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Guitars, Google, and guns: a new view of Western power [1]

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Budapest, Hungary -- In the run-up to the NATO summit Nov. 19 in Lisbon, the transatlantic community must confront not just the burning issues it faces (from Afghanistan to Russia), but the way free nations can and should wield their power for global progress.

Indeed, it needs to address the biggest questions of all: How is the free world going to lead in an age when its values are increasingly under attack? When it is facing threats and challenges unknown in the past? And when its economic model – the source of our power and freedoms – is being questioned?

Smart power

The buzzword for dealing with these challenges in the corridors of power in Washington and European capitals is "smart power." But a buzzword is no substitute for honest reflection. What the West needs most is a fresh look at the full range of its capabilities and interests. Only then can its power fulfill its purpose.

Seen as a wonder tool, smart power has been embraced as a fresh and benign aspect of power; a definably formulaic mix of soft (cultural) power and hard (military) power. The reality is that the need for hard power has not vanished. And soft power alone will never suffice to win a war, push down threatening dictators, or keep a peace. We still live in a world that requires both swords and plowshares.

Soft power has always had a place. During the cold war, rock songs by The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Janis Joplin played an important political role by inspiring a young, disaffected, and rebellious generation in Eastern Europe to help bring down the Iron Curtain.

Today, rock almost seems like a soft-power anachronism, along with most shortwave radio broadcasts; underwritten overseas English-language training; and other pricey, legacy public diplomacy programs paid for by the European Union and the United States.

In the past 20 years, the transatlantic community has expanded its military, political, and economic institutions, but it hasn't come forward with new ways to augment its arsenal of soft and hard power influence. At least not in a big way. America is sorting out where it erred with its extreme embrace of its military power after 9/11. But Europe, too, must reflect on why its global strategic and political influence is not on par with its economic might.

America is not Mars. Europe is not Venus.

A better – and smarter – use of both hard and soft power is necessary. A more efficient use of the softer aspects of power will mitigate the need for actual military intervention. In the transatlantic relationship, this calls for a sober realization that a distribution of labor between the US and Europe along the lines of hard and soft power is not viable. The US is not Mars and Europe is not Venus. They are both earthbound.

Power – hard or soft, American or European – is still just power and it is spectral. At the two ends of the visible power spectrum are the extremes: strategic nuclear forces at one end and cultural diplomacy on the other. Hot, hard war tactics are on the red end of the spectrum and cool, soft sells to societies are at the opposite, bluer end. There is a lot of space in between: for example, military assisted humanitarian actions or helping fight devastating disease in Africa.

Extending the metaphor of spectral power, we need also to understand that there are parts of the spectrum that are "invisible" until they strike.

Take nonstate actors. They have become a curse word in recent years, and many remain a source of worry and threat. The worst are invisible inhabitants of the hard end of the power spectrum, becoming visible only when they carry out devastating terrorist acts.

At the softer end, free societies have their own nonstate actors, too. Our innovative and maturing technologies – YouTube, Facebook, Google, and others – empower individuals worldwide. Unsung heroes of the Internet community figured out how to circumvent the Iranian regime's Internet control via proxy servers, for example. Technology by itself, however, is not a liberation panacea. It is just a tool. And tools – whether a match or a firewall – can be used for good as well as evil.

Power toolbox

The concept of spectral power is essentially a new way of looking at our power toolbox in a more integrated manner. Free and democratic countries, alliances, and organizations will have to begin to see more clearly the subtle colors, shades, and mixtures of power that a full and wide spectrum view allows. The most important expected result will be a framework that will help define a more efficient and effective use of our human, economic, military, scientific, and cultural assets.

It is a great consolation that, in the end, the full and sophisticated use of spectral power will only be effective in the hands of those who understand that lasting influence is never achieved by military force or economic influence alone, but by sharing values and solutions that simultaneously have benefits for both the global community and the individual.

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