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HARD AND SOFT POWER IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concepts of soft and hard power in international relations, with a focus on domestic institutions within the context of democratic systems. It relies on Joseph Nye's seminal work and more recent empirical indexes to critique the classical dualism of statecraft's coercive or persuasive nature. It compares the United States, France, Germany, and Japan to argue that political systems, whether presidential or parliamentary, federal or unitary, influence the projection and efficacy of power abroad. The article argues that power should not be conceptualized merely as an asset stock, but rather as a process situated within political institutions, the intersection of strategic alignment, and continuity in leadership. It offers a new approach with the "Smart Power Governance Matrix" to analyse how democracies apply soft and hard power through institutional integration, multilateralism, and enduring foreign policy. The results highlight the need to redefine the discourse on democracy and power in global politics by relocating analysis beyond fixed criteria to situationally defined frameworks of state capabilities within their governance systems.

KEYWORDS

Soft power, hard power, political system, smart power, political transition, democracy, power projection.

Introduction

Power remains an essential concept in International Relations (IR) as it continues to guide how states seek influence, protect national interests, and participate in the international system. In a more traditional sense, IR has distinguished between hard power- coercive methods such as military force and trade sanctions- and soft power, which denotes the ability to appeal, influence, and convince people through culture, political values, and legitimate foreign policy. Notable Professor Joseph Nye, who passed away recently in May 2025, founded the soft power theory. In his groundbreaking work Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, Nye (2004) proposed that "soft power" enables a state

to influence others to align with its interests without coercion or economic incentives. His contributions fundamentally changed the perspectives of many scholars and policymakers regarding global influence.

In this piece, we acknowledge Nye's scholarly impact by dissecting the definitions of soft and hard power and their applications. So far, these categories remain crucial to statecraft, but their actual use in practice is profoundly tempered by domestic politics and the culture of institutions, especially in developed democracies. While states may have access to significant power resources, how those resources are projected abroad—through diplomacy, culture, multilateralism, or military might-requires specific internal governance architectures, leadership, and strategy coherence.

For this purpose, the article relies on three core works. First, Cevik and Padilha's (2024) IMF Working Paper comes with a new Global Soft Power Index, providing an excellent quantitative analysis but lacking an explanation of institutions and context. Second, Bilgin and Elis (2008) critique the hard/soft power dichotomy and propose a more complex and relational logic. Finally, the Financial Times (2025) article "Trump and the End of American Soft Power" underscores the scope of domestic political disruption, specifically during Trump's presidency, that has affected the credibility of soft power globally. This article highlights the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan. It targets the argument that power in international relations must be understood through several institutions and political cultures that configure its power. This study deliberately chose democracies to maintain methodological continuity among the sample states with governance norms based on electoral accountability and checks and balances. Still, they differed in having either a presidential or a parliamentary system (Keohane, 1984). Toward the context of the democracies, the study applies Nye's (2004) framework on soft power, which is based on drawing in and using legitimacy, the most prominent attributes in democracies. Including non-democratic states would introduce factors that obscure these dynamics. Instead, the focus of this article is to encourage further research to apply this framework to non-democratic or emerging democratic systems. To situate power within the context of institutions, the analysis uses policy papers, global indices, and secondary literature to construct and test hypotheses on power in international relations.

Conceptual Landscape: Hard, Soft, and Smart Power

The understanding of power in international relations has changed over time. Traditionally, power was associated with hard power, which included the coercive capacity of military power and economic sanctions (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). This realist perspective emphasizes tangible assets as the strongest form of power in an international system that resembles an anarchic order. However, the end of the Cold War period, along with the shift in global dynamics, highlighted the need for arguably non-materialistic forms of influence and athleticism.

To adjust, Nye proposed soft power, which focuses on culture, political values, and the legitimacy of foreign policy to gain consent and preference voluntarily (Nye, 2004). It recognizes the importance of attraction and persuasion alongside coercion. However, Nye later advocated for smart power—the integration of soft and hard power tools—to address the multifaceted nature of global politics (Nye, 2009, 4-5) that uses both non-coercive force and coercive diplomacy. This integration of coercive assets with development aid, cultural exchange, and even humanitarian efforts leads to achieving sustainable results (Nye, 2011).

Despite these advancements, Bilgin and Elis (2008, 4-5, 7-8) criticize mainstream IR theories for conflating power into a simplistic spectrum of hard and soft, ignoring its hybrid and relational essence. They contend that power is not simply material; it is also symbolic and institutional, wielded through the social and political structures, cultures, and norms that contour enablement and resistance (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Lukes, 2005). This interpretation aligns with constructivist lenses, which focus on embedding power in signification and social interaction (Wendt, 1999).

The most profound theoretical gap in power analysis remains the lack of institutional or systemic context, particularly the domestic political system, as an intermediary in translating power resources into foreign policy (Keohane, 1984; Risse-Kappen, 1995). For instance, the same military capacity could be utilized differently because of ruling norms, leadership style, or democratic constraints (Putnam, 1988). Without these insights regarding internal dynamics, any assessment of an abstracted power will invariably remain dissociated from reality.

To fill this gap, this article uses a comparative qualitative methodology focused on the impact of a country's domestic political structure on the use of hard and soft power in developed democracies. The case studies of the United States, France, Germany, and Japan demonstrate very different systems designs that foster within-system comparisons, such as presidential vs parliamentary and federal vs unitary governments. These countries also offer geographic and cultural diversity, representing major democracies from North America, Europe, and Asia. The political significance of these countries, along with their varying democratic systems, enables the examination of the internal institutional arrangements of a state and its strategic use of power in global relations. The research uses secondary sources of literature, policy papers, and global indicators to advance an analysis of the debate on power and political systems and their practical implications.

Hence, going beyond the descriptive frameworks, the following sections focus on applying soft and hard power in advanced democracies and analyse the political systems' influence to contextualize power to appreciate its agency within institutional boundaries.

Limitations of the Global Soft Power Index

Cevik and Padilha's (2024) Global Soft Power Index is the first empirical attempt to measure and rank countries' soft power capabilities. They formulate a composite measure of a country's culture, socioeconomic structure, education, digital activity, and international standing perception, among other factors, to gauge its influence and attractiveness nationally and globally. This methodology provides an overview of distributive global soft power and appeals to public policy advocates who seek defined parameters to evaluate progress.

On the other hand, the breadth of the Index provides a more multifaceted perspective, yet lacks substantial depth in many areas. Most critically, the Index scores remain contextually detached from all strategic considerations around which soft power is implemented, especially in developed democracies. The Index is static, treating soft power as an unmeasurable asset rather than a collection of dynamic indicators, combining static indicators such as the university count or cultural exports (Cevik & Padilha, 2024). It also neglects the impact that relations of domestic political institutions, governance systems, and leadership decisions have on the effectiveness of soft power resources (Cull, 2008, 4; Nye, 2004).

Additionally, the Index attempts to distinguish soft power from hard power and security policies, thus perpetuating the artificial dichotomy criticized by Bilgin and Elis (2008). In practice, the interplay of

soft and hard power, or "smart power" (Nye, 2009), especially plays a key role for democracies that seek to balance military obligations with diplomacy and cultural outreach. The Index overlooks this fusion, resulting in a limited assessment of power projection.

This is an essential conceptual gap, defining soft power not as a mere possession of assets like renowned universities or a global media, but rather as a combination of domestic institutions and the politics that deploy those assets. For example, cultural diplomacy works effectively when there is inter-ministerial coordination from the foreign affairs, education, and culture ministries and supportive systems (Melissen, 2005, 6). In federal states such as Germany or some decentralized parliamentary systems like the United Kingdom, the institutional routes differ from those found in more prescriptive or centralized systems like the United States or France.

Consequently, the article seeks to answer the primary inquiry: How do various governance types, such as parliamentary or presidential, and centralized or federal, affect the application and balance of soft and hard power? Addressing these distinctions beyond the boundaries of power hierarchies enables one to understand how resources of power are converted into influence at the global level.

This framework attempts to compensate for the absence of qualitative assessments by focusing on institutional frameworks in international relations, thereby shifting the understanding of power from mere numbers to practices worldwide.

Political Systems and the Execution of Power

The domestic political system and the head of state affect the projection of state power overseas. This essay analyses the United States, France, Germany, and Japan to demonstrate how different political systems exercise "hard" and "soft" power in practice. These cases show how institutional frameworks, either presidential or parliamentary and unitary or federal, systematize the strategy and effectiveness of power projection.

United States (Presidential / Federal)

The United States' presidential and federal system concentrates authority on the executive, especially the president, regarding foreign policy. As the Financial Times (2025) notes, the Trump administration vividly showcased how unilateral decision-making could be shattered by soft power institutions such as diplomatic corps and cultural exchanges. His withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement (2017) and the Iran Nuclear Deal (2018), alongside traditional ally alienation through trade wars and NATO critiques, marked an acceleration of decades of American soft power erosion (Nye, 2019; Zakaria, 2020, 9). Not only did these decisions undermine multilateral partnerships, but a 2018 Pew Research Center survey indicated a 30% decline in favourable views of America in Europe, showing a declining moral authority of the US.

This phenomenon illustrates how executive strategies, at least in the case of the United States, can swiftly change international perception and diminish soft power even when hard power remains potent. The United States is set to spend $816 billion on defence in 2024, maintaining its position as the world's military powerhouse alongside economic supremacy, but, the reduction in diplomacy and cultural engagement during this time indicates the vulnerability of soft power – in this case, reliance on institutions of enduring presence (Jentleson, 2014, 9). The US federal system adds another layer of complication, as states and regions sometimes have their own foreign policy agendas. California's independent climate treaties with Canada and China in the 2010s demonstrate subnational attempts to

sustain soft power when the federal government's policies were uncooperative (Rosenau, 1997, 9). At the same time, this illustrates how federalism can splinter and enhance power and authority projection.

France (Semi-presidential / Unitary)

France has a functioning system that is both semi-presidential and unitary, meaning it has a special executive branch and a centralized administration. With a 2024 defence budget of $53 billion, France is militarily far weaker than the United States, but uses soft power through international organizations of the Francophonie, cultural institutes such as the Alliance Francaise, and diplomacy (Keohane & Nye, 1998, 10; Rioux, 2009, 10). The Organization Internationale de la Francophonie has 88 member states and, for example, in 2024 held the Paris Summit where the French language and culture are used and disseminated. It has especially in Africa and the Middle East where cultural relations exceed power. France uses cultural power; in 2023, 1.2 billion Euros were allocated for cultural diplomacy for 800 Alliance Francaise centers that teach over half a million students.

Giauque and Varone (2014, 8) noted that the French system allows for coherent coordination across ministries, which follows a soft power strategy even during political transitions. France, for example, exercises cultural and educational diplomacy through the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs to maintain its influence in West Africa, a former post-colonial area of France, where France fuels conflict mediation and development aid. This framework enables France to wield greater influence on the global stage, illustrating that potent, enduring soft power can make up for the scarcity of hard power resources.

Germany (Parliamentary / Federal)

The extraordinary historical legacies of Germany's parliamentary federal system, such as overt military force as a boundless option, especially post World War II, remain (Paterson, 1996, 9-10). Germany spends $66 billion on defence in 2024, channelling military expenditure into economic diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and educational exchange. This is exemplified by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which since 1925 has sponsored 1.2 million scholars and funds 150,000 students every year from 70 countries. German economic diplomacy, like with the Nord Stream gas pipelines (up to 2022), Schimmelfennig (2018, 11) also drew attention to Germany's use of trade and investment to expand influence in and outside the EU.

The need for consensus within parliamentary coalition politics curtails German foreign policy decisions, implementing a slower, more steady approach. The federal system provides power to the national government and the Länder (states), creating a need for coordination to articulate a unified foreign policy (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013). For instance, Bavarian international trade missions enhance federal initiatives, but some federal policies, such as on refugees, lead to disputes that undermine coherence. Such an arrangement focuses on stability and multilateralism, determining Germany's soft power focus of promoting more profound integration and cooperation through European Union leadership and humanitarian policy, with 1.2 million refugees hosted by Germany in 2023.

Japan (Parliamentary/Unitary)

As outlined in Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, Japan is seen as a pacifist state, allowing limited military proactive measures. Coupled with Japan's Parliamentary and Unitary system, these factors inhibit any form of military power (hard power) from being utilized by law (Stockwin, 2008, 12).

Japan's 2024 defence budget is set at $50 billion. Its investment in soft power, particularly through anime, Japanese cuisine, and international aid programs, is substantial (Iwabuchi, 2015, 10; Nye, 2004). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) spent $18.2 billion in developmental assistance funding on infrastructure and education in Southeast Asia and Africa in 2023. Moreover, the $20 billion revenues from Japanese anime and manga in 2022 boosted Japan's cultural influence around the globe.

The foreign policy of Japan, dominated by civil services, is a strategic continuum irrespective of which party is in power. This ensures soft power is stored over time (Calder, 2019, 11,14). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with other agencies such as the Japan Foundation, coordinates educational and cultural exchange programs like the JET Programme, which has recruited 70,000 foreign teachers to Japan since 1987. As seen in these activities, institutional cohesion preserved these soft power assets over time. The political framework in which Japan situates itself allows for easier coping with limited military strength. The situation portrays how political and legal limits impact the strategy adopted and how the power exercised influences governance.

These combined cases show that power is not merely about resources but also how domestic institutions interpret their application. The US system has both subnational innovation and fragmentation risk; French coherence comes at the cost of subnational asymmetries due to its unitary structure; German federalism balances multilateralism with regionalism; Japan engages in unitary pacifism that prioritizes culture and economics. Whether a state adopts a presidential or parliamentary system, unitarism or federalism, and constitutional constraints structure the exercise and integration of hard and soft power. From this perspective, the political context becomes essential for understanding indices measuring power projection. Such a lens exposes simplistic metrics and assumptions concerning the interplay of diverse political factors.

Converging Power Forms: The Missing "Smart Power" Nexus

Cevik and Padilha (2024, 3-4, 13), using the Global Soft Power Index and Bilgin and Elis (2008), provide a critique of soft power; both approaches collate relevant information, but neither formulation a balance of hard and soft power that is practical for use by democracies in the real world. The former provides a framework with quantitative measurement of soft power assets, yet lacks the strategic interplay of hard and soft power. The latter focuses on power's hybrid and relational aspects but remains too conceptual, offering no operationalization of how this hybridity works in democratic contexts.

This shift calls for reframing toward smart power as an emergent property. Not an accumulation of hard and soft power, but the result of dynamic interaction dictated by political culture, institutional strategy, and leadership constraints (Nye, 2009; Joseph, 2019, 15). Integrating coercive capabilities with the mechanisms of attraction requires intense mediation through the institutional structures that define policies (Peters, 2017, 15). In other words, the degree of integration and coordination within the political system of a democracy determines the efficacy of power projection.

The case of Donald Trump's presidency highlights the failure of smart power succinctly. The United States' hard power was, and still is, robust, heavily due to the $816 billion military budget and military presence stationed around the globe as of 2024 (Financial Times, 2025; Nye, 2019). The remnants of the collapse of international norms and institutional credibility made diplomatic undermining impossible, and the absence of productive relations overseas further destabilized it. The unilateralist retrenchment from traditional world order agreements fostered paralytic mistrust in American

governance structures, which became increasingly fractured with tougher leadership approaches, which could be described as a shift from deploying soft to hard power (Zakaria, 2020, 15). While Iraq and the Paris Agreement's structural counterparts presided over Trump, the Obama administration (2009-2017) showcased the epitome of smart power through ushering coordinated multilateralism. The defeatist objectives visioned by US competitors, which formed the basis of coalitions, trust with signatories aimed at creating a multilateral organization, as described by the 2016 Pew Research Center survey, where it was claimed that 64% of the surveyed held confidence in the leadership of the US (Ikenberry, 2011, 12-13). With these comparisons, it is evident that having unparalleled hard power does not factor in when lacking the systemic and societal claims of soft power, which is necessary to take advantage of the overpowering strength.

To implement smart power, we suggest the Smart Power Governance Matrix, which evaluates how democracies balance hard and soft power integration through institutional coordination, global leadership, policy endurance, and international relations. Possible measures of smart power include:

Sustainability across administrations: Enduring foreign policy reputations that do not erode with changes in political leadership and are considered credible internationally (Rathbun, 2011, 16). Take Japan's overseas development assistance (ODA) as an example: it remains a bilateral donor through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), disbursing $18.2 billion in ODA in 2023, which has assisted in shaping Southeast Asia over a long period (Calder, 2019).

Integration of soft and hard policy measures: Combining the use of military and diplomatic force and economic and cultural engagement to achieve coherent national interest objectives (Mattern, 2015, 17). One example of this is France's cultural diplomacy through the Francophonie with peacekeeping operations in Mali from 2013–2022, where it applied soft power to support hard power goals in West Africa (Rioux, 2009, 17).

Multilateral institutional leadership: Involvement and undertaking of authority on international processes, such as the G7, the United Nations, and NATO, which enhances legitimacy and helps in coalition building (Ikenberry, 2011). Germany's leadership role in EU integration has also included the 2020 EU Council Presidency, where she advocated for a €750 billion COVID-19 recovery fund, which marked an increase in soft power while stabilizing the economy in Europe Schimmelfennig, 2018, 17.

These indicators, encapsulated within the Smart Power Governance Matrix, show how entrenched smart power is within the institutional framework and polity of a democracy and is not merely a collection of assets. The matrix assesses states on three axes: substantive cross-institutional coordination (like inter-ministerial coordination), policy continuity (across different administrations), and participation level in international relations (like multilateralism and leadership roles in global organizations). Using this approach enables scholars and policymakers to analyse how to use and strategically integrate power in a multipolar context efficiently.

These illustrations, alongside the proposed matrix, highlight the role of institutional dynamics in pursuing smart power. Understanding this complexity is essential when examining power relations today, or for policymakers looking to maintain leverage in the emerging multipolar world.

Conclusion

This work has claimed that exploring the application of both hard and soft power goes beyond merely evaluating a state’s material resources or cultural assets. It requires understanding the political systems and the institutional frameworks that structure the resource mobilization processes. In the case studies

of the United States, France, Germany, and Japan, it has been shown that there is striking dependence of efficacy in power projection on the domestic political configuration: presidential versus parliamentary, federal versus unitary systems of governance, and the relationship between the chief executive, administrative elites, and the prevailing political culture and norms.

Cevik and Padilha's (2024) empirical index of soft power and Bilgin and Elis's (2008) theoretical critique offer useful insights, but these two perspectives, in their combined form, cannot sufficiently capture this emerging complexity. The former's ranking lacks contextual information, while the latter pertains to a conceptual emphasis on hybrid power. In this case, suspicion operates through an unsophisticated synthesizing approach. This demonstrates the shortcomings of measuring power in international relations with numbers or attempting to frame it with absolutes.

From now on, the domain would benefit from the creation of a novel smart power index that includes the political and institutional dimensions, evaluating not just the resources but also the meticulous coordination and consistency in the exercise of power across administrations. Such an approach would better capture the dynamics of democratic rule and global politics.

Moreover, future work could construct a more comprehensive perspective with subregional case studies, such as the supranational governance system of the European Union or the hybrid democracy of South Korea. Comparative analyses of the democracies of the Global South could also help explain how different political contexts shape the interplay between hard and soft power in emerging powers.

As noted in this article, an integrated approach to the concept of power is needed, focusing on contextual realities that are more grounded in an analysis of power for the institutions of modern democracies.

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