

# FIIA 15/2017 COMMENT

Leo Michel  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## US “soft power” and the Trump administration: Disturbing signs

Judging by its statements and actions so far, President Donald Trump’s administration does not place a high priority on projecting “soft power” in its conduct of foreign policy. America’s friends should be worried.

In his seminal essay in 1990, Harvard professor Joseph Nye contrasted “soft power” – a country’s ability to “achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it or have agreed to a situation that produces (desired) effects” – with the “hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants”. As Nye observed: “If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes ... (and) may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power”.

Government efforts to promote American culture and political values with overseas audiences have a chequered history, and they pale in comparison with the influence radiated by many actors outside government control – corporations, news media, the entertainment industry, universities, and foundations. However, US leaders’ statements and decisions affect Washington’s ability to attract support. Hence, it is worrying that the Trump administration does not see soft power as a major organizing principle for its international policies.

Consider the President’s rhetoric. His inaugural speech featured dystopian images of America’s society and political establishment, and recycled wild claims of its exploitation by others. The “wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their

homes (and) redistributed across the entire world,” Trump stated, adding that Americans had “defended other nations’ borders while refusing to defend our own”. In response, he promised an unwavering “America first” policy. Moreover, in subsequent interviews, rallies, and “tweets”, he has unleashed baseless attacks against his predecessor and critics in both parties, assailed federal judges, branded media organizations as an “enemy of the people”, and painted himself as the victim of an unprecedented “witch hunt” by congressional and federal investigations into Russia’s meddling in the 2016 election.

A more considered statement of the administration’s approach to international affairs might emerge in the National Security Strategy, which the White House is required to send to Congress under a 1986 law. But early signs are not encouraging. In May, Trump’s top national security and economic advisers, H. R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, argued in an op-ed that “America first does not mean America alone”. Their attempt to reconcile the President’s nationalist rhetoric and traditional US support for alliances only heightened the contradictions between the two.

In particular, they extolled the President’s “clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, non-governmental actors and businesses

engage and compete for advantage”. As a conservative pundit put it: “By treating the world simply as an arena for competitive advantage, Trump, McMaster and Cohn sever relationships, destroy reciprocity, erode trust and eviscerate the sense of sympathy, friendship and loyalty that all nations need when times get tough ... They make our country seem disgusting in the eyes of the world”.

Early administration actions also reflect a disregard for soft power. The President’s executive orders banning citizens of several Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States sent a message of religious discrimination that reverberated beyond the targeted Middle East and North African states. His withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change, based on tendentious claims of its effects on the US economy, drew rebukes from Germany, France, Canada, and the EU.

Meanwhile, the combined State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) budget would be reduced by approximately 30 per cent under the administration’s proposed budget for 2018. Among the largest cuts (in dollar amounts) would be contributions to international organizations and their peacekeeping activities, bilateral economic development and health programmes, and USAID’s Food for Peace programme.

---

Finnish Institute of  
International Affairs

---

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

---

POB 400

---

00161 Helsinki

---

Telephone

---

+358 (0)9 432 7000

---

Fax

---

+358 (0)9 432 7799

---

[www.fiia.fi](http://www.fiia.fi)

*The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decision-making and public debate both nationally and internationally.*

*All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.*

This is neither the language nor the kind of action that inspires admiration by US allies, partners, and other believers in a liberal world order. Indeed, the Pew Research Center's recent major survey of America's image in 37 countries found a "sharp decline" in global confidence in the US president (from 64 per cent at the end of Barack Obama's mandate to 22 per cent for Trump); in Western Europe, confidence in Trump is approaching the low ratings (20 per cent or less) garnered by George Bush in 2008. Only in Russia does Trump's favourable rating exceed that of his two immediate predecessors.

Despite the bleak indicators, declaring the demise of American soft power seems premature. Within the administration, defence secretary James Mattis is a vocal soft power advocate. (In 2013, while overseeing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, then Marine General Mattis told congressmen: "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately".) Senators from both parties have since declared the proposed State cuts "dead on arrival".

Still, the administration's current approach is risky. At best, it will slow progress made in parts of

the world to raise living and health standards and to help responsible governance take root. At worst, it could open new avenues for dangerous state and non-state actors to exploit nationalist, religious, or ethnic tensions in ways that threaten US, allied, and partner interests. As either (or both) of those scenarios unfold, a Washington perceived as selfish and arrogant will find it more difficult to rally contributions by others to the "hard power" missions that will inevitably arise. In that case, Trump cannot claim that Mattis has not warned him.