries are named when the sources name them.

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They are used to illustrate the theory rather than as cases to be judged, and Section 6 looks at the United Kingdom (UK) as one example.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses why soft power is a contested term and how research on nation branding has treated its own indexes. Section 3 sets out three readings of soft power in International Relations: resources, constructivism, and status. Section 4 analyzes how the indexes calculate rankings (Table 1). Section 5 examines what states can understand from their rank (Table 2). Section 6 discusses the questions that need to be asked about other states, uses the UK as an example, and gives the limits of the analysis. Section 7 concludes with directions for further research.

2. The conceptual drift of soft power

Nye introduced the term "soft power" to the field of International Relations as a way to discuss how a state could influence another to get what it wanted. The idea was that a state would attract another country into doing what it wanted rather than paying or coercing it. When Nye coined this phrase, he was using it to describe how power could operate (Nye 1990, 2004). He placed it within a state-to-state relationship. The term has since been used outside the field and has lost some of that relational dynamic.

Yun examines many operationalizations of soft power, all of which fit within what Nye laid out. Evaluations of soft power can be drawn from how others perceive a country's popular culture, technology, political values, and businesses (Yun 2018).

Resources such as foreign aid and the number of immigrants, tourists, and students were operationalized as measurements of soft power. Public relations took the information used by others to create operational categories of what made a country appealing (Yun 2018). The Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index states that it measures whether people are attracted to a country over other nations: how a country is perceived in attracting others to invest, trade, work, study, and visit. It also measures how much influence a nation is thought to have on other nations. It takes that perception of influence and turns it into something that can be measured (Haigh et al. 2026).

Research on nation branding and public diplomacy has the same problem, and it has indexes of its own. Anholt started the Nation Brands Index in 2005. In its first years he found no link between changes in a country's image and how much its government spent on branding campaigns. He argues that a country is seen by what it does and not by what it says about itself (Anholt 2008). Fan discusses how attraction may not lead to influence, as the people who are attracted may not be the ones making policy (Fan 2008). Mariutti and Tench find that Brazil's position is uneven across four nation brand indexes (Mariutti and Tench 2016), and Pamment notes that the evaluation of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation brands has received far less attention than the concepts themselves (Pamment 2014). Newer studies measure soft power by

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what people in other countries choose to do (Yeo, Lee, and Eschbach 2024), or use index scores to predict how an economy performs (Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun 2026). They do not look at how other states respond, which is the question for this paper.

Communicating with others is also not always free of coercion. Representational force can compel an audience to think in a certain direction (Mattern 2005). There also needs to be an understanding of who is being measured when soft power is discussed. When Brand Finance examined its ratings, it found that individuals from a country rated their own nation higher than the rest of the world did, above all on governance and on education and science, perhaps because citizens experience these directly (Haigh et al. 2026). Hence, as the term travels through different fields, what it originally described is lost from view.

3. Three readings inside International Relations theory

There are at least three ways to look at soft power in International Relations. Once the aim is defined, it is possible to ask what an index is trying to do and what is being measured when a state is said to be gaining rank.

3.1 The resource reading

Following Nye's argument means defining the resources that make a country attractive to others. The assumption is that by having resources a state will attract others (Nye 2004). On this reading the state is the actor and a general foreign public is the audience. The state only needs to have the resource, and the evidence is a count of what it has. Other scholars have tried to distinguish between what states have at their disposal and what can result from using those resources. Another approach would be to take what makes a country attractive to others and use the resources to measure whether they are truly attracting people. Both of these could be called soft power (Trunkos 2013; Yun 2018). It cannot be assumed that there are universal resources that all states will have. Depending on its culture, a state may value certain resources over others (Zhang and Wu 2019; Gallarotti 2020). Selecting only certain political and sports-based indicators to measure soft power could overlook something else that is valued by other cultures. When defining the target of these resources, it may not be clear who wants to use them. Some targets may be attracted to the resource while others may not want any association with it (Gallarotti 2020; Timilsana 2024). Once it is known what is considered to make a state attractive, it is possible to ask which resources would gain it rank.

3.2 The constructivist reading

Another way of looking at soft power is from a constructivist standpoint. Here one state is trying to gain the approval of others to help attain something it seeks. There needs to be an understanding of how those states will receive this power and act upon it (Mattern 2005; Hayden 2012). The state is still the actor here, but the audience is a specific public or government. The state communicates with it, and the evidence is how that audience responds. Not everyone in an

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audience will be attracted by what a country has to offer. The aim is to show that there are positive qualities that attract people to a country, but there also has to be an audience, and it matters how that audience acts on what it learns. It is unclear how being attracted to a country leads to behavior. Many people like what others tell them about a country, but it is not known how that makes them act. Statistics can show correlations between indicators, but that does not explain why (Gallarotti 2020; Greco et al. 2019).

A final point is that believing a state has influence does not mean it actually does. In the Global Soft Power Index, South Korea rose in familiarity and perceived influence. The index connects this mostly to its culture, such as pop music and television dramas, while its governance ranking went down. Many people think South Korea has influence because they see its culture everywhere, but this does not show that a government changed a decision because of it (Haigh et al. 2026). The question on this reading is whether those who are attracted to a country have shown it.

3.3 The status reading

Status can be defined as a place in a hierarchy that is granted by others. In international relations a state may be trying to rise in status by trying to gain the trust and approval of those above it. Status can change as time goes by, and some states may not agree that others are their equals. Status can be used by those who are seen as higher in the hierarchy to tell those below them that they do not stand as high (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Zarakol 2011; Towns 2010). Here the actor is a state seeking a place and the audience is the other states that could give it. Those states have to grant the place, and the evidence is what they actually do. Larson and Shevchenko see status as something given by others. A state can try to get it by moving up, by competing, or by finding its own niche. Zarakol argues that the hierarchy a state wants to enter is created by international society, and Towns argues that norms rank states by what is seen as advanced at that time (Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Zarakol 2011; Towns 2010). Newer studies agree and also show how status can be observed. Status is described as what others together believe about where a state ranks on the things they value, and it is connected to others deferring to the state by choice (Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014). Status also sits within a status community, the group of actors a state wants recognition from (Wohlforth et al. 2018). Duque finds that status comes more from relations between states than from what a state has, and measures recognition by the embassies states send to each other. Røren and Beaumont use diplomatic representation in the same way (Duque 2018; Røren and Beaumont 2019). The beliefs that matter here are those of the states a state wants recognition from, and they can be seen in what those states do. A state can also tell a story about the place it should have, but telling that story does not mean that other states accept it (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2017).

Japan gives a useful example. Zarakol describes how Japan, after it was defeated in 1945, had to learn to live in an international society where others set the rules. Its standing came from being accepted by those states and not from what it said about itself (Zarakol 2011). Timilsana

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describes how, during the Persian Gulf crisis, the United States did not think Japan was meeting its global obligations. This is connected to Japan changing its foreign policy toward peace cooperation, development assistance, and cultural exchange (Timilsana 2024). Being well known and liked did not give Japan the standing it wanted. What mattered was how the other country judged its contribution. Hayden adds that Japan's cultural diplomacy, partly run through the Japan Foundation, assumes that foreign audiences who take up its culture will act in Japan's favor (Hayden 2012). This is an attempt to earn a role rather than proof that the role was granted. Judging by the rank a state has, it might be said that it is receiving recognition from the world. In the 2026 Global Soft Power Index, El Salvador's tourism minister used the country's position to assert that it is being recognized by others (Haigh et al. 2026). The sections that follow ask what a state is receiving when it has a rank on an index.

4. How composite rankings are built

The methodology documents produced for each ranking index make it possible to determine what they are trying to measure. For the Soft Power 30, these are the 2018 report (McClory 2018) and McClory and Harvey (2016), read alongside the analyses by Yun (2018), Zhang and Wu (2019), and Gallarotti (2020). For the Global Soft Power Index, they are the 2026 report (Haigh et al. 2026) and the methodology note for the 2025 edition (Woods 2025). Table 1 compares the two indexes on the same features.

4.1 The Soft Power 30

The Soft Power 30 combined quantifiable data that was readily available about each state with polling in which people around the world evaluated these countries. These measures were designed to determine the positive qualities that a country can offer to others. The objective data was sorted into six sub-indexes (Culture, Digital, Education, Engagement, Enterprise, and Government), which together contained more than 75 measures. The polling asked people in other countries to rate seven aspects of a state: its cuisine, its technology products, how friendly it is, its culture, its luxury goods, its foreign policy, and whether it is a good place to live (Zhang and Wu 2019; Yun 2018).

Objective scores accounted for 70% of the overall score and the remainder came from the opinions of people across the globe (McClory and Harvey 2016; McClory 2018). Several issues arise when analyzing this index. One is what the index measures and how it classifies it. It classified immigrants, foreign students, and tourists each as a resource (Yun 2018). Having multiple measures that could all be classed as the same thing creates problems when interpreting the results. Another problem is that a large share of the data came from the World Bank, which leaves room for criticism of what was gathered and whether it is appropriate (Zhang and Wu 2019). Lastly, aggregating measures that are similar to one another can introduce bias, so care is needed not to double-count information. When the weights on these measures change, they

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change the rank of countries and can affect how countries perceive themselves and their position (Nardo et al. 2005; Zhang and Wu 2019).

4.2 The Global Soft Power Index

The Global Soft Power Index created by Brand Finance takes a different approach. It uses people's perceptions to determine whether they think well of a country and whether others are influenced by it. Thirty-five measurements are taken and grouped into eight categories of information about the countries being analyzed. The final part of the measurement asks people whether they think a country is a good place to invest, trade, work, study, or visit (Haigh et al. 2026). In the 2025 edition these answers were reported alongside the score but did not count toward it (Woods 2025). Influence makes up 30% of the score for a country, and familiarity and reputation 10% each; the remaining half comes from the 35 attributes, whose weights are set each year by a drivers analysis (Woods 2025).

A few points can be highlighted when examining the index's methodology. When determining a country's influence, the index does not specify who is being influenced. The drivers analysis, which weights each attribute by how strongly perceptions of it are associated with reputation and influence, relies on statistics to determine what a state should pay attention to (Woods 2025). In addition, the people asked these questions since 2022 are not the same people who were asked before: specialists were surveyed alongside the general public in the first two editions, and only the general public since (Woods 2025). If a country's score changes between those editions, it may be because different people were asked and not because the country is seen differently. If someone thinks a state has influence, and that influence affects their economy, it is not clear that this will lead them to change political positions.

Table 1. The construction of the two indexes, from their methodology documents

	Soft Power 30 (Portland, 2015–19)	**Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2020–)**
Object; coverage	Soft power resources and their reception; 30 countries	Perceptions of nation brands; all 193 United Nations member states
Objective data	Six sub-indexes (Culture, Digital, Education, Engagement, Enterprise, Government); 75+ metrics	None
Survey data	Seven polled perceptions (cuisine, technology, friendliness, culture, luxury goods, foreign policy, livability) in 20–25 countries	Familiarity, reputation, influence; 35 attributes in eight pillars; recommendations; 159,459 respondents in 102 markets (2026)
Respondents	General public	General public since 2022; home-country ratings excluded
Scoring	Min–max normalized; objective 70%, polling 30%; equal weights, later regression on favorability	Influence 30%, familiarity 10%, reputation 10%; attribute weights from drivers analysis; 0–100 scale

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	Soft Power 30 (Portland, 2015–19)	Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2020–)
Change over time	Indicators, weights, and polling treatment revised; years not comparable	7 pillars, 60 nations (2020) to 8 pillars, 193 states (2026); audience narrowed 2022
Reading captured	Resource, plus favorability; no counterpart's response recorded	Constructivist (audience evaluation); "influence" is an impression, not a conferral

Sources: McClory and Harvey (2016); McClory (2018); Zhang and Wu (2019); Gallarotti (2020); Nardo et al. (2005); Woods (2025); Haigh et al. (2026).

5. What can and cannot be said about a state's standing from a rank

A rank can show only what its construction allows. As explained in Section 4, neither index captures actions taken by states. This section examines what conclusions can be drawn if rankings are taken to be similar to other indicators that place pressure on states (Kelley and Simmons 2015), and if it is accepted that states actively pursue rankings (Cooley and Snyder 2015). What the indexes record is taken from their methodology documents; what a rank can or cannot show is the argument of this paper. Table 2, at the end of the section, sets the two side by side.

5.1 Claiming national standing with composites

A composite score for a country may suggest it has high national power, even if the components measure something different from what is stated. On Guzzini's understanding of power as dispositional, power is the ability to do something. It is not something a state has, or an event in which it uses its power. Barnett and Duvall distinguish direct control over another actor from control that works through institutional arrangements, and neither is identifiable from having a good image (Guzzini 1993; Barnett and Duvall 2005). The status reading in Section 3.3 shows there is room for argument. A country may claim to have influence on how a regional order is created but be excluded from discussions on it. There may be a ranking that supports one side of this argument, but not enough to say which one is true. Adding to this is how the rank was constructed: a rank based on a regression that tests favorability shows that a country has higher levels of favorability, not that it had an influence on a decision (Zhang and Wu 2019; Nardo et al. 2005). On the basis of who was surveyed, it might be argued that a country had more influence on a decision, but only by looking at the public's opinion. A public survey cannot show how that decision was reached (Gallarotti 2020; Haigh et al. 2026).

5.2 Ranking as a performance indicator and a practice

As discussed, rankings place pressure on states before states begin to reference them. Kelley and Simmons discuss how indicators have pressured states through domestic politics, through elites who care about their reputation, and through transnational pressure. Cooley and Snyder also consider the producers of rankings and how states begin to interact with those producers (Kelley and Simmons 2015; Cooley and Snyder 2015). Both arguments apply to soft power rankings.

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Trunkos notes that the Institute for Government's 2010 soft power index, a forerunner of the Soft Power 30 (Zhang and Wu 2019), was created partly so that a government would have an argument for the value of soft power, and so that a country could see how to improve its standing (Trunkos 2013). There has also been discussion of how China tried to find out how it was perceived at a global level and where it stood, believing that it should not rely on rankings that did not include its own views (Zhang and Wu 2019).

Stories about a high place in the rankings can be identified as well. Section 3.3 showed how El Salvador's tourism minister used a rank to tell the world that the country is being recognized. Brand Finance argues that the UK fell to fourth because people are following its affairs less closely and it has lost power to set the agenda. Switzerland rose by one place because others dropped further than it did (Haigh et al. 2026). These stories all try to explain how a rank can affect a state, without ever addressing how other states acted toward it. A study of whether states use rankings needs to ask what a country said about its ranking, how it applied that to its policies and the audience it was speaking to, and whether that can be corroborated by other states saying the same thing.

5.3 Composites that contain a mixture of steps, and appeal versus recognition

There are many levels a state can go through to win over another state. It may send aid and advertise in the other country, which may then offer favorable comments and begin visiting. Having a mix of indicators that represent different stages cannot prove whether the next step was reached. Trunkos argues that the Institute for Government index mixed indicators that represented inputs, such as aid sent to countries and the number of languages spoken, with indicators that represented what states wanted to accomplish, such as brands and visitors (Trunkos 2013). With indicators that measure different steps of education, it might be assumed that a state gained more students from the country it advertised in, but it cannot be assumed that the country decided to send students to it (Yun 2018). In a composite, the inputs, processes, and outputs need to be clear; normalization of the data can allow these to be mixed (Nardo et al. 2005; Freudenberg 2003).

With a perception index, the question is whether the country is influential in diplomatic circles and whether it has good relationships with other states. Respondents think it has influence over diplomatic relations, but it cannot be said that a certain state let that happen or allowed it to become part of diplomatic relations (Haigh et al. 2026). It is necessary to know who was surveyed in order to understand the level of diplomacy a country has. It can be argued that if the public thinks the country has influence then its experts will too, which is why Brand Finance dropped the specialists from its study, as there was little difference (Woods 2025). Knowing that an expert feels that way does not mean that the expert knows the inner workings of diplomatic relations. It shows only that they think the country is appealing. A statement by an official is closer to an argument about a diplomatic relationship than asking the public whether the country is appealing, but it is still only a statement (Timilsana 2024; Zhang and Wu 2019).

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5.4 The importance of weighting and of looking at change over time

The Soft Power 30 used equal weights and then moved to using regressions to determine what the weights should be, along with changes to how it normalized its data and how it treated subjective data. A rank can rise through changes to the observations collected, the weights, or how the data is combined (Zhang and Wu 2019; McClory and Harvey 2016). Adding indicators can make it seem as though a state is rising in rank. France moved from fifth place in 2016 to first in 2017 when the index began measuring how many Michelin-starred restaurants a country had, which some may argue matters only if fine dining is valued (Zhang and Wu 2019). Uncertainty and sensitivity analysis can be used to identify what affects a rank and whether a state is still ranked the same when weights and observations change, but that will not help an argument about how it came to have that rank (Saisana, Saltelli, and Tarantola 2005; Greco et al. 2019).

There are values embedded in the choice of indicators to collect data on. In the 2018 edition, the majority of data sources came from Western institutions (Zhang and Wu 2019). Indicators assessed whether a state had good governance, which rewards states that value liberal democratic societies and leaves out other sources of attraction (Keating and Kaczmarska 2019). Sports indicators were also limited, including only soccer and the Olympics. These are all examples of someone deciding that a ranking should focus on these areas. Following Towns, creating an indicator means ranking the practices one wants countries to follow (Towns 2010). Polling can be used to collect data on what people think about a state, but that moves the values from the indicators to the audience.

5.5 From perception to recognition

Rankings can show whether a state is being thought about and liked: how many people know it, what they think about it, and how much they believe it influences them. Status could be seen in another state giving it a position, consulting it, or becoming its partner, all of which require it to have status. A rank in the Soft Power 30 shows the resources a country holds and how favorably it is viewed. A rank in the Global Soft Power Index shows how familiar, well regarded, and influential the public thinks a country is. Neither records another state's decisions, consultation, or deference. Favorable perceptions may be among the conditions that lead to such acts, but a rank cannot show that they followed. A survey also records collective beliefs, but they are the beliefs of the general public, not of the states that could grant the place. Status must be given by another country; it is not something a state can claim (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). There is a hierarchy in the world system that states follow, so a state can be at the top of a ranking but not be respected by its counterparts (Zarakol 2011; Towns 2010). There are reasons why states try to rank high. Perhaps they want their citizens to see that they hold a high rank, and because they know others are trying to gain high ranks, they start acting as if the rank means they have gained status from others. This shows that a rank by itself cannot speak to standing. Standing is instead something to be established in International Relations, by asking whether a state has been able to

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influence another country and, if so, on what issues. Table 2 shows what each measure records and what a rank can and cannot support.

Table 2. What the two indexes record, and what a rank can and cannot support

Measure	What is recorded	What a rank can support	What it cannot establish
Objective resources (Soft Power 30)	Objective data in six sub-indexes, more than 75 metrics	The state has resources that may attract others	Whether anyone was attracted or another state acted
Polled favorability (Soft Power 30)	Public ratings of seven aspects of a country in 20–25 countries	People in those countries view it favorably	Whether a government changed a decision
Familiarity and reputation (Global Soft Power Index)	How well known and how well regarded a country is among the general public	The country is known and liked	Whether other states respect it or gave it a role
Perceived influence (Global Soft Power Index)	How much influence respondents believe a country has	Respondents think the country is influential	Whether it influenced a decision, or who is influenced
Change in rank over time (both indexes)	A new position under that year's indicators, weights, and respondents	The score changed under that year's method	Whether standing changed, as editions cannot be compared

6. Discussion: questions to ask about other states, and a worked example

A study of whether a state has gained status from another country needs to establish what that question is about. The state may believe it gained status from aiding that country on a specific topic. The first question is then whether its rank can show that. The next is who would need to show that it gained status (Gallarotti 2020; Timilsana 2024). It can be on a certain topic, perhaps working together with that country, asking it for input on a specific issue, or that country recognizing the state as having a certain role. Even if other countries benefit from a state's use of its soft power, this does not mean that the state had influence over the decision (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Guzzini 1993). For that reason, the evidence needed is deference to the state: an instance where another country acts as if the state had that role. Another country could adopt a state's practices or praise its model, which could show that it was drawn to what it learned about that country (Towns 2010). The question therefore remains whether another country has shown the state that it has status on this topic.

Three questions need to be asked when looking at a rank. First, who is answering the survey behind the rank, and is that the actor from which the state wants to show it has status? Respondents may believe the country is influential, but that does not mean it has status from other countries. Second, what have other states done? The evidence would be that a country consulted the state on a topic, or that the state was able to partner with it. Third, who is quoting the ranking, and to whom? A state may be using its rank to claim status from another country, or

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as a form of persuasion aimed at its own citizens. A rank that went up does not by itself support a claim to status from that country.

If it can be shown that another country gave a state a role, that could indicate it has status from that country. The records of negotiations that took place between those states on that topic can show whether the other country mentioned the state and what role it played, whether it invited or excluded the state on that topic, and what standards it holds the state to.

Each reading can also be considered in terms of what a rank should show about standing. On the resource reading, a rank should increase when a state's resources and activities increase, and it should not fluctuate with events. On the constructivist reading, the rank would be expected to increase when people hear more about the country and to fluctuate if they become negative about it, and each group polled may return different answers. Rankings can fluctuate with good and bad news, so they are not tracking resources; on the constructivist reading they are most likely showing how a country is received. If a rank could show status, the rank would be expected to move as other countries included the state on that topic. Neither index is built to record that, so a rank does not by itself show that a state has status. Rankings still matter: as Section 5.2 shows, they put pressure on states. But the rank alone is not evidence of status. What matters is therefore what has happened to a country for it to gain that position, not just what its current position is. These questions point to what is needed to show recognition. There needs to be a named country, a specific issue, a role that this country gave or refused, and records of it consulting or deferring to the state.

The UK provides an instructive case. It was ranked second in the Soft Power 30 in 2017 and first in 2018 (McClory 2018). This was based on measurable criteria as well as public opinion surveys from other countries, and no government opinion was sought. Moreover, in 2017, other governments took a position on questions directly related to the UK's standing. In June, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted 94 to 15 to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the Chagos Archipelago, contrary to the UK's view. In November, the UK was unable to secure a majority of UNGA votes for its nominee to the ICJ, resulting in an Indian judge being elected instead, the first time the UK did not have a judge on the ICJ (Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph 2019). Finally, a rank was invoked domestically: the UK government stated in the 2021 Integrated Review that it was a "soft power superpower" and ranked third in the world in soft power (HM Government 2021, 9), in support of its "Global Britain" policy. Foreign diplomats characterized the "Global Britain" framing as a domestic slogan (Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph 2019). Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph (2019) note that it is difficult to ascribe these UNGA votes to any one factor. Nonetheless, the votes demonstrate other countries' views and actions on a specific issue, which the soft power rank does not, and in 2017 they diverged from the UK's position.

There are limits to this analysis. The Soft Power 30 changed its indicators, weights, and polling between editions, and the Global Soft Power Index changed who it surveys in 2022, which

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makes it hard to compare either index across years. This paper also uses only published documents. The UK example was chosen because its record is public, and it illustrates the argument and does not test it, as one case cannot show how often rank and recognition differ.

7. Conclusion

There is much that can be learned from a country's ranking. Some indicators can show what a country has to offer others and what people think about it, but not enough to show whether another state decided to work with it, or allowed it to have a position of influence on a certain topic. Several factors need to be taken into account when studying a rank: how the indicators were chosen and weighted, how the data is normalized and whether unlike things are being compared, and which audience a state is trying to rank itself with. For governments, and for those who manage a country's brand or public diplomacy, the lesson is that a rank can show how well known and well regarded a state is, but a rise in rank should not be read, or presented, as recognition by other states. Further research should examine how states react to their rankings, and whether those actions show that they have gained status from another country. What are states saying about their rank, and where are they applying that information? Is the other country reacting to that information, and how? This argument can also be tested. A state's rank, in editions that use the same method, can be compared with what other states did in those years, for example where they sent embassies (Duque 2018; Røren and Beaumont 2019) or what roles they gave. If the rank and these actions move together, a rank may say more about recognition than this paper argues. If they do not, the rank is measuring something else. A claim that a state has gained status from a country requires looking at that country, and at whether the claim can be demonstrated by how the two worked together on that topic. This leads back to soft power: how can a state gain status from other countries by using its image?

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