

“The EU is a powerful model for the rest of the world: Most neighboring countries wish to join it rather than balance it or resist it, and other regional groupings around the world seek to emulate it.”

## Is the European Union’s Soft Power in Decline?

KAREN E. SMITH

**A**lmost twenty-five years ago, the political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. coined the term “soft power” to capture the influence that the United States exercises not through coercion or inducement but through attraction. Coercion and inducement—the stick and the carrot—are forms of command power (or what Nye calls “hard power”), delivered via economic, diplomatic, or military instruments. Command power is used to compel or bribe others to do what you want them to do. Soft power, in contrast, is less a policy instrument to be wielded than an indirect force; it emanates from the attractiveness of a state’s culture, political values, and foreign policies. Soft power encourages other international actors to cooperate with a state (or a multistate organization like the European Union) to pursue what they perceive as shared goals and values. It is therefore a less costly means of attaining desired outcomes than the use of command power.

### Soft Power Revisited

Sixth in a series

This concept has been used by politicians and officials around the world, as well as by analysts of international politics. Countries have tried to “manufacture” soft power to increase their international influence. Yet some have confused propaganda with soft power and have not achieved the desired results. As Nye argued in the January 2014 issue of *Current History*, “Investment in government propaganda is not a successful strategy for increasing a country’s soft power.” Slick public relations cannot make up for the fact that other actors are not attracted to your culture, values,

and policies. Nye also warned that a state’s soft power resources can be depleted if it does not live up to its values at home and abroad and is therefore seen to practice double standards, or if its foreign policies lack legitimacy.

Although Nye’s work on soft power centers on the United States, he views Europe (both European countries and the European Union) as its closest soft power competitor. Europe has considerable soft power resources, and the EU itself is a unique entity: a grouping of states that have “domesticated” their relations with each other in a highly institutionalized environment, thus profoundly transforming the international relations of much of the continent. Interstate war within the EU seems inconceivable, and for this, the union certainly deserved to win the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize.

The EU is a powerful model for the rest of the world: Most neighboring countries wish to join it rather than balance it or resist it, and other regional groupings around the world seek to emulate it. In addition, the EU’s foreign policies in support of international law and multilateralism generate good will—distinguishing it from the United States, which has shown hostility to many international treaties and even to the United Nations. Member states of the group are all relatively rich democracies, with high levels of human rights protection and active civil societies, and a magnificent cultural heritage. There are also much less attractive aspects of Europe, particularly in its history, but the positive side of its soft power balance sheet is nonetheless quite full.

While some member states have significant command power resources in the form of military strength (France and the United Kingdom have nuclear weapons and the ability to project conventional force abroad), the EU itself lacks hard military power. The forces that the union can use

---

KAREN E. SMITH is a professor of international relations at the London School of Economics. She is the author of *European Foreign Policy in a Changing World, 3rd edition forthcoming* (Polity Press, 2014).

are now predominantly for peacekeeping or training missions—not for coercion. Instead, the EU has developed and wielded formidable economic and diplomatic instruments. These include one of the world's largest development aid budgets; the capacity to enter into trade, association, and other agreements with non-EU states and international organizations; and a network of delegations and special representatives that it can use to engage others in dialogue.

## CIVILIAN CLOUT

These nonmilitary instruments have given the EU strong influence internationally—which is rather anomalous in international politics. The traditional conception is that a state wielding aid or diplomacy still needs military force behind it in order to have an impact. Yet the union has acquired its influence without this kind of force.

As a result, the EU is sometimes described as a “soft power,” though not in the sense that Nye intended. The term often refers to the EU's reliance on what are seen as soft aid instruments and trade, rather than military might. A more accurate expression to describe the EU in this regard is *civilian power*—that is, an actor that uses civilian (non-military)

instruments. There is a key difference between the concepts: Civilian policy instruments are instruments of *command power*. They can be used to induce, but also to coerce—as when conditions are attached to the provision of aid or trade privileges, or when sanctions are imposed.

The EU uses conditionality to spread norms: for example, by making its aid or trade agreements conditional on respect for human rights and democratic principles (at least in theory; the practice is considerably less consistent than the rhetoric suggests, but more on that below). It also applies conditions, such as compliance with its regulations, in exchange for entry into the EU market. And it has demanded conclusion of a readmission agreement in exchange for visa liberalization (that is, a non-EU country must agree to readmit any illegal immigrants found on EU territory who either come from or have passed through that country).

Sanctions and other negative measures are applied if the EU disapproves of other countries'

policies or when they fail to comply with the union's demands. Currently, for example, the EU has imposed oil embargoes and other sanctions on Iran and Syria. When the EU does this, it is not using soft power, but (civilian) command power.

The EU's use of command power—both inducements and sanctions—can be effective where such instruments are used credibly and decisively, and where the material costs and benefits matter to non-EU countries. Conditionality is particularly strong (and effective) when it comes to EU enlargement: Countries that seek to join must fundamentally transform their economies and political systems to meet the union's membership conditions. Soft power gives membership conditionality much of its force (if countries did not seek to join the EU, then obviously membership conditionality would be irrelevant), though the EU then uses this attractiveness as command power. But the civilian power concept fits this sort of behavior better than soft power does.

The EU is also frequently described as a “normative power”—that is, a power that tries to spread certain norms, such as respect for human rights, to other actors. Again, there are important differences

between normative power and Nye's concept of soft power; notably, command power can also be used to try to spread norms.

It is true that soft power is crucial for pursuing normative goals, or what the international relations scholar Arnold Wolfers called “milieu goals”: A state or group of states may shape conditions beyond its borders to encourage desired trends, such as protection of human rights and promotion of democracy in other countries. But democracy cannot be imposed on a country; it requires fertile domestic soil in which to take root. Coercion or inducement may help at the margins to reshape the cost-benefit calculations of authoritarian rulers and dissuade them from violating human rights. However, if the EU is to be an effective normative power, its soft power *and* command power will both need to be strong.

## INTERNAL TURMOIL

In the early- to mid-2000s, there was a widespread view that the EU's soft power was relatively

---

*If countries can look elsewhere for investment or aid, they are less likely to listen to the EU's lectures about standards or comply with its conditions.*

---

strong—primarily because it was compared with the United States under the George W. Bush administration. US foreign policies—above all regarding Iraq—were considered illegitimate in many countries (especially in Europe), and Washington proved to be a very difficult partner during the UN’s reform process, in international negotiations on the environment and arms control, and in the creation of the International Criminal Court (the Bush administration “unsigned” the statute of the ICC). The perceptions that US foreign policies were not legitimate and that the United States was not living up to its own values undermined its soft power.

In contrast, during that period the EU was generally (though not universally) seen as possessing the right set of policies for the twenty-first century—mainly because it preferred to work multilaterally and was less reliant on the use of military force than the United States. There were predictions that the EU was on the rise: that it could be the next superpower and run the new century.

Yet the EU was also going through considerable internal turmoil. In 2005, the electorates of France and the Netherlands summarily rejected a laboriously negotiated draft constitutional treaty. Following a period of disarray, member states returned to the negotiating table and cobbled together the Lisbon Treaty, which was initially rejected by the Irish electorate in 2008 before finally being approved over a year later.

Members had also fallen out over the 2003 invasion of Iraq: The display of disunity sparked concerns that the union would disintegrate, or at least that its mechanisms for cooperation on foreign policy would be abandoned. But it also meant that the EU (by default) did not support the unpopular US invasion, even though

several of its member states did. In this period, the attractiveness of the EU-led model—its soft power—stemmed from comparison with the US model.

The EU’s foreign policies were perceived as more legitimate than those of the United States, even despite the apparent weaknesses of the EU’s internal model. These weaknesses could also be downplayed since they were supposed to be rectified when the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. The treaty amalgamates various parts of the EU’s foreign policy machinery and involves member state officials in a new European External Action Service. This prompted expectations that the EU would become a more coherent and unified international actor.

In the last five years or so, however, the relative strength of the EU’s soft power has waned. American foreign policy has changed under the Barack Obama administration, leading to a surge in US attractiveness. But European soft power has declined absolutely, not just relatively, for reasons that have to do with both the diminished attractiveness of the EU model and negative perceptions of some of its foreign policies.

Since 2008, the euro crisis more than anything else has drained EU soft power. The inability of the union and its member states to solve the crisis has not only had a negative impact on economies elsewhere in the world, making the EU a problem for others to deal with; it also has led to serious contestation of the EU in several member states (above all, Greece). This has focused attention on economic policy at the expense of foreign policy. The ensuing austerity has limited the extent to which the EU can deploy its foreign policy instruments, in addition to casting doubt on the viability of the European social model—one source of European soft power in the past. Even more

#### From *Current History*’s archives...

“New leaders throughout the region sought to create and consolidate democratic political institutions while grappling with the economic decline that had characterized the last decades of Communist rule and paved the way for the changes of regime. As the early post-Communist slogan ‘Democracy, the Market, and Back to Europe’ indicates, they also faced the need to re-create private property and other aspects of a market economy and to reorient their countries’ economic relationships with the outside world.”

Sharon Wolchik “The Politics of Eastern Europe’s Move to the Market,” November 1992



worryingly, the EU does not look like an attractive club to join anymore in the wake of the crisis, and so its soft power vis-à-vis potential members has been damaged as well.

## DISUNITY ON DISPLAY

The lack of unity apparent in the run-up to the Iraq war has been obvious in more recent situations such as the intervention following the 2011 rebellion in Libya, where France and the United Kingdom participated but Germany did not. The EU's response to such developments has typically been a mix of some decisive action coupled with lowest-common-denominator approaches, as in the continuing debates over how to deal with Ukraine, Egypt, and Syria. Displays of disunity have continued despite the entry into force of the supposed cure—the Lisbon Treaty—and hence are more damaging.

Additionally, the Arab Spring exposed the EU's previous support for authoritarian regimes in the name of stability, and left it scrambling to find an alternative approach. The revised European Neighborhood Policy in 2011 promised to continue more or less along the same lines as before—only now the EU pledged to be serious about helping reformers and punishing undemocratic regimes. But the legitimacy of such a policy has clearly been undermined by the fact that the use of command power (human rights and democracy conditionality) before the Arab Spring lacked credibility.

Unfortunately, hypocrisy is not unusual when it comes to the promotion of human rights and democracy around the world, and the EU has always been inconsistent in its pursuit of such goals. Some human rights violators escape its attention while others are targeted by sanctions. But the Arab Spring was arguably more damaging, since the EU had for so long pretended to promote democracy in a region on its doorstep while at the same time tolerating authoritarian rulers. No wonder the bloc struggled to establish links with new interlocutors in some North African countries in 2011.

Finally, the EU's premier tool for transforming its neighborhood—the promise of accession to the union for countries that meet the membership conditions—seems to be losing its power not just because of the euro crisis and other

signs of disunity, but also because its member states show little enthusiasm for enlargement. Negotiations have stalled with Turkey, and the accession process for Western Balkan states slowed after Croatia joined in 2013; Macedonia's progress is still blocked by a bilateral dispute with Greece. Since the EU apparently is not offering much hope of accession in the near future (or even at all) to neighboring European countries, its influence suffers. Why would countries try to meet the conditions for membership if the EU shows little sign that it will indeed permit their accession?

In the past few years, the EU has seemed less and less attractive to other countries—as a model, as a partner, as an organization that eligible countries are welcome to join. Its command power resources have also declined relative to others. The EU's share of global trade, aid, and investment is still very large, but growing smaller. This is particularly obvious in places such as Africa, where trade with China especially (but also with India and Brazil) is growing quickly. If countries can look elsewhere for investment or aid, they are less likely to listen to the EU's lectures about standards or comply with its conditions.

Coupled with this economic decline is the EU's perennial difficulty in mustering military power. Getting all the member states to agree on the use of military force can be difficult, and capabilities are not well developed. The EU's ability and willingness to respond to crises proved to be limited or nonexistent in Africa—in 2012, relatively low-key training and capacity-building missions were sent to Mali, Niger, and Libya, and in 2013, to the Central African Republic. The European Council (the heads of state or government of EU member states) discussed the union's security and defense policy in December 2013, and committed to strengthening military and civilian capabilities. But the EU member states are not always willing to use such command power to spread norms and to foster peace and security, so capabilities are only part of the problem.

## STILL ROLLING

The combination of a relative decline in the EU's command power and arguably an absolute decline in its soft power has led to dire predic-

---

*The euro crisis more  
than anything else has  
drained EU soft power.*

---

tions of EU irrelevance in a more multipolar world. However, although the EU undoubtedly will struggle to exercise influence in a world in which power is more diffused, its decline should not be exaggerated.

Firstly, the EU's influence in international affairs has always been uneven, in the sense that the member states have sometimes agreed to act collectively and at other times have not, yet all the while they have been gradually building institutions and creating instruments to try to strengthen the EU's international influence. There have been high points and low points in terms of unity and effectiveness in international relations over the past few decades. What is significant is that at no point (yet) has a member state walked away. Instead, remarkably, the member states' reaction to unseemly displays of disunity or ineffectiveness is to try to reform EU institutions to foster more unity and make the union more effective (while still ensuring the retention of national control over the foreign policy machinery). This pattern is unlikely to change soon.

It is also worth noting that although there may not be much enthusiasm for enlargement, the EU is still proceeding with talks with various candidates, and negotiations with Serbia began in January 2014. The enlargement train moves haltingly, but it is still moving forward.

Secondly, the EU's soft power should also be assessed in relation to that of other actors. Here the picture is not so bleak. In the global marketplace

of ideas and values, the EU's wares are still relatively attractive. For example, a yearly poll conducted by the BBC World Service and GlobeScan in over 20 countries showed starkly lower positive views of the EU in 2012 (in the midst of the euro crisis). But those views had stabilized in 2013, when the EU's average positive rating was still marginally higher than those of Brazil, the United States, and China, and much higher than Russia's.

The protests that erupted in late November 2013 in Ukraine make for another illustration of the EU's soft power. Demonstrations started after the Ukrainian government, apparently under pressure from Russia, decided not to sign an association agreement with the EU. While both Russia and the EU held out promises of material benefits, the protesters on the streets of Ukrainian cities have predominantly demanded respect for democratic principles and human rights—values that the EU holds dear—and have been flying the EU flag. The EU's soft power, combined with the influence of its civilian instruments, may not change outcomes in Ukraine in the short run, but it is still having an undeniable influence on politics in that country.

Thirdly, although it may appear to other countries that the EU's conditions can be avoided by turning to other sources of investment or aid, funding from elsewhere is not without conditions or negative implications. Chinese aid and investment often come with requirements to use funding to purchase Chinese goods.

Some countries have shown that they do not wish to tie themselves too closely to any one benefactor. Although China is the biggest investor in Myanmar, the latter's government apparently chose to undertake political reforms so as to attract Western aid and investment as well. Russian assistance comes with strings attached, too—such as the demand that Ukraine not sign an agreement with the EU.

## STRONG VALUES

It is also important to remember that, despite austerity, the EU still has formidable command power resources. The use of these resources can boost its soft power. The EU is still the largest and richest single market, so most countries naturally want to trade with it. It is still one of the most generous aid donors, and has dispatched peacekeepers and civilian experts to about 20 countries since 2003. A lot of goodwill can be generated through the use of these instruments.

### From the archives of *Current History*...

"Since the end of the Cold War, as the world system has become more interdependent, networked, democratic, and freer of ideological rivalry, Europe's distinctive instruments of influence have become relatively more effective, leading to a rise in European power. . . . If we view power in this multidimensional way, Europe is clearly the second superpower in a bipolar world."

**Andrew Moravcsik**

"Europe, the Second Superpower"

March 2010



In a multipolar yet interdependent world, the EU's strengths are still relevant and potentially very influential.

Clearly, though, the EU needs to adjust to the new international context or predictions of its irrelevance will ring true. Ideally its soft power and command power should reinforce each other, as is the case with membership conditionality. But the way the bloc's command power is used can also damage its soft power. This happens when conditionality is not credible because the EU simply does not use it against autocratic regimes, or when the bloc appears to be making demands on non-EU countries solely to satisfy its own interests (such as preventing asylum seekers from reaching its shores).

The EU also has a tendency to view other countries not as partners but as objects needing reform. Action plans jointly decided with non-EU countries tend to be full of changes that the other country needs to make, rather than lists of areas on which the two sides could collaborate. At the same time, though, the EU has also been rather generous in naming other countries as "strategic partners," even where there is little genuine partnership to speak of and few shared values to promote together. This does little to boost the legitimacy of its foreign policies. Reconsidering how the EU interacts with outside countries—and with *which* outside countries—could help to realign the union's foreign policies with its internal values, thus refreshing its soft power.

Doing so will be challenging for two principal reasons. First, the EU is a complex intergovernmental system and hence any action requires much internal negotiation and compromise. This is both a strength and a weakness: The EU's consensus-based structure makes it a unique and influential role model in international relations, but many of the challenges it has faced as an inter-

national actor stem from the difficulties of setting clear priorities and acting decisively.

If the EU is to exercise influence internationally, its institutions and member state governments will have to recognize that command power alone will not suffice to meet its aims, protect shared interests, and promote shared values. The bloc must also preserve its soft power resources.

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

But here is the second challenge to boosting the EU's soft power: There are looming problems posed by hostility to the EU from within. Euroskeptic political parties may do very well in European Parliament elections in May 2014. A more serious crisis might be sparked by a British exit from the union, and although this is an unlikely prospect, the continuing British debate about EU membership is distracting. The attractiveness of the EU to outsiders will reflect its attractiveness to insiders, so the current internal contestation is damaging to its influence abroad. How the union reacts as an institution to these internal challenges will illustrate how strong its political model is.

The EU's soft power has declined in the estimation of both outsiders and insiders since the early 2000s; altering those perceptions in a multipolar world will be difficult, but not impossible. After all, the EU's soft power is still quite formidable compared with that of its competitors, and it still has a considerable reservoir of soft power resources, such as its unique model of international relations. Ultimately, the EU's influence depends on its member states accepting that collectively they are stronger than any of them could be separately. Such acceptance would boost the EU's command power and soft power. Whether the member states' governments will rise to the occasion remains to be seen. ■