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Soft Power: A Strategy for UK Success

Contributors

This evidence has been produced by a team of scholars engaged in academic research into the history of British cultural diplomacy. Our expertise has a broad chronological (1934 to the present day) and geographical (Europe, Asia, Africa) scope. We can, therefore, based on the historic case studies we have examined, offer evidence on best practice for the use of cultural diplomacy overseas and appropriate approaches to further Britain's soft power.

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The Politics of Terminology

1. The government should reflect on what term it uses to describe the use of culture in state-to-state relations as certain assumptions can be made based on this choice. Historically, United States (US) organisations favoured the term public diplomacy – on the premise that such policies seek to engage with overseas publics – while British and European-based agencies/institutes preferred the term cultural diplomacy, on the grounds that their initiatives aim to foster greater mutual understanding between cultures and peoples (Kamasaris, 2021). In recent years, soft power has become the preferred term on both sides of the Atlantic. The theory, coined by political scientist Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), describes policies that governments and institutes employ to persuade and attract peoples to certain norms, values and ideas and thereby achieve influence. Such a framework has drawn much greater journalistic and public attention, with policymakers employing the concept to describe and frame a more cost-effective way of promoting their interests globally.
2. Increasingly, policymakers are placing greater emphasis on rivalry with other nations and a desire to show which state has the most soft power. This is at variance with the focus on fostering mutual understanding and promoting person-to-person exchanges which was previously the hallmark of cultural policy. While this is still the priority for individuals working for organisations like the British Council or the Goethe Institute, governments who spend more in this area are far more policy-

driven and award funding accordingly (British Council & Goethe Institute, 2018).

3. More pro-active efforts to meet policy goals and 'beat' other nations in soft power rivalry have several potential weaknesses. Policymakers and officials must be mindful to ensure initiatives do not blatantly highlight overarching policy goals to overseas audiences, who may regard such endeavours as propaganda instruments rather than as attempts to foster greater cultural understanding. During the 1980s, for example, officials from Britain and the US separately pursued, and sought to build ties with, South Africans who worked in cultural fields, education, or the country's burgeoning multi-racial trade union movement. These individuals have since commented that US representatives were quite blunt in their approach and were more obviously trying to 'win them over'. There was also suspicion that some might have been working in cover posts rather than as 'genuine' cultural diplomats (Feather, 2024). These figures, comparably, perceived British cultural diplomacy efforts as more 'respectful' and less concerned about propagandising their 'targets', even allowing opportunity to meet people who held views at variance with the British state while visiting the country. This shows that a subtle approach, which emphasises exchange and mutual understanding, is more beneficial than one which overtly indicates that there are political goals motivating contact.

4. Another governmental approach to soft power has been to leave it to the private sector to generate it. In a speech describing Britain as a 'soft power superpower', former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson emphasised the importance of celebrities like Jeremy Clarkson who he argued is 'a prophet more honoured abroad' while he described J.K. Rowling as 'a kind of divinity' in Asian countries (Johnson, 2016). While the promotion of celebrity culture can have some success, it can lead to attachments to a particular individual rather than Britain as a whole, which draws questions over how useful it can be as a means of promoting Britain's broader interests.

5. Despite the emphasis on 'Global Britain' in recent years, government spending on soft power policies and initiatives has been neglected, seemingly because there was a belief that British popular culture, spearheaded by private actors, was the key to British soft power. In contrast, other nations have invested considerably in this area. According to recent British Council reports, the United Kingdom (UK) is at a 'turning point' with regards to policies in this area. Whereas in previous years Britain's position as a 'soft power superpower' was assured – second only to the US – greater funding provided to German, Japanese and South Korean cultural institutes operating overseas, as well as greater direct investment in this area by Russian and Chinese governments, could result in the UK losing its superior position in this field to both allied and rival nations by this decade's end (British Council 2021; 2024).

6. We argue, therefore that the most appropriate way for the British government to maximise its soft power potential is to ensure that organisations such as the British Council are properly funded and

supported in their work, and given adequate independence to foster relations in a more organic way which avoids alienating those they are engaging with. Placing too great an emphasis on specific goals could easily lead to negative outcomes if they develop suspicion amongst foreign audiences.

The British Council

7. Earlier this year the prospect of the British Council's collapse was mooted by its Director General in an interview with *The Guardian* (Adams, 2025). This is not the first time that the organisation has faced such threats. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, post-war austerity followed by rearmament led to British Council centres being closed across Europe and Latin America, at a time when other international players (the US and the Soviet Union, in particular) were investing heavily in their cultural efforts abroad in the early Cold War. Although these closures were somewhat offset by British Council centres opening in newly-independent countries in the 1950s and 1960s (Donaldson, 1984), the organisation's existence remained precarious and was once again jeopardised as a result of the 'monetarist' policies of the 1980s (Feather, 2024), while questions of the appropriateness of government money going to 'quangos' was discussed in the context of the austerity of the 2010s. This led to yet another round of cuts to the British Council grant-in-aid and increasing pressure to generate income through commercial activities. In addition to their dispiriting effects on local teams, these financial constraints have hindered the emergence of a long-term, strategic UK soft power approach.

8. Nonetheless, the British Council has consistently managed to circumvent imminent disaster and prove its value. In particular, the organisation has contributed to developmental and educational activities, working very closely with the Ministry of Overseas Development from its foundation in 1964, and its successor the Overseas Development Administration (ODA). Increasingly in fact, the British Council staff came to view their organisation as 'much more a client of the ODA, carrying out specific ODA instructions' and sometimes endeavouring to tailor its 'activities to meet ODA criteria' (Feather, 2024).

9. The fact that the British Council has been able to survive multiple threats to its existence is testament to the expertise the organisation has been able to develop in its near hundred-year history and suggests it will continue to be an important conduit for the promotion of British cultural relations while simultaneously facilitating educational exchanges, the promotion of English language teaching, and foreign aid work. Rather than considering the British Council as an organisation whose existence is constantly under threat, it is more accurate to consider that it has a history of both decline and revival, depending on the political, social, and economic circumstances of the time.

10. The British Council was created during the tumultuous 1930s as a means of promoting British culture overseas in response to the hostile propaganda streaming from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial

Japan. By the 1950s the Drogheda Commission's findings emphasised the British Council's potential value in promoting educational work in the developing world, in the context of the UK's decreasing influence on the international stage and the early Cold War battle for hearts and minds (Byrne, 2023). This became even more important to British policymakers as plans were made to grant independence to their colonial territories and it was hoped that a British Council presence would help 'maintain influence' after Britain's departure (Allday, 2021).

11. Case studies of the British Council in post-independence India and Burma (Byrne, 2014; Simony, 2023) provide prime examples of how British authorities attempted to use the organisation to relay British cultural influence in a postcolonial context. Far from offering a neutral field of action, cultural activities were highly politicised and, at times, competitive. While the British Council initially offered a means to maintain a British presence, over time it fostered the development of new types of relations across a range of fields, albeit essentially limited to elites. Education was a key site of intervention for the British Council, but one that required delicate handling given its importance in nation-building. This is notably visible in English language teaching, which it supported beyond its own classrooms through the provision of training and policy advice, when asked to do so. It was also active in offering scholarships and facilitating academic collaboration between the UK and South Asia. In the long term, these efforts contributed to the success of UK higher education today and the wealth of partnerships that continue to emerge.

12. British Council work, as in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, also benefited from the clear-sightedness of those – within and outside the organisation – who, based on their knowledge of the local scene, warned about overconfidence in a British model, criticised outdated publications and visuals, and addressed the need to engage with a much wider cross-section of the population of host countries in the long ends of empire, beyond the more traditional and often more urban political elites (Torrent, 2014). This confirms the dangers of boasting about soft power influence, which is rather something to be won through negotiation and which can only be sustained through nuance, compromise and, we would argue in the present day, a willingness to acknowledge the darker side of Britain's past instead of stoking 'culture wars', whose negative effects at home resonate abroad. Nicholas Cull's insistence on the importance of listening as 'the foundational form of foreign policy through public engagement' is apposite in this respect (Cull, 2019).

13. The British Council also demonstrated its value as a means of promoting British relations in states where more formal diplomatic ties were strained. It maintained a continuous presence in Poland throughout the Cold War, even during the Stalinist period when all other western cultural organisations were forced to withdraw. It was therefore well-placed to foster renewed exchanges following the subsequent Khrushchev thaw (Corse, 2019). A similar argument could be made regarding Algeria, who broke relations over the British Government's refusal to use force in

Rhodesia after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of the white supremacist regime in 1965. Routine cultural activities were maintained as a long-term investment in British interests in the country and the wider region, which had both strategic and commercial appeal; they did not cause but they certainly facilitated the resumption of relations in due course (Torrent, 2023).

14. The British Council has also proved useful in quickly establishing British cultural and educational presences in newly formed states or states which had just undergone a radical regime change. In Zimbabwe, for example, the British Council played a pivotal role in facilitating the significant British developmental assistance package which was implemented after the country's first democratic election in 1980 (Perchard, 1981). Similarly, the British Council's work in Eastern Europe grew exponentially after the end of the Cold War (Hamilton, 2013). It also expanded its role in South Africa's educational sphere after the end of apartheid in 1994, and promoted cultural exchanges involving visits by British royalty, actors, and musicians (Feather, 2024).

15. These diverse historic examples demonstrate that the British Council is sure once again to play an important role, particularly in the context of an ever more challenging geopolitical environment. With war in Europe, the return of protectionist economic policies, and the rise of misinformation and disinformation, the cultural relations the British Council pursues can play an important role in promoting mutual understanding between states while also trying to help Britain achieve its foreign policy objectives in an increasingly difficult context. The need for organisations like the British Council to take a leading role is even more stark in light of the US government's plans to significantly reduce foreign aid and the loss of expertise from substantial reduction in staffing at the United States Agency for International Development. The British Council's history shows that it is well placed to take on this responsibility. It did, for example, take over several educational and development projects in South Africa's townships when US funders withdrew in the 1980s (Feather, 2024).

16. The British Council has also demonstrated that it can help further British interests in territories where this was previously limited. For example, after Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, the British Council in Morocco developed a more proactive strategy, marked by renewed efforts to replace French as the country's second foreign language. Simultaneously, the Moroccan government has initiated a significant educational reform to gradually expand English language instruction, starting at the middle school level.

17. These cultural and educational shifts are unfolding within the broader context of deepening UK-Morocco bilateral ties across various sectors, including renewable energy, trade, and education. Academic cooperation initiatives include the PhD Exchange Program, a joint Higher Education Commission and collaboration in the field of English language assessment. Partnerships between universities are fostering scientific and technical research, helping to tackle climate change and facilitate early-

career researcher exchanges (FCDO, 2023). This example shows how the British Council can draw on its long experience in working with state and non-state actors to foster co-operation that expands British soft power precisely because it provides tangible benefits to both parties, and even farther afield.

18. Insufficient, or simply erratic, funding has dogged the British Council's efforts throughout its history. More funding is needed for the British Council to achieve its goals, and a greater governmental understanding that the impacts of its activities are not wholly tangible is required. There should also be a more sustained appreciation of the need for the British Council to foster two-way dialogues between itself and overseas audiences. British Council officials must therefore possess a firm awareness of who, precisely, they are targeting with their endeavours. In this geopolitical climate, the British Council must move beyond engaging with societal elites, who may already possess pro-western and British sympathies, and look to interact with people beyond those who are economically privileged and residing in major urban spaces. Failure to engage beyond existing friends and partners undermined their activities in Iran prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The agency's English language teaching focused on developing the linguistic skills of privileged elites, as did its 1977 'Festival of Britain', which involved, among other things, ballet performances and piano recitals which did not resonate with the wider populace. Such a disconnect undoubtedly resulted in the agency departing the country after the Islamic Republic's imposition (Wainwright, 2023).