

Mario Hirsch

# Soft Power on the March

## Is there a difference between US and European foreign policy?

The good intentions guiding Europe's external action reflect a messianic inspiration. What the fight for democracy is to US foreign policy, is the engagement for human rights in Europe's case.

In both cases, these evangelical aspirations are well translated by the concept of 'soft power', meaning the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments"<sup>1</sup>, introduced by Joe Nye in the early Nineties. Ultimately, the concept "rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others." This ability is governed by "intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, ideology and institutions."

Nye's concept, originally meant to address the increasing difficulties encountered by the United States in wielding hard power, has proven extraordinarily popular outside the US. In his latest contribution, the Harvard Professor rebranded the concept into 'smart power', inspired by the awareness that the United States can influence, but not any longer control other parts of the world – hence an attractive mix of hard and soft power. This had become the official line of the US State Department under the Obama Administration, when Secretary of State Hilary Clinton embraced smart power in 2010.

These ideas have been eagerly adopted in Europe as a token or catch word of how the

EU and its Member States are supposed to conduct their foreign relations, especially by those who tend to view Europe as a benign actor<sup>2</sup>. It has become a convenient way to deflect the attention from the difficulties with hard power and it is a kind of fig leaf to distract from the obvious difficulties and the many shortcomings in developing a convincing Common

---

**the "ability to get what you want  
through attraction rather than  
coercion or payments"**

---

Security and Defence Policy. The former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Védrine, referred to soft power recently as a "mask" or substitute for the obvious lack of power of Europe in its classical acceptance<sup>3</sup>.

### Leading by example

What has been a constant preoccupation in the discussion on the nature of EU external action, is the obsession to be perceived as a 'civilian' or 'normative' actor, eschewing deliberately coercive means of pursuing one's interests. Instead, the EU likes to present itself as an actor relying on the 'domestication' of relations between sovereign states through contractual politics, multilateralism and the promotion of international legal norms<sup>4</sup>. Europe likes to exert its influence by example, convinced

that it does not need to use force nor even the threat of force to encourage change because it is in the business of offering the "incentive of opportunities"<sup>5</sup>, such as membership or privileged relations. The concept of 'normative power' describes the EU's capacity in propagating 'norms' in international relations through disseminating its own values and norms among partners and the countries it interacts with. A good example would be the campaign for the abolition of capital punishment, which owes quite a lot to EU influence and is a constant source of friction with the USA: "...the most important [about] the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is."<sup>6</sup>

These enthusiastic views about the civilizational mission of Europe found an early echo right at the launch of "European Political Cooperation" in 1970, underlining the potential of a united Europe to promote international relations "on a basis of trust". The Copenhagen Declaration on European Identity in Foreign Relations (14 December 1973) had the same inspiration: "European unification is not directed against anyone, nor is it inspired by a

---

Mario Hirsch is senior visiting research fellow at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), a Paris-based EU agency. He is working since June 2011, thanks to a research grant from the Luxembourg Ministry for Higher Education and Research, on a research project "Soft Power: Quintessence or Component of European Foreign and Security Policies?".

desire for power. On the contrary, the Nine are convinced that their union will benefit the whole international community. They want to play an active role in world affairs, so that they have a more just basis.”

The EU commitment to certain values and its relentless determination to incorporate these, under the code word “conditionality”, in many of its policies with external bearings (development aid, enlargement, neighbourhood and partnership or association policies) is indeed a trade mark of EU external relations whose achievements can hardly be questioned.

### Milieu shaping

Thus, in accession negotiations, candidate states must accept the *acquis communautaire* in full, including its norms and values. More recently (2004), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is a further example of the EU attempting to spread its norms and values to the countries in its immediate vicinity. The ENP policy document repeats the rhetoric of the EU being a force for good in spreading universal values, offering a closer relationship in exchange for the “effective sharing of values”.

Through such policies the EU engages in what can be called milieu shaping by

trying to alter its immediate international environment in ways more amenable to its interests. It attempts to actively engage with neighbouring countries, promoting reforms, in order precisely to prevent the sort of problems requiring more forceful responses. This is all the more interesting as the countries covered by ENP, stretching from Morocco to the Caucasus, have no real membership perspective for the time being. It is an interesting example of the charms of the soft power *démarche* of the EU, because it illustrates very well that the attractiveness works even short of immediate membership perspectives. However, ENP has lost its momentum and its

stamina as of late, even though it remains in the best interest of the EU to continue stabilizing its “near abroad”.

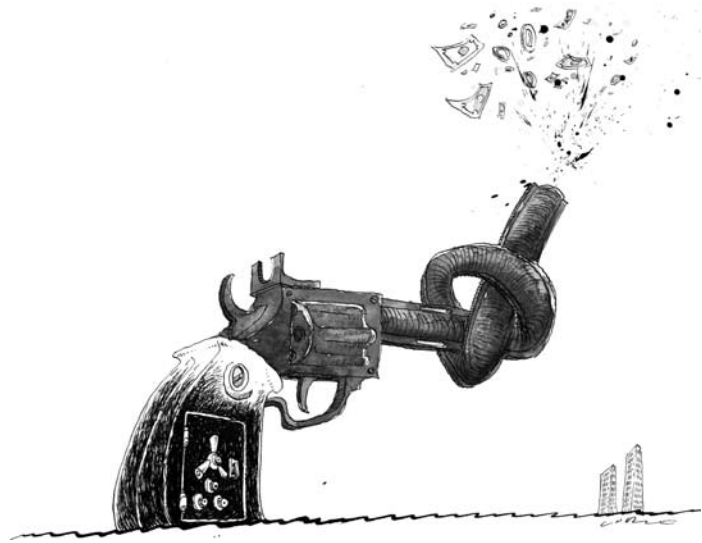
### The limits of Soft Power

There is a capability-expectations gap between the EU’s means and the increasing expectations of third countries.

The reliance on soft power as a foreign policy instrument reaches its limits outside the European zone of influence where common values, norms and standards regarding human rights and democracy are far from being evident. Even within the ENP area the EU had to suffer many setbacks. Take the erratic behaviour of Belarus and to a lesser extent Ukraine, not to mention the situation in Moldova. But outside Europe, the situation is even more problematic in the Caucasus, the Middle East or North Africa.

Joseph Nye has made himself a caveat regarding the operational use of his soft power concept by noting that soft power should never replace hard power, but supplement it so as to make the cost of applying hard power less demanding. Military power does have its time and place, according to Nye, but soft power can do much to address the causes of conflict: “Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both”.

For the EU this presents a problem. While its soft power strategies have developed over many years, the same is not true regarding



**Subject** Luxembourg Intention To Announce New Contribution To Afghanistan Effort

**Cable time** Wed, 27 Jan 2010 17:23 UTC

**Classification** SECRET//NOFORN

MFA desk officer Yasuko Muller delivered Luxembourg’s intended announcement details concerning new contributions for the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) trust fund and developmental aid to Pol/Econ Chief January 27 just before she departed for the London Conference. It is the GoL [Government of Luxembourg] “intention to announce a new contribution of four million Euros (USD six million) to the ANA Trust Fund (2010).” Concerning development aid, GoL’s “contribution for 2010 will amount to just over two and one half million Euros (slightly less than three million USD). This level of support will be sustained in the medium-term (2010-2014).” In all the GoL contribution from 2000 to 2010 totals 40 million Euros (USD 60 million) in addition to their participation in ISAF. (Note: Currently GoL has nine soldiers at the Kabul airport. End note.) According to USDAO the GoL may increase the number of soldiers it sends to Afghanistan. An increase in their troop levels has not been announced publicly by GoL or confirmed privately. If a final decision to increase troop numbers has been made but is not yet ready for release, it may explain why Yasuko did not list the numbers for GoL troops in ISAF. POC this action is Pol/Econ Chief, Michael A. Via, [viama@state.sgov.gov](mailto:viama@state.sgov.gov).

traditional wielding of power. Despite progress since the Maastricht Treaty and the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1991, the EU has a long way to go before it can assert itself in the muscle flexing exercise of power politics. Its only consolation is, that since the end of the Bush era military prowess has reached its limits, as evidenced by the protracted and probably futile military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### Cache-sexe for the EU's military impotence

The Brookings scholar Robert Kagan has argued provocatively that the EU's preference for softer milieu shaping stems primarily from its general weakness in traditional terms of power politics and that its actions have therefore been an attempt to rationalize its military impotence. Rather

than engaging in power politics, it has sought to emphasize the areas where its strengths lie: commercial interactions, economic carrots, state-building, normative issues, governance etc. Although Kagan deliberately meant to provoke, he did highlight a very real problem for the EU if it ever wants to be taken seriously as a global actor.

The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) was an attempt at defining the European interest in international affairs, the threats facing the Union and the means to respond adequately. It looks like a grand strategy, but critics have been quick to point out that it is rather muted regarding priorities for developing military force. It is a rhetoric exercise, an excuse for not promoting military capabilities. Thus, it refers to "a mixture of instruments", arguing that "none of the threats is purely

military, nor can any be tackled by purely military means".

It tries to accommodate all the member states, while not upsetting relations with NATO. Other than references to military force possibly being necessary for restoring order in conflict zones, the strategy says relatively little about the circumstances in which the EU might consider military force. The preference is therefore not pre-emption *à la* G.W. Bush, but at best 'preventive engagement'.

But the reliance on soft power is not only a matter of paying lip service to certain principles. One must also live by them and be prepared to uphold them in action. In other words, be prepared to defend them by all means, including military power. Hard or coercive power does not necessarily mean military means. The EU disposes of a vast arsenal and has considerable experience with economic sanctions when and if confronted with behaviour violating its norms and values.

It can of course be argued that the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo belonged to a category where more than soft or normative power was and is required. In both cases the conflict was only temporarily resolved by the massive US intervention. On the other hand, the EU's subsequent efforts at stabilizing the successor states of the former Yugoslavia are a good illustration of the attractiveness of its soft power: all the states plus Albania have expressed the aspiration to integrate further and eventually become full members.

Moving beyond the immediate neighbourhood, the EU is becoming more closely involved, much to its dislike, in regions, where its traditional tools and its secular values will be tested severely. Even if ESS primarily focuses on threats close to Europe, extending ENP into the Middle East or North Africa entails that the kinds of threats outlined in the security strategy will become more pressing. That in turn will increase the strains on CFSP and necessitate enhanced resources. The point is that if the EU wants to make its influence felt in regions that are experiencing problems, especially of a violent nature, soft power alone will not suffice. It will have

**Subject:** Luxembourg Supports Cm Ban, But Will Not Allow It To Effect Nato Operations

**Cable time** Thu, 31 May 2007 15:26 UTC

**Classification** CONFIDENTIAL

Acting Pol/Econ Chief discussed points contained reftel with Michel Leesch, MFA Desk Officer for Political-Military & Non-Proliferation Affairs on 29 May. Leesch said that Luxembourg had a mandate from Parliament to negotiate an international instrument which would ban cluster munitions and that, accordingly, Luxembourg took part in both the Oslo and Lima meetings and would remain engaged on the issue. Luxembourg agrees with the US, however, that the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) is the best framework in which to negotiate this instrument. Leesch said that the GOL urged the US to "go as far as possible" on restrictions on the use of cluster munitions (CM) to aid Luxembourg's efforts to try to keep the issue within the CCW framework. Regarding the possible effect of a CM ban on NATO operations, Leesch took great lengths to stress that Luxembourg took its responsibilities as a founding NATO member very seriously and despite its opposition to CM, Luxembourg would not allow this opposition to interfere with its prior commitments as a NATO member. He specifically stated that neither the over flight of Luxembourg territory nor the use of Findel International Airport for shipments of CM would be effected by any such ban or restrictions.

**Subject** Haiti

**Cable time** Fri, 22 Jan 2010 17:04 UTC

**Classification** UNCLASSIFIED

Press reporting on U.S. efforts in Haiti has been overwhelmingly – and nearly exclusively – positive. The one exception Post has noted is a letter to the editor that ran in weekly paper Le Jeudi, entitled "A Military-Humanitarian Invasion" [...] Luxembourg's own contributions to Haiti have dominated press coverage, focusing on their own boots (and paws) on the ground and euros in the pipeline. In the last couple of days, local press coverage has homed in on the feel-good adoption story, running full page spreads of the fourteen Haitian orphans arriving in Luxembourg to meet their new families. [...]

to be backed up by more than idealistic rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

This is all the more true, when looking at how the EU can deal with countries seeking to move closer to its norms and values. That is especially the case, if these countries are at the same time trying to move out of the orbit of another actor, and are thus vulnerable to a violent backlash, as is the case with most of the Western and Caucasian CIS countries. In such cases it is not enough for the EU to be a distant friend. If soft power is to work in those regions, there needs to be a firm commitment to the countries seeking partnership. This cannot take the shape of security guarantees, but Europe would be more convincing by stating firmly, that the full range of power tools will be available, should a crisis occur. In that respect, hard power tools can in some cases induce an increase in soft power, by proving that certain fundamental values are non-negotiable. Conversely, a perceived lack of willingness to take coercive action will send the signal that the values one claims to hold up and defend are clearly negotiable. The Georgia crisis is in a way an illustration of the ambiguities confronting Europe, because it is still disputed whether diplomatic pressures by President Sarkozy really made a difference in Moscow and its aggressive posture. In its response, the EU seemed to be as concerned with Russian sensitivities as with upholding its own principles when they were challenged.

### Will the Centre hold?

There is a famous line in a poem by W. B. Yeats (*The Second Coming*): "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold".

This is precisely today's predicament of the European project. Its soft power appeal has a direct bearing on Europe's role in world affairs. Four years of economic and financial crisis have led to a major social crisis. The attractiveness of the European model, based on solidarity, has suffered badly.

It has become clear that the EU faces three main challenges, which all affect its image and its attractiveness, hence its soft power appeal: the euro crisis, the public's

diminishing trust in the EU, and the ineffectiveness of its institutions or its governance. The longer the EU offers its citizens only economic austerity and welfare cuts, but no inspiring political project, the bleaker its future will become.

Europe's decline has become a major concern, confronted as it is with haunting challenges: a looming demographic crunch, a surge in non-European immigration and feeble growth rates that, even if there were no Eurozone crisis, would threaten the affordability and sustainability of its state-funded welfare systems.

What is at stake is the serene future of the EU as a prosperous, postmodern, semi-demilitarised entity whose main functions would be to save its social model, fight climate change, assist economic progress in developing countries and preach morality in international relations.<sup>8</sup> ♦

1 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* (New York, Public Affairs, 2004). The concept was first introduced in his *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York, Basic Books, 1990). Many other publications followed, notably *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's only Superpower can't go it alone* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002). His most recent contribution is *The Future of Power* (New York, Public Affairs, 2011).

2 See for instance Eneko Landaburu, 'Hard Facts About Europe's Soft Power', *Europe's World*, Summer 2006.

3 Speech at the conference 'Diplomatie culturelle', organised by the Institut français at the Collège de France, Paris, 12-13 December 2011.

4 It took more than 20 years to see the optimism expressed by François Duchêne come to fruition. Cf. François Duchêne, 'The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence', in: Wolfgang Hager and Max Kohnstamm (Eds.), *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign Policy Problems Before the Community* (London, Macmillan, 1973). This was criticized by Hedley Bull, 'Civilian Power: A Contradiction in Terms', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 21, Number 2 (1982), remembered for a resounding dismissal of Europe's ambitions: " 'Europe' is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one."

5 John McCormick, *The European Superpower* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Arguing that Pax Bruxellana was at the core of the European Project, Johan Galtung was one of the first to understand the potential of Europe as a global actor: *The European Community. A Superpower in the Making* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

6 Ian Manners 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 40, Number 2 (2002).

7 Robert Kagan, 'Power and Weakness', *Policy Review*, June (2002). The essay was published one year later in an expanded form under the title *Of Paradise and Power. America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York, Random House, 2003).

8 This article sums up the author's work, that will lead to a *Chaillot Paper*, the well-known publication series of the EUISS, in Fall 2012.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Foreign Minister Asselborn's Visit To The U.S.</b>
<b>Cable time</b>	<b>Tue, 28 Jul 2009 12:56 UTC</b>
<b>Classification</b>	<b>CONFIDENTIAL</b>

Asselborn visited New York on June 25 to attend the UN-sponsored & Conference on The World Financial Crisis and Its Impact on Development. As Foreign Minister, Asselborn has frequently travelled to the U.S. for UN meetings but has had relatively few bilateral meetings with U.S. officials. He met with Deputy Secretary Zoellick in June 2006 and with Secretary Rice on the margins of an EU meeting in 2005. For this reason, Asselborn feels somewhat overshadowed by the presence of long-serving Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, and will no doubt relish this opportunity for a meeting and photo-op with the Secretary. (Note: PM Juncker met with President Bush in 2005 and 2008.)

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Luxembourg Ready To Sign Tax Treaty Amendment</b>
<b>Cable time</b>	<b>Fri, 3 Apr 2009 14:19 UTC</b>

Juncker is posturing to a domestic audience by denouncing certain states within the U.S. He faces elections in June and the average Luxembourgish does not grasp (or care to research) that the Prime Minister's calling out of individual U.S. states is little more than a red herring. At the same time, Juncker has vowed to get off the OECD gray list, publicly announcing that negotiations have already begun with Germany and France, yet failing to mention its ongoing conversations with the United States.