

Policy Insight

Utilizing Soft Power in the Conduct of Foreign Policy: Current Realities and Prospects for the Philippines

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Introduction

Soft power is the use of cultural values to promote and foster better state relations (Nye 2009, 2010). In terms of soft power, one of the leading states possessing great influence in international affairs is the United States, as it remains the only superpower and military juggernaut in current times. Aside from the US, other states such as Japan, South Korea, and China also practice soft power politics in East Asia. The use of soft power by Southeast Asian states has far reaching implications in terms of the receiving countries' perception and norm formation. The Philippines is one of the recipients of these influences in the region. However, due to its geopolitical position in the Asia Pacific region, it is also in the middle of ongoing rivalry between major and middle powers.

Given the perilous situation of the Philippines, the country relies on the rules-based international order to promote its interests in the region. While there have been some gains in that aspect, there is also a need for the Philippines to look for other ways to promote its interests in the international arena. One suggestion is for the Philippines to tap into the use of soft power.

This essay will explore the possibility of utilizing soft power in Philippine foreign policy. First, it will highlight current geopolitical realities the country is facing. It will be followed by a discussion of how power is viewed in existing literature, and how soft power is utilized by

states to advance its interests. The paper will then present the need for the Philippines to promote its own soft power in the region. Lastly, the essay will discuss the possible impact of soft power on the country's foreign policy.

Current Philippine Geopolitical Realities and the "Independent Foreign Policy"

Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, is usually considered as a perilous region given competing interests of different powers. On the one hand, the United States is very much present in the region through its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), and the promotion of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy¹ as a way of securing its interests. On the other hand, China has been promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)² and has acted upon its expansionist claims in the region. This competition for power might lead to a "Thucydides trap,"³ if the rivalry between the US and China is not settled peacefully (Allison 2015).

The Philippines is in the middle of these competing interests. For one, it has been part of the US's "hub-and-spoke system," has a standing mutual defense treaty (MDT) with the US, and has deepened relations due to the changing dynamics in the Asia Pacific region (de Castro 2017). Furthermore, the Philippines has utilized international litigation to resolve the dispute, in which China refused to participate in the proceedings, and continues to refuse to honor the arbitral award (Bautista 2018). While the Philippines was able to win the arbitration case against China, the gains are not being fully maximized given the Rodrigo Duterte administration's refusal to highlight the award in dealing with China (Bautista 2016; de Castro 2016).

What the Duterte Administration opted to do instead is to promote the so-called "independent foreign policy" mentioned in the 2018 National Security Strategy.⁴ While it aims to change the direction of Philippine foreign policy, scholars seem to agree that its focus is geared toward China's appeasement (Baviera 2016; Bautista 2016, 2018; de Castro 2016, 2017; Magcamit 2019). For instance, it has been noted that the Duterte administration is willing to sacrifice some of the gains of the previous administration by casting aside the legal victory of the Philippines against China in establishing bilateral relations with Beijing (de Castro 2016; Bautista 2016, 2018). After more than three years in power, the results of Duterte's independent foreign policy have

been mixed as there are gains in terms of funding but at the cost of neglecting one's sovereignty, alienating one's allies in favor of another, and tarnishing of one's reputation due to implemented domestic policies (Parameswaran 2019).

If the Duterte administration truly wants to pursue an independent foreign policy, the Philippines should do so without sacrificing its territorial integrity and its alliances with its traditional partners—it needs to be creative about its foreign policy instead. One aspect where the country can steer its foreign policy direction is through the utilization of soft power for its long-term strategic goals. However, the question remains as to whether the Philippines has that kind of power in the first place.

This essay argues that there is a space for the Philippines to utilize its soft power at the international level. In fact, there has already been a call to consider cultural diplomacy in promoting Philippine soft power (Wong 2016). However, before discussing in detail how the Philippines can incorporate soft power in its foreign policy, there is a need to discuss first the concept of power, its various types, and how soft power is used by other states to promote its interests.

Power and Its Different Types

As a field of study, political science concerns itself with issues pertaining to the use of power (Hay 2002). Power is defined as “having the ability to influence another to act in ways in which that entity would not have acted otherwise” (Wilson 2008, 114). Aside from its classical definition, Steven Lukes (2005) argues that power is also manifested under the purview of policymaking and ideological structures. All these definitions recognize that power is based on relational aspects in general, despite the difference in terms of locus.

This conceptualization of power is also applied in international relations. Scholars have devoted their attention to discussing the different avenues where power is manifested. Hard power is the use of coercive powers in promoting one's interests, whereas soft power is the use of cultural values to promote and foster better relations (Nye 2009, 2010; Wilson 2008).

These types of power are not mutually exclusive. States can utilize both, in what Joseph Nye (2010, 9) referred to as smart power, or “the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy.” The use of both

hard and soft power must be “mutually reinforcing” for them to be effective and efficient (Wilson 2008).

States can manifest power through different means. The first is the use of coercive mechanisms to enforce compliance. Another is the use of culture to foster cooperation. States can utilize both forms of power to promote its goals. Regardless of how power is used by different states for different purposes, power remains to be relational.

The Use of Soft Power in Advancing State Interests

Southeast Asian nations are on the receiving end of soft power projections by major and middle powers in the region (Otmazgin 2008). However, Nissim Otmazgin (2008) argues that soft power is not unilateral as other states can also utilize soft power for their own agenda. The use of soft power, in general, has implications for a state's domestic affairs and its foreign policy.

Soft power can promote a positive image of a certain state. Japan, for instance, has been using soft power to promote “export-oriented cultural commodities” and a “friendlier image” abroad (Otmazgin 2012, 39). Japan has been dependent on its anime and manufacturing industry to project itself as a developed country despite its militaristic past during the Second World War (Otmazgin 2008). Meanwhile, South Korea is known for promoting its cultural industry, prompting the phenomenal rise of *Hallyu* (translated as Korean Wave), which first spread in China and then to the rest of Asia, eventually reaching global recognition (Tae-Jin and Dal Yong 2017). Even smaller states such as New Zealand have also used soft power to promote a friendly image in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Butcher 2012).

Soft power can also be used to gain leverage. For example, China is known to provide a huge sum in support of ASEAN member states (Lum, Morrison, and Vaughn 2008). China is also known to engage Europe, but the results of its engagement with several European countries have been met with issues pertaining to legitimacy and credibility (d'Hooghe 2011). Aside from China, South Korea has also used soft power to gain leverage due to its lack of military power, as compared to its neighbors in the region (Lee and Melissen 2011). Meanwhile Japan has utilized its soft power based on its geopolitical reality (Otmazgin 2012). And for the US, it was suggested that soft power be used in North Korea as a way of promoting change in society, rather than using military force to achieve this goal (Lerner 2015).

Soft power is also used to reassert one's national identity (Lee and Melissen 2011). For instance, China has been using its Confucius Institutes around the globe to teach non-Chinese people the use of Chinese language, as well as promote its cultural values abroad (Lum, Morrison, and Vaughn 2008; Zhe 2012). Japan, on the other hand, has used its soft power to help shape its identity as a pacifist state by promoting values such as "comprehensive security," "human security," and "civilian authority" (Fukushima 2011).

Lastly, soft power is used for norm diffusion through public diplomacy (Cross 2013). One of the examples highlighted where public diplomacy is used for norm diffusion is the case of the European Union. As discussed by Mai'a Davis Cross (2013), the regional block is known to promote its soft power through engagement with other states in terms of aid, environment, and human rights issues. Soft politics as a promoter of norm diffusion is also utilized by the US. In the context of the Cold War, the US was active in exporting Hollywood movies for consumption abroad, as seen in the case of Turkey (Karademir 2012). However, the dominance of the US is currently in decline due to some poor policies it enacted after the Cold War (Nye 2010; Bouton and Holyk 2011).

Incorporating Soft Power on Philippine Foreign Policy

East Asian states are known for their economic prowess, which they use to promote their economic, political, and cultural interests (Lee and Melissen 2011). These states are far more powerful and richer than the Philippines. Like the Philippines, these states also have to deal with territorial disputes. For example, Japan has ongoing disputes with Russia over the Kuril Islands, with South Korea over Takeshima/Dokdo, and with China over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

The situation in the Northeast Asian region is comparable to the ongoing disputes in the West Philippine Sea as well. There's the Spratly Islands issue for one, the Paracel Islands on the other, and the overarching claims of China under the nine-dash line map.⁵ Unlike South Korea and Japan, the Philippines remains to be weak in terms of its military capabilities; nevertheless, there have been attempts to enhance its defense capabilities through the modernization of its armed forces.⁶

The Philippines has the following pillars in the conduct of its foreign policy: national security, economic security, and the

protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare of overseas Filipinos (Department of Foreign Affairs n.d.). While the Philippines has these noble intentions, its actualization is rather difficult given the current geopolitical context of the region. The country cannot rely on international rules to protect its core interests as powerful states can simply choose to ignore these rules. The Philippines, therefore, should have other avenues to promote its interests in the international arena. One of the ways the Philippines can achieve its foreign policy goals is through the use of its soft power.

One may wonder about why this essay gives emphasis on the possibility of the Philippines utilizing soft power given its geopolitical context. If the current situation is disadvantageous to the country, it should be able to utilize other strategies to promote its interest in the long run. As discussed by Sook Jong Lee and Jan Melissen (2011), states such as South Korea have utilized soft power extensively to promote its interests despite the lack of military resources. If other states were able to successfully use their soft power to advance their interests, the Philippines can perhaps learn from their experience.

Possible Impact of the Use of Soft Power on the Philippines

If utilized properly, the Philippines can use soft power to advance its interests both locally and at the regional level. Locally, it can help industries access international markets. It can also promote the Philippine tourism industry abroad. At the same time, it can improve the image of the Philippines at the regional level and foster relations with new allies. In the long run, these improvements can help with norm formation and diffusion in the ASEAN region.

Improved Access to Cultural Market

Investments in culture, as discussed by Andrea Wong (2016), can help local cultural industries gain new markets. Similar to what Japan and South Korea have done in terms of their own cultural industries, the Philippine government can usher opportunities to help local industries access different markets, especially with the onset of the ASEAN economic integration. In turn, this can help industries earn more income, and, by extension, translate into additional income for the Philippine state.

Promotion of Philippine Tourism

The use of soft power abroad can also highlight positive stories about the country, which in return can help boost the number of tourists (Wong 2016). For instance, tourism in South Korea has greatly improved due to *Hallyu* (Tae-Jin and Dal Yong 2017). If properly executed, the Philippines can expect foreigners to have an interest in visiting the country for tourism (Lao 2013).

Improved Philippine Foreign Relations

Aside from promoting new markets for Filipino cultural companies, the use of Philippine soft power can build better relations with other states and improve its international status (Wong 2016). Fostering better relations with other ASEAN member states can help the Philippines promote its interests through its allies in the region against foreign powers. Moreover, improved relations with its allies can help safeguard the rights of Filipinos who are currently living and/or working abroad (Lao 2013).

However, for that to work, values diffusion in receiving countries usually presupposes society's acceptance of the ideas presented by the country of origin (Cross 2013). Once this is successful, both the receiving and originating countries of soft power can benefit from the improvement of relations.

Norm Formation and Diffusion

By focusing on the Philippines' soft power capabilities, exporting the country's cultural values can help shape international norms in the long run. Norm formation and diffusion usually take a long time for one to instill; if done properly, Filipino norms can help shape discourses in the future. It might not happen in the near future but having norms transcended elsewhere will help the country's future leaders promote Philippine interests.

It will probably take a long while before the Philippines can determine whether the use of its soft power has indeed made an impact. As pointed out by Otmazgin (2008), the use of soft power may not result in diplomatic power, may not be effective in establishing spheres of influence, and may be counterproductive in the end. Despite these possibilities, Wong (2016) has argued that the promotion of cultural

diplomacy is crucial for Philippine development nevertheless as the state would be able to utilize and help the growth of its cultural industry.

Conclusion

Soft power can help improve state relations and promote norm diffusion without resorting to the use of force. Moreover, soft power does not discriminate its users classified in terms of state power. Powerful states with great military arsenal such as the United States, and to some extent, China, rely on their soft power capabilities to advance their own interests. Middle powers such as Japan and South Korea are also known for the use and promotion of their soft power globally. Even small powers such as New Zealand are also known to use soft power to foster better relations with ASEAN member states.

Depending on how the current geopolitical landscape will be shaped both by the US and China in the succeeding years, the Philippines will remain in a crossroad as these two powers compete for influence. The Philippines is clearly indisposed in terms of using its military resources to promote and protect its interests. In fact, policymakers should be able to use other available resources to promote Philippine interests. However, they should not sacrifice the gains of previous administrations in the conduct of Philippine foreign policy.

Soft power is one of the tools the Philippines can tap in the conduct of its foreign policy. Through its use, the Philippines can promote its local cultural and tourism industries. It can also improve its relations with other states, which in turn can help with the promotion of different norms at the regional and global levels. If executed properly, soft power can promote the country's strategic interests in the long term.

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Notes

1. The concept of the Indo-Pacific Region was recognized by the United States in the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States Government. In 2019, the US government released a much more defined report on its Indo-Pacific strategy entitled *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

2. The Belt and Road Initiative (originally One Belt, One Road), is an initiative announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The aim of the initiative is to promote investment using a two-prong strategy, i.e., land corridors and a maritime route (Lu 2016).

3. Graham Allison discussed the concept of Thucydides trap based on the context of power transition between Sparta and Athens, wherein both Greek city-states fought against each other to overthrow the old power (Sparta), and replace it with a new power (Athens). As explained by Allison (2015), 12 out of 16 power transitions throughout history have resulted in wars to overthrow the former power.

4. The National Security Strategy of the Duterte Administration is accessible through this link: <http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2018/08aug/20180802-national-security-strategy.pdf>

5. The nine-dash line map has been declared invalid based on the ruling made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the Philippines v. China case in 2016.

6. This has been acknowledged by the Philippine state in its 2018 National Security Strategy, where included as one of its action plans is the promotion of state capabilities against external security threats.

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