

Stockpiling Soft Power: Consolidating Leadership Beyond Country's Borders

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Summary

Brief Description and Overall Aim of the Research

Soft power has been growing in significance with respect to UAE's foreign policy. This became evident with the launch of the first strategy cycle 2017-2022 ((The UAE Soft Power Strategy - The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2017). As the cycle is coming to close, it is quite important to reflect on what has been achieved and to envision how to move forward, in line with the UAE's 2071 centennial vision.

To this end, this paper engages the leading measures of soft power to trace the record of soft power deployment. According to Brand Finance's Nation Brands index (Brands finance soft power index, 2022), that largely draw on peoples' and experts' perceptions of national brands, the UAE came as the top 2022 national brand in the Middle East for the 3rd consecutive year, with a steady improvement in its ranking over the past five years. While measuring on the demand-subjective side has its own merits including a reflection of public interest in and appreciation of a given national brand, it also suffers few shortcomings. Prime among the latter is the fact that perceptions are contextual and subjective. An objective approach in this regard would, by contrast, would aim at supplementing the subjective measure with a 'supply/hard side' perspective. In other words, same as the assessment of hard power arsenals, there is a need to measure the stockpiles or resource levels of soft power. This should help better reflect nations' real potential for impact beyond their borders without resorting to coercion (Nye, 1990). One of the measures that provide such reading is the Elcano Global Presence Index. According to their 2021 report (Soft Presence, 2022), the UAE ranked as the top nation in the economic domain but ranked second in the military and soft domain of global presence. This divergence in score or readings is the main point that this paper tries to disentangle and to explain. The paper argues that this diversion can be best explained by overcoming the subjective/objective dichotomy and focusing more on the power conversion strategies in the domain of soft power. In other words, a successful soft power strategy relies more on the conversion of the available resources towards achieving the intended outcomes.

Research Methodology

The paper compares the two leading soft power indices, each representing one of the two sides of the subjective-objective spectrum in the measurement of soft power. The UAE is taken as one significant case study for 'soft power conversion.'

Study key points

Reviewing the stockpiles of soft power, against public perceptions, can guide policymaking to which sectors simply need more visibility and which require further development to enhance their impact. This becomes particularly important considering the rising competition at the regional level across the different domains of power.

The paper also presents for the significance of attending to the power conversion strategies in deploying soft power. In the case of the UAE, the study presents for the successful deployment of UAE's soft power resources so that they create an impact that far exceeds their original size. In addition, the study factors in the soft power potential of the proven reserve of 'hard power' resources – i.e. its economic and military presence. Put differently, the UAE's global 'footprint,' while already large and compounded, can be sustained and expanded. This expansion can result from an investment in both the sources of power for the country, as well as in maintaining and expanding the ongoing strategies of power conversion.

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The UAE Soft Power Strategy—The Official Portal of the UAE Government. (2017). <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/the-uae-soft-power-strategy>