



Soft Power as Infrastructure

Rethinking the Role of Dialogue Platforms in Twenty-First-Century Multilateral Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the relationship between soft power and multilateral dialogue platforms. While Joseph Nye's foundational work locates soft power in the cultural, political, and normative resources of an actor, this article argues that the conversion of such resources into durable influence depends on the institutional infrastructure through which dialogue occurs. Drawing on the institutionalist literature on multilateralism and the rational-design approach to international institutions, the article develops a framework in which membership, centralization, flexibility, and perceived legitimacy jointly determine a platform's capacity to function as soft-power infrastructure. The framework is illustrated with reference to contemporary security dialogue forums, including the Munich Security Conference, the Shangri-La Dialogue, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. The article concludes that scholarship and practice concerned with soft power should attend as closely to the design of dialogue platforms as to the resources of the actors who convene them.

IndexTerms - soft power, multilateralism, institutional design, dialogue platforms, legitimacy, preventive diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye at the end of the Cold War, has become one of the most widely used and widely contested ideas in the study of international relations. Nye defined it as the capacity of an actor to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment, resting on resources such as culture, political values, and foreign policy¹. Three decades of scholarship have refined the concept, extended it from states to non-state actors, and linked it to the practice of public diplomacy, understood as the deliberate cultivation of foreign publics through communication, exchange, and cultural programming². What remains comparatively under-examined, however, is the institutional form through which soft power is generated and sustained over time. Attraction does not simply radiate from a state's culture or values; it is transmitted, tested, and renewed through recurring venues of interaction among governments, experts, and publics. This article argues that multilateral dialogue platforms - standing or recurring forums that bring state and non-state actors together for sustained deliberation - should be understood not merely as venues where soft power is displayed, but as infrastructure through which soft power is produced, distributed, and converted into influence over outcomes.

¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

² Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94-109.

This reframing matters for the design of global governance because it shifts the analytical question away from how attractive a given actor is and toward how durable, accessible, and credible the platforms are through which attraction operates. The article draws on the institutionalist literature on multilateralism ³⁴ and the rational-design approach to international institutions ⁵ to develop a framework for analysing dialogue platforms as soft-power infrastructure, and it illustrates the framework with reference to contemporary security and diplomatic forums.

2. FROM ATTRACTION TO ARCHITECTURE: REVISITING THE SOFT POWER CONCEPT

Nye's original formulation situated soft power primarily in the resources an actor possesses - its culture, its values, and the perceived legitimacy of its policies. In later writing, Nye acknowledged that resources alone do not translate automatically into influence; the conversion of resources into outcomes depends on strategy and, crucially, on the channels through which attraction is communicated ⁶. This conversion problem has received less systematic attention than the identification of soft-power resources themselves. Scholars examining soft power diplomacy in the context of globalization have similarly observed that international organizations function as the principal channels through which culture, values, and policy positions are projected onto a multilateral stage, complementing bilateral cultural diplomacy with a standing institutional presence ⁷. If this is correct, then the platforms through which multilateral dialogue occurs are not incidental to soft power; they are constitutive of it. A state or coalition with considerable cultural and normative resources but no durable access to credible multilateral platforms will struggle to convert those resources into sustained influence, while a platform with broad participation and procedural credibility can amplify the soft power of its convening actors and, over time, generate an institutional authority of its own.

This distinction between soft power as a possession and soft power as an infrastructural effect has practical implications for how platforms are designed. It suggests that scholars and practitioners should examine not only what resources a convening actor brings to a dialogue forum, but also the structural features of the forum itself - its membership rules, its recurrence, its rules of participation, and its relationship to formal decision-making bodies - as independent contributors to the forum's capacity to generate influence.

3. MULTILATERALISM AS AN INSTITUTIONAL FORM

Ruggie's influential distinction between multilateralism as a numerical description and multilateralism as a qualitative institutional form provides the conceptual bridge between soft power and platform design. For Ruggie, multilateral arrangements are distinguished from bilateral or minilateral ones not simply because they involve three or more parties, but because they are organized around generalized principles of conduct that

³ John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 561-598.

⁴ Robert O. Keohane, "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research," *International Journal* 45, no. 4 (1990): 731-764.

⁵ Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, "The Rational Design of International Institutions," *International Organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): 761-799.

⁶ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Obama's Smart Power," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2009): 7-9.

⁷ Yousif Hameed Jasim Alisawi and Shamal Mustafa, "Soft Power Diplomacy: Leveraging International Organizations in the Age of Globalization," *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology* (2024).

apply across cases without regard to the particular interests of individual parties in any specific instance ⁸. Keohane's parallel account emphasizes that multilateral institutions persist because they reduce transaction costs and provide a stable set of rules that participants can rely upon across repeated interactions ⁹. Read together, these accounts suggest that the credibility of a dialogue platform - and, by extension, its capacity to serve as soft-power infrastructure - depends on the degree to which it embodies generalized, rule-bound conduct rather than the particular preferences of its most powerful convening state.

This generalized character is precisely what differentiates a genuine multilateral dialogue platform from a bilateral showcase dressed in multilateral language. Forums that are perceived as instruments of a single sponsoring power's national interest struggle to generate the kind of durable attraction that Nye associates with soft power, because participants discount the platform's neutrality. Forums that succeed in projecting generalized, rule-governed conduct, by contrast, can become sites where soft power accumulates independently of any single member's national resources.

4. DESIGNING PLATFORMS AS SOFT-POWER INFRASTRUCTURE

The rational-design literature offers a useful vocabulary for specifying which institutional features matter most. Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal identify five dimensions along which international institutions vary: membership, scope, centralization, control, and flexibility, and argue that these dimensions are chosen strategically to address the particular cooperation problem an institution is meant to solve ¹⁰. Applied to dialogue platforms conceived as soft-power infrastructure, each of these dimensions has a direct bearing on the platform's capacity to generate attraction. Broad membership increases the platform's claim to generalized, rather than particularistic, conduct, but it also raises coordination costs and can dilute the coherence of outcomes. Centralization - for instance, a standing secretariat - provides continuity and institutional memory across dialogue cycles, allowing accumulated goodwill to be carried from one meeting to the next rather than dissipating when individual delegations change. Flexibility in agenda-setting allows the platform to remain relevant as issues evolve, which sustains participant interest and therefore sustains the platform's audience.

Empirical studies of specific dialogue forums illustrate how these design choices shape outcomes in practice. Comparative research on the Munich Security Conference and the Shangri-La Dialogue finds that what distinguishes effective Track 1.5 forums from mere talking shops is what the authors term the quality of discursive space, a composite of the forum's degree of formality, the type of discourse it permits, and the access participants have to governing authority ¹¹. This finding lends empirical support to the infrastructural view of soft power advanced here: it is not the raw attractiveness of the convening state or institution that

¹¹ Anna Longhini and Erin Zimmerman, "Regional Security Dialogues in Europe and in Asia: The Role of Track 1.5 Forums in the Practice of International Security," *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 4 (2021): 481-502.

determines a platform's influence, but the structural conditions the platform creates for credible, sustained exchange.

5. LEGITIMACY AS THE BINDING CONSTRAINT

Institutional design alone cannot guarantee that a dialogue platform will function as effective soft-power infrastructure, because design choices interact with the platform's perceived legitimacy. Zurn's account of global governance emphasizes that the authority exercised by international institutions requires ongoing legitimation, and that gaps between an institution's exercise of authority and its perceived legitimacy generate contestation that can erode the institution's standing ¹². Tallberg and Zurn extend this argument specifically to international organizations, noting that legitimacy affects an organization's capacity to secure voluntary compliance and cooperation from its members ¹³. Applied to dialogue platforms, this suggests that even a well-designed forum with broad membership and institutional continuity will lose its soft-power function if participants come to see it as procedurally biased or captured by a subset of powerful members. The case of the ASEAN Regional Forum is instructive: despite an inclusive membership structure and two decades of institutional continuity, critics have argued that adherence to consensus-based, non-interventionist norms has limited the forum's ability to move from confidence-building to substantive preventive action, thereby constraining the practical influence the forum can convert from its considerable diplomatic goodwill ¹⁴.

6. CONCLUSION

Reconceiving soft power as a property of infrastructure rather than solely of actors carries implications for both scholarship and practice. For scholarship, it directs attention toward the comparative institutional design of dialogue platforms as a variable explaining variation in diplomatic influence, complementing the long-standing focus on the cultural and normative resources of individual states. For practice, it suggests that states and institutions seeking to build durable influence through dialogue diplomacy should invest as much attention in the structural credibility of the platforms they build or join - their membership rules, their continuity, and their perceived neutrality - as in the cultivation of their own national attractiveness. The remainder of this research agenda, developed further in the companion studies that follow, examines how these design features can be made to scale across an expanding and increasingly crowded field of multilateral dialogue platforms.

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¹³Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zurn, "The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework," *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019): 581-606.

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