

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The Hardening of Soft Power



ZAKI LAIDI

INTERNATIONAL-relations theorists generally distinguish between soft and hard power. Soft power refers to the exercise of political influence through flexible, non-binding instruments such as economic assistance; the dissemination of environmental, health, and civil-security standards; and exports of cultural goods. Soft-power leaders are generally reluctant to coerce others and prefer to wield influence by example. The European Union is the leading exponent of this approach.

Hard power, by contrast, refers to military and economic instruments of coercion. Rather than leading by example, countries that depend on the hard power at their disposal wield it to try to bend others to their will. Following Machiavelli, they would rather be feared than loved. Here, Russia is a quintessential example. And between Europe and Russia, the United States has long represented a unique combination of both forms of power.

But nowadays, the distinction between hard and soft is becoming less relevant, because soft power itself is being weaponised. In what some commentators now refer to as "sharp power," traditional soft-power tools—trade, legal standards, technology—are increasingly being used to coerce. If one were to identify three primary causes for this change, it would be the rise of China, the ensuing Sino-American rivalry, and the new powers of digital technology.

So far, the most sensitive domain in which soft power has been weaponised is trade. Since President Donald Trump came to power, the US has ratcheted up import



US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS/CARLOS BARRIA

tariffs and invoked "national security" to justify its circumvention of the rules-based multilateral trading system. Although the US can no longer control the multilateral system singlehandedly, it still can harm its competitors (and its allies) on a bilateral basis.

The consequences of this weaponisation of trade have been profound. By the end of 2019, the US will have an average import tariff rate of 6.5 percent, up from just 1.5 percent three years ago, putting it close to Brazil in terms of import barriers. The Trump administration has now imposed levies on 90 percent of imports from China, yet its

strategic objectives for the trade war remain unclear.

To be sure, the Trump administration wants to force China to reduce its bilateral trade surplus with the US, and many in the US want China to move toward a market economy. But the irony is that the trade war has forced both countries to embrace managed trade, which gives the Chinese state an even firmer grip on the economy.

A new era of managed trade implies significant risks for Europe. China may have to import less from Europe in order to import more from the US, or it may dump onto European markets exports that

it can no longer ship to the US. Either way, international trade is increasingly becoming a zero-sum game.

The weaponisation of soft power is also gaining ground in the legal domain, through the extraterritorial application of national laws. Both the US and the European Union rely on extraterritoriality, but the differences in how each wields this power is revealing. European extraterritoriality has never been used for strictly political purposes and is essentially limited to three areas: market standards, competition policy, and the protection of personal data.

The US, however, regularly uses the dollar to sanction any economic activity that it regards as a threat to its foreign-policy interests, even in the short term. The French bank BNP Paribas, for example, has been fined USD 9 billion by the US Department of Justice for violating US embargoes against Cuba, Sudan, and Iran. And under the 2018 Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data (CLOUD) Act, US law-enforcement authorities can now access data held by American companies even when it is not stored in the US.

Once again, European companies have borne the costs of these measures. And because European firms are so heavily integrated with the US economy, Europe has struggled to maintain an autonomous foreign policy toward Iran. Unless the euro can be made into an international currency to rival the dollar, the European economy will remain highly vulnerable to US extraterritoriality.

A third area of soft-power weaponisation has been technology, particularly with respect to 5G. Unlike 3G and 4G broadband systems, 5G deployment has far-reaching security and geopolitical implications, because it promises not only to improve mobile telephony, but also to accelerate the development of the Internet of Things and the digitalisation

of entire economies. Thus, any malicious intervention in the 5G architecture could cause considerable economic, social, or even physical damage.

Owing to China's growing capacity to conduct cyber warfare, the head of the German intelligence service has expressed deep reservations about opening the German 5G network to the Chinese company Huawei. Although it is currently the world's leading provider of 5G hardware, Huawei is subject to Chinese law, and thus ultimately answerable to the Communist Party of China and Chinese intelligence and security services.

Whatever one thinks of the Trump administration, the US is not wrong to highlight the potential danger posed by Huawei and Chinese technology providers generally. US allegations against Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE should open Europeans' eyes to the threat of weaponised network technologies.

Looking ahead, it would not be unreasonable for the US to offer its support to European companies such as Ericsson or Nokia, which serve as counterweights to Huawei in Europe and elsewhere. For its part, the EU's strict competition rules prevent it from extending overt assistance to these companies on its territory. And because the EU is not a state, it has no interest in providing state aid or otherwise playing the card of soft-power weaponisation.

Yet European leaders should be careful not to ignore realities on the ground. Missing the opportunity to get ahead of a worrying new global dynamic would not be in the interest of the world's last major soft-power actor.

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25 YEARS OF GLOBAL POPULATION CONFERENCE

Have we kept the promise of reproductive rights?



ASA TORKELSSON

TWENTY-five years ago, in 1994, representatives of 179 countries, along with civil society organisations and many other actors, came together in Cairo at the International

Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), sparking a radical shift in reproductive health.

For the first time, individual reproductive rights and choices—with a special focus on those of women—were fixed at the heart of the population and development conversation, including emphasising the right to make free decisions on if and when to start a family, with whom, and if and when to have children, and how many.

Recognising the centrality of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)—and linking these firmly to human rights and gender equality—governments and other stakeholders put the needs and aspirations of people first, moving away from an earlier emphasis on population targets to control fertility amid fears of the time of overpopulation. By so doing, the ICPD Programme of Action provided a practical and aspirational roadmap towards, and intimately linking together, sustainable development, prosperity, and gender equality.

This week, 25 years later, representatives from the world will meet again at the Nairobi Summit on November 12-14, taking stock of progress towards the commitments, and reenergising to finish any outstanding agenda. The non-binding Nairobi Statement, as well as the original Programme of Action, reflects the inextricable links among women's empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and sustainable development, and therefore calls for greater domestic and international funding for programmes that enable women to decide whether, when or how often to become pregnant. The Nairobi Statement also reflects the importance of achieving the goals of the Programme of Action as a pathway to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Remarkable progress has indeed been made in Bangladesh over the past 25 years. The UNFPA considers Bangladesh, in many ways, to be an ICPD champion. But despite the progress made here and around the world over the past quarter century, hundreds of millions of women—including millions in Bangladesh—still need access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and rights, while gender norms and gender-based violence pose significant challenges to the ability of women and girls to freely make fundamental decisions regarding our sexual and reproductive health and rights. Of particular concern is maternal

mortality, which is a key indicator both of the rights of women and the functioning of health systems. Reducing the number of deaths from 495 (per 100,000 live births) in 1994 to 176 in 2015, Bangladesh has undoubtedly made significant strides toward saving lives of mothers, and no woman should fear giving birth. However, progress in maternal mortality has slowed down in recent years. According to the BMMS 2016, 53 percent of births are taking place at home, mostly without skilled birth attendance.

Related to this, Bangladesh's public health system needs to be equipped with proper quality care, and adequate supplies and human resources, if not those who can afford it may increasingly access the private health sector.

Although the contraceptive prevalence rate in Bangladesh has increased over

ever-married women experienced physical or sexual violence by partner at least once in the last 12 months. The report also reveals that 9.1 percent of ever-married women who have ever been pregnant experienced sexual violence during pregnancy. Non-partner physical or sexual violence among women who have never been married is 35.3 percent.

This high prevalence of GBV reduces the opportunities for women to explore their full potential and make decisions about their own life, including matters of sexual and reproductive health. This, in turn, also affects women's general well-being and also women's participation in the society and economy. Further, it limits women's access to and control over resources. Taken together, radically reducing GBV will further expedite Bangladesh's speedy and sustained growth, on the pathway to graduation



PHOTO COURTESY: UNFPA

the last decade, it has not yet reached the desired level. In particular, the use of contraception among married adolescent girls is still very low, at 51 percent. The unmet need for family planning is highest among this demographic: 17 percent, compared to 12 percent among women aged 15-49. Neither the contraceptive prevalence rate nor the unmet need for family planning have shown any substantive positive change over the last decade, which makes it abundantly clear that the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls in Bangladesh needs urgent attention; this will also be conducive to women's empowerment, and by consequence, to the country's continued prosperity and growth track.

It saddens me that cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV) are high in the whole world, and alarmingly so in Bangladesh. Women should be and feel safe, all the time, and everywhere. According to the VAW survey report 2015 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 54.7 percent of ever-married women reported some type of violence in the past 12 months; 26.9 percent of

from LDC status. Child marriage, while down somewhat, continues to be prevalent throughout Bangladesh. The high incidence of this harmful practice and its repercussions are a structural constraint to women's autonomy and agency by limiting women's access to education and employment, yielding vulnerability to domestic violence.

Further, the adolescent fertility rate in the country remains 113 live births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 years, with no significant decrease in decades. This is a matter of huge concern as well.

Bangladesh currently has a large population of young persons, whose potential must be fulfilled if the country is to realise a demographic dividend. But the window of opportunity to make this happen is finite; urgent measures must be taken now to fully invest in young persons to ensure better health and education leading to better wellbeing and jobs, including for girls and women in a gender-equal society.

At the same time, as more women exercise their rights and choices in life, and as fertility falls, the reality of

To finish the unfinished agenda of ICPD, it will be important to recommit to the aspirations of zero maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, zero violence against women and girls.

population ageing will also begin to set in, as it has in so many countries in Asia-Pacific and globally. An ageing Bangladesh will be a reality in the not-too-distant future, and Bangladesh needs to start preparing from now—by taking a life-cycle approach to development underpinned by gender equality—beginning with healthy pregnancy and safe childbirth, through a well-resourced childhood and adolescence and onto an optimal adulthood with its childbearing years and, eventually, onto a healthy old age, considering investing in the care economy.

All in all, building on the strengths of the resilient and warm-hearted country of Bangladesh, we will continue supporting an inclusive economy and society where all women and men, the old and the young, people with disabilities, people with diverse identities, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, feel, and are, valued and able to contribute to communities, society, and the country.

In the face of current and emerging challenges, we look forward to continue supporting Bangladesh as the country seeks to achieve the ICPD agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and by so doing, ultimately ensure that no one is left behind.

Fulfilling these commitments will require individual and collective effort, substantive additional financial investments, both public and private. Using national budget processes, as well as all available and innovative financing instruments and schemes, to do what is in our power to increase domestic resources for sexual and reproductive health programmes to fill the financing gap could be the first step ahead.

To finish the unfinished agenda of ICPD, it will be important to recommit to the aspirations of zero maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, zero violence against women and girls.

Now is the time to make reproductive rights and choices a reality for everyone, everywhere!

Asa Torkelson is UNFPA Bangladesh Representative.

QUOTABLE Quote

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.
(Born in 1950)
American literary critic, historian and filmmaker

Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Folks
- 7 A long time
- 11 Severe trial
- 12 Persian leader
- 13 Counterpart of tricks
- 14 In need of a massage
- 15 Ancient city on the Nile
- 17 Minus
- 20 Stylishly quaint
- 23 Phone download
- 24 Specter
- 26 Letter before 22-Down
- 27 Blood color
- 28 Low digit
- 29 Warlock's forte
- 31 Costume part
- 32 Dubai rulers
- 33 Visitor to Siam
- 34 Did lab work
- 37 Border
- 39 Halloween hue
- 43 Rise
- 44 Author Cervantes
- 45 "Dear me!"
- 46 Fragrances

DOWN

- 1 Poker prize
- 2 Goof
- 3 Lyric poem
- 4 Moss materials
- 5 Wood strip
- 6 Different
- 7 "—on TV"
- 8 Tumble-weed locale, stereo-typically
- 9 Corn unit
- 10 That woman
- 16 Civil War photographer Mathew
- 17 Oversight
- 18 Derby town
- 19 False beard
- 21 1998 De Niro movie
- 22 Last Greek letter
- 24 Iron
- 25 That woman
- 30 Like ghouls
- 33 Wise words
- 35 Some cats
- 36 Rocker Clapton
- 37 conceit
- 38 Cry from Homer
- 40 Convent resident
- 41 Acquire
- 42 Overhead trains

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H	A	L	O	S	B	R	O	O	M
E	Q	U	A	L	L	E	D	G	E
L	U	C	K	Y	D	E	V	I	L
P	A	Y	D	E	W	N	E	A	
					L	O	G	I	C
S	P	R	I	G	T	R	I	C	K
S	A	U	L	T	O	N	C	E	
T	R	E	A	T	G	A	S	S	Y
					C	R	A	C	K
A	S	P	A	I	L	B	O	O	
S	P	E	E	D	D	E	M	O	N
H	A	S	T	E	F	I	D	E	L
E	N	T	E	R	S	A	Y	S	O

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