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Soft power, Hard foundations: The future of the UK’s International Influence

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Summary

1. This submission assesses the extent to which the UK’s soft power will enable it to exert influence within a changing international context, and examines some ways in which UK soft power could be enhanced. I argue that soft power is a core aspect of Britain’s international influence, but that it does not exist distinct from more traditional sources of power. Rather, it is built upon them.

2. This submission will deal principally with the relationship between the UK’s traditional sources of international influence and its soft power. The submission explores the economic, multilateral and non-state aspects of Britain’s soft power.

3. Britain has the potential to retain its capacity to enhance its international influence through soft power, even though it faces a number of near-term challenges. In order to live up to its potential, Britain’s leaders must concentrate on three priorities.

4. The first is to ensure that the UK sets its economy on a path to sustainable and productive growth. Without a strong economic base, Britain’s many attributes for international influence as well as its power of attraction will begin to erode.

5. Second, the UK will need to leverage its national and diplomatic strengths more proactively and challenge the status quo more frequently if it is to be influential in promoting its values and interests. Britain’s proactive role within the key institutions and relationships that helped promote its interests over the past sixty is a central pillar of its soft power, but that position is now more precarious than ever. In this context, leaving the EU would represent the greatest risk to the UK’s soft power.

6. Third, the UK government must continue to invest in or create the necessary supportive environment for those organisations and institutions which enhance Britain’s soft power – its universities, the BBC and other UK-based media organisations, the British Council, and the rich mixture of British non-governmental organisations.

Defining soft power

7. A country’s power and influence in international affairs reflect a combination of factors. They include a country’s material and human capabilities, along with the ability to apply political will-power towards international objectives.

8. Soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. It rests upon the attractiveness of a state’s culture, the appeal of its values and the authority or legitimacy of its actions.66 But these qualities are also rooted in core aspects of power, and the two cannot be separated fully. For example, a country’s attractiveness is increased by steady economic growth and a successful socio-economic model.

9. To understand the extent of the UK’s soft power, therefore, a broader assessment of its capacity for influence is necessary. I will assess in turn three different aspects of the UK’s soft power: first the economic foundations; second, the international institutional elements; and third, the non-state aspects.

**Economic growth and soft power**

10. National prosperity is a source of both hard and soft power. By many of the core measures of economic power, the UK is in relative decline, and has been so for the last few decades. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, its economic position has subsided further relative to that of most of the rest of the world.67 In the first quarter of 2013, the UK’s GDP was estimated to be 3.9% below its 2008 pre-crisis peak.68 The UK’s share of global GDP declined from 3.2% in 2008 to a projected 2.7% in 2013.69 In addition, the UK’s share of world exports fell from 6% in 1980 to 2% in 2011.70

11. Strengthening the British economy will enhance Britain’s soft power in numerous ways. First, at a general level, economic success will increase the UK’s power of attraction to others: increasing the degree to which other states seek out the UK’s support, associate themselves with its initiatives, and look to follow its example. If the UK can re-set itself on a path of sustainable economic growth, this will provide an essential platform for it to maintain or increase its soft power.

12. Second, economic strength will also bring material benefits. For example, UK military spending could rise, offering the government greater options to contribute to international peace and stability. These options would include increasing military and

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67 See, for example, the UK’s ranking in terms of household disposable income per head. According to the OECD, the UK ranked twelfth in the world, falling down a list of other advanced economies including the United States, Australia, Canada and a number of Britain’s European counterparts. Claire Jones, ‘Britons slip down world ready-cash table’, *Financial Times*, 14 May 2013, [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/02703f38-bc4c-11e2-b344-00144feab7de.html#axzz2XctacGnlq](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/02703f38-bc4c-11e2-b344-00144feab7de.html#axzz2XctacGnlq).
70 In addition, ‘while the UK was the 5th largest exporter in cash terms between 1980 and 2000, in 2011 it was ranked 12th’. See Grahame Allen, ‘UK Trade Statistics’, House of Commons, 8 October 2012, [http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06211](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06211).
police training missions in key countries, while contributing to the maintenance of international stability through counter piracy operations, post-conflict reconstruction, and peacekeeping. These actions can have powerful effects, deepening personal ties between Britain and those countries that benefit from these initiatives - networks through which the UK can later engage in dialogue, press its case or make its own appeals for support. All can be offered without demanding specific returns from the recipients of these British investments.

13. Similarly, a healthy budget increases the UK’s capacity to play a leading role in disaster relief. The UK’s response to the Great Eastern Earthquake and ensuing nuclear disaster in Japan in March 2011 has reinforced the bilateral relationship. These actions build the UK’s status as a responsible and proactive member of the international community, one with a stake in the success of collective responses to global problems and that is willing to take on the risks and burdens that come from such a role. Playing this role strengthens the UK’s voice in bilateral and multilateral debates and decisions.

14. Third, the government could increase its still modest investment in its diplomatic network. Expanding the UK’s diplomatic missions in priority countries have been valuable steps, with 50 new positions created in Beijing and 30 in New Delhi. By 2015, 11 new British Embassies will open, with 300 more staff in emerging economies, including in South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Angola, Argentina, Peru, Pakistan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. But the UK’s diplomatic capabilities remain under-funded, from compensation levels to technology infrastructure to overall staff numbers.

15. Fourth, the UK could invest not only in meeting the top-line goal of spending 0.7% of GNI on development assistance, but also in ensuring that it has the national administrative capacity to manage this increased flow of funds, and thus ensure that the support is put to good use. While the UK’s role as a leading provider of development assistance strengthens the attraction of its initiatives and approaches within multilateral forums and among other donors, a stretched staff may rely excessively on sub-contracting its initiatives without sufficient resources for effective guidance or supervision.

**Soft power and international institutions**

16. If there is one distinguishing feature of 21st century international relations, it is the inability of countries to address international challenges on their own. The UK will generally need to act in partnership to pursue its interests and uphold its values. It is important, therefore, to consider the effectiveness of the international institutions through which the UK conducts its diplomacy, as these are all arenas where soft power is a key currency of successful transactions.

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17. What might attract other countries and actors to Britain and its international agenda when it is just one among a growing number of influential players? A key advantage for the UK is that it remains one of the most networked countries in the world, with an important institutional position in the EU, G20, G8, NATO, UN Security Council, IMF, World Bank and the Commonwealth.

18. However, many of the traditional institutional avenues for British influence are in retreat. The UK has enjoyed a privileged position in a Western-led world order that may soon be eclipsed. The UK risks being less influential in the UN Security Council in a world of rising powers; less relevant to the United States as US leaders focus more on Asia; less significant in a leaderless G20 world than one led by the G8; and a more detached member of the European Union.

19. In the future, the UK will need to adapt its approach to its engagement in these institutions. Britain may be relatively less powerful in material terms than was the case thirty years ago, but it can still be confident in its position as a dynamic mid-sized economic, diplomatic and military power.

20. For example, the UK should seek to remain an influential power within the EU. Defenders of the EU have often pointed to its soft power strengths as a rebuttal to its hard power weakness. Europe’s attractiveness is rooted in a post-modern form of intergovernmental cooperation and supranational governance, the product of a remarkable 60-year project of reconciliation. The EU’s soft power has been enhanced by the attractive power of the single market and leading role as a purveyor of international aid. However, hopes that the EU might serve as a vehicle for its members to play a more influential role – from climate change negotiations to assisting in the political and economic transitions in the Arab world – have been undercut by the EU’s loss of credibility during this period of economic crisis and the persistent weaknesses in the structures of EU foreign policy.

21. Despite these weaknesses, the UK government should embrace the soft power benefits that membership of a rules-based, supra-national single market of some 500 million people confers upon Britain. The UK may be destined to sit on the institutional as well as the physical periphery of the EU. But if the UK government can navigate its way through its EU referendum maze, then its position as a major European economy with strong global ties could enable it to serve as one of the most powerful voices within the EU for deepening the EU’s international engagement. This could involve driving the EU’s current and future trade liberalisation agreements, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, or arguing the case for more forceful EU involvement in managing the security risks of its neighbourhood.

22. In the case of the G8, the UK could commit to raising the voice of this Western caucus inside the broader and still quite unfocused G20. It could build on a successful G8 Presidency in 2012-13, for example, in order to promote within the broader G20 the practical value of increased standards of transparency in governance and taxation. In the case of the Commonwealth, the UK should actively promote rule of law reform as a central tenet for economic development.
23. In the coming years, international influence will be measured more by the UK’s ability to set specific policy agendas in an increasingly competitive global environment and less by its capacity to serve as a highly-regarded mediator between sometimes divergent Western views. In all these different forums, the UK government should continue to enhance its soft power by seeking to lead international debates. The UK has a good record on which to build. In the recent past, it has provided conceptual and diplomatic leadership on combating climate change, promoting sustainable development, good governance and global health, and creating agreement on the value of transparency in an interdependent world.

**Beyond the state: The third dimension of the UK’s soft power**

24. The British government should not forget that the sources of its soft power also lie beyond state-centric institutions and dimensions. The UK benefits from some structural advantages in this respect which the government should continue to capitalise on and reinforce.

25. The British Council promotes the study of English as well as a better understanding of British culture across the world. The role of English as an international language enhances Britain’s influence in the fields of international negotiation, the arts and scientific research.

26. Ahead of being funded directly by the BBC Licence Fee, the BBC World Service’s budget was reduced by 16% in real terms for the three years following the 2010 Comprehensive Funding Review. And yet, the BBC’s reputation for objective analysis has made it one of the most trusted broadcasters in the world. As the government considers the future role of the BBC as a publicly-financed broadcaster, it should remember that the BBC World Service is not only a valuable international public service, it also helps promote the sort of transparency that empowers populations at the expense of entrenched and inefficient authority. It is also popular with the public. In the 2012 Chatham House–YouGov survey of attitudes to international issues, the public ranked the BBC second highest (after the armed forces) in a list of institutions which serve British national interests around the world.

27. The UK services sector possesses a number of structural advantages in addition to the status of English as the world’s *de facto* international language. With the added benefit of the country’s time zone between Asia and the Americas, the strength of the UK services sector has helped make London one of the world’s first global capitals and one of the most competitive centres of economic activity in the world. UK-based financial, legal and accounting services are not only major contributors to UK prosperity; they are elements of the UK’s soft power. They place UK firms at the heart of global corporate deal-making and negotiation, helping define the norms and rules through which international commerce is undertaken.

28. British universities attract students from across the world and deliver world-class research, and in so doing, help build personal networks that can reinforce bilateral relationships. British policy institutes offer international analysis and neutral forums.

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for debating policy while drawing on the insights of extensive local diasporas, especially from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.

29. And British-based environmental, humanitarian and human rights NGOs are fearless in challenging environmental degradation, natural disasters, poverty, injustice and autocratic regimes. A proactive UK approach to agenda-setting at the international level will need to continue to play to this strength.

Conclusions

30. In the last five years, the UK has under-performed economically, which has undercut its international standing and, to a certain degree, its capacity for international influence, in terms of hard and soft power. However, given Britain’s underlying economic strengths and unique political-economic attributes, it is possible that the country may be heading into a period of relatively better economic health.

31. It should not be forgotten that Britain still ranks among the world’s leading mid-sized countries from a combined demographic and economic perspective. According to the UN, the UK’s population will reach at least 73 million in 2050, which may make it the most populous country in the EU, overtaking Germany at some point in the 2040s.74

32. Rebuilding its economic strength will be a sine qua non to enhance the UK’s soft power, allowing it to increase investment in defence, diplomacy and development. It would also enable the government to invest in the institutions and organisations which support the attractiveness of the UK economy and the country’s social and political model, as well as to capitalise on Britain’s structural advantages of language and time zone.

33. The UK’s influence will also depend upon how the country’s leaders leverage the UK’s position within key international institutions in what is now a highly interdependent world. Enhancing the UK’s soft power will make it a more effective player in the networks and coalitions that will be essential to success.

34. The biggest risk to Britain’s soft power in the near-term is if it detaches itself completely from its closest and deepest institutional network: the EU. This would risk the UK becoming become a consumer of global public goods, standards and norms, rather than a shaper of the international environment.

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