

USAPC Washington Report
Interview with Dr. Marshall Bouton
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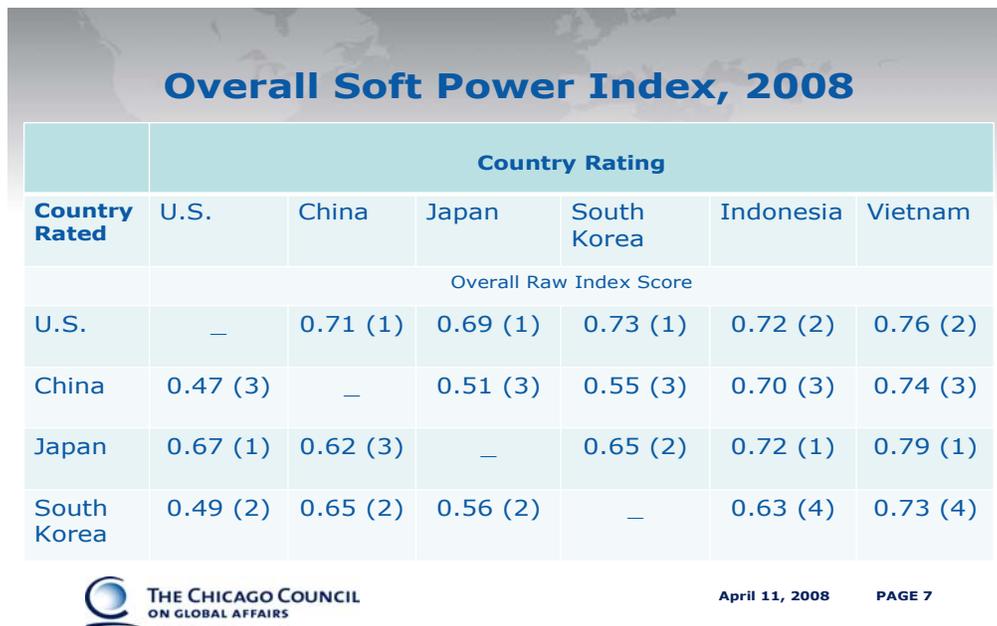
USAPC: How did the Chicago Council define “soft power” for purposes of conducting the survey?”

Bouton: In defining “soft power” for this survey, we really drew on Harvard Prof. Joseph Nye’s now famous book – *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Prof. Nye defined soft power generally as the ability of a nation through non-military means to exert its influence and to attract the attention and cooperation of other nations. In particular, Prof. Nye has proposed that soft power refers to the ability of a nation to define the agenda.

USAPC: How did the survey measure a nation’s soft power?

Bouton: There are many dimensions to a nation’s soft power, for example, economic, cultural, diplomatic, human capital, and political (that is to say, the attractiveness and functionality of political systems).

The Chicago Council attempted to measure these dimensions of soft power in a questionnaire that originally included about 60 or 70 questions, which we posed to respondents in China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the United States in January and February 2008. We boiled down responses to produce indices for each of the five soft power “pillars.” These five indices, in turn, were averaged to produce an overall “Soft Power Index” (see chart).¹ As you can see, U.S. soft power ranks high.



¹ The figures represent the average level of influence on a 0 to 1 scale when soft power questions are combined, followed by rank.

USAPC: The Bush administration has been criticized for its lack of engagement and effectiveness in Asia. But as you point out, the Chicago Council’s soft power survey as well as its 2006 survey, which focused on the rise of China and India, both found that the United States still is well regarded in Asia. How do you explain this?

Bouton: To clarify, the Chicago Council set out to measure soft power. We did not attempt to measure why U.S. soft power is stronger than we expected. We could not show that U.S. soft power had declined specifically during the Bush administration’s two terms in office because we did not have a prior measure of equal comprehensiveness and quality for comparison.

There are two or three hypotheses to explain why the United States still is well regarded in Asia. The first is that the Bush administration, indeed, is guilty of neglecting Asia – a point made by many Asian experts in recent years – but that the neglect was benign.

The second hypothesis proposes that the Bush administration generally has not neglected Asia. Rather, its relations with Asia have been characterized by the right balance of involvement and non-involvement, and that approach has been helpful.

The third hypothesis is that the stock of American soft power was so high already that despite the Bush administration’s neglect – benign or otherwise – our soft power in Asia still remains quite high.

There may even be a fourth hypothesis to explain the survey findings, which is related to the third. That hypothesis proposes that American soft power still may be the highest overall in the region because the soft power of China, Japan, South Korea, or other Asian nations for a variety of reasons has not reached the U.S. level. But that fact does not necessarily mean that American soft power is not in decline.

It is really impossible to sort out which of these hypotheses best explains the survey results. My personal interpretation would be that the results may be explained by a little bit of all of these hypotheses.

Importantly, however, there are interesting patterns of soft power in the region. For example, the U.S. measure of soft power was weaker in Southeast Asia, generally, but particularly in Indonesia and Vietnam. Perhaps it is not surprising that Indonesians do not hold the United States in as high regard as other Asian nations. Our policies and actions in the Arab world appear to have negatively influenced Indonesian public opinion.

The reactions of Vietnamese respondents were a little more puzzling. But there is a good deal of history between the United States and Vietnam, which still may influence Vietnamese views of the United States. Too, it is important to bear in mind that a great many complaints about U.S. neglect of Asia have come from Southeast Asian commentators – not from the experts in Japan, China, or South Korea.

Overall, I think we have a positive picture of how major Asian nations regard the United States. This means that the incoming U.S. administration has some tools to work with in the region.

USAPC: There is a view that China’s soft power in Asia and elsewhere is outstripping that of the United States. But your report concludes that “great power” does not necessarily mean “soft power,” particularly with respect to China. Please elaborate.

Bouton: We do not have a measure of China's soft power 10 or even five years ago. So, just as it is difficult to determine the extent to which U.S. soft power has diminished in recent years, so, too, is it hard to know the extent to which China's overall soft power has increased.

However, it is apparent from the Council's data as well as from any noteworthy analysis of regional developments that China's economic soft power certainly has increased. Our survey yielded extensive data indicating that other Asian nations regard China as an emerging regional, if not global, economic power.

The survey also revealed the extent to which the Chinese themselves value an open economy and their nation's involvement in the global economy. The Chinese have not seen a free trade agreement (FTA) they do not like. Whereas the Americans have not seen a FTA they do like! That, alone, is an interesting comparison of American and Chinese attitudes about trade and globalization.

There is no question that China's role in Asia has become more important owing to its economic interactions with its neighbors. The question we asked was, "Do you think China will emerge as a regional power?" Majorities in most of the Asian countries said yes -- as did Americans, by the way.

China's growing economic soft power is not the issue. Rather, the issue we tried to grapple with via the survey was whether China's economic power is beginning to translate effectively into other dimensions of soft power. Asian experts have observed China's diplomacy in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia, and argued that, in their estimation, it is quite skillful. I certainly would concur with this judgment.

Yet, we did not see the impact of China's diplomatic successes in Asia in the survey results. We now have a benchmark, however, so we hope in another three to four years to conduct the survey again. At that point, we will have solid data that will enable us to make comparisons.

USAPC: During the 1980s, many Americans viewed Japan as an economic juggernaut that was poised to take over the U.S. economy. What did the survey reveal about attitudes toward trading partners and globalization?

Bouton: As I mentioned earlier, Americans are very suspicious about FTAs and economic engagement with other countries in Asia. Interestingly, though, Americans are less anxious now about economic relations with Japan. That represents a real shift from the late 1980s right up through the mid-1990s. The Council's other biannual public opinion studies in 2002, 2004, 2006 all revealed a slow, steady decline of American concern about economic competition from Japan.

In some respects, China now has replaced Japan in the minds of many Americans as a country whose economic competition is cause for concern. Even the Japanese, despite other problems in their relations with certain Asian nations, reacted favorably to the prospect of entering into FTAs with their Asian neighbors, including China.

The Japanese become more guarded when asked about Chinese military power, but clearly they recognize that the rise of the Chinese economy has been beneficial to them. And I have already mentioned how the Chinese view trade and the global economy.

In general, the survey data revealed that Asians are far more open and optimistic about trade than are Americans (see following chart).

**American and Asian Perceptions of
Countries with Which Should Have Free
Trade Agreements, 2008
(Percent Saying Should Have)**

Views of	Countries				
	U.S.	Japan	China	South Korea	ASEAN
Americans	–	59	41	49	NA
Japanese	63	–	53	63	63
Chinese	84	79	–	82	84
South Koreans	75	74	67	–	76

USAPC: Historically, Japan’s relations with both China and South Korea have been fraught with stresses and strain. Were these tensions still apparent in the survey results?

Bouton: Yes, they certainly were. We have a series of survey questions pertaining to Sino-Japanese relations. As we reported, there are some encouraging signs that the Japanese public, in particular, feels more favorably toward China than we had hypothesized at the outset. But, as I mentioned earlier, when the survey questions probed into issues relating to the rise of Chinese power overall, and particularly Chinese military power, there was a very distinct shift in Japanese opinion.

For instance, when we asked Japanese respondents if they saw China becoming the leader of Asia and whether they were comfortable with that prospect. Fifty-five percent of Japanese replied that they could see China becoming the leader of Asia, but only 10 percent indicated they were comfortable with that outlook. So there is a very big gap there (see chart on next page).

The gap in confidence about China’s rise as a leader of Asia also extended to the South Koreans, who, on the whole, have been less anxious about China’s growing power than the Japanese. The Indonesians and the Vietnamese, in contrast, not only saw China becoming a leader in Asia, but were quite comfortable with that development.

A pattern emerged across quite a few different questions that reflected Japanese concern about the rise of Chinese power. When we asked whether the United States and Japan should work together to contain the rise of Chinese power – we used different phrasing, but that was the essence of the question– a majority of Japanese said yes. The Japanese still see the United States as their key ally and partner in the region and the hedge against the rise of Chinese power, particularly Chinese military power.

**American and Asian Views on Whether
China Will Be Leader of Asia in Future, and If
So, Whether They Would Be Comfortable or
Uncomfortable, 2008**

	Percentage Saying	
	China Will Be Leader of Asia in Future	Will Be Very or Somewhat Comfortable
Americans	68	27
Japanese	55	10
South Koreans	78	21
Vietnamese	71	56

USAPC: You have spoken to different groups around the United States about the survey findings. Were there any questions or comments about the soft power survey that surprised you – or perhaps served to confirm further the survey findings?

Bouton: There have been many questions about methodology. “Policy elites,” for want of a better term, look at the survey results and they cannot believe the respondents really understood what they were being asked to comment on. Not a few foreign policy experts have this idea that the general public simply does not know certain things or is confused in its thinking about certain issues so, “How could these results be possible?!”

The Chicago Council has explained the methodology we have used in this and previous surveys. Our methodology is sound. That is not to say that questions can be worded in a variety of ways that make a difference in the outcome. We all know that from polling.

The important thing is to look at the patterns, not only patterns across countries, but patterns within countries. You get a very good sense from the data whether the replies of respondents more or less are on track. There should be some rough consistency. We have found that to be the case in the soft power study as in others.

We think we have tapped something real and important. These are trends of opinion. Basically, we have taken a snapshot. It provides a way to stimulate our thinking about some problems rather than offer an eternal truth.

That said, the part of the survey that to me is even more interesting than the soft power finding -- and we have received some feedback about this -- is the clear pattern of divergent Chinese and American public attitudes toward the other country.

USAPC: Yes, in that regard, the soft power report warns of a “worrisome disconnect” between American and Chinese views of each other. How do we close that gap?

Bouton: This goes back to my earlier comments about China replacing Japan in the minds of many Americans as the feared source of economic competition. I would say that Americans have not passed a tipping point yet, in the sense that they have not yet concluded that our economic relationship with China is on balance more threatening to us than more helpful to us.

I believe most Americans generally understand that there are winners and losers. The winners would be the great majority of American consumers who can buy goods more cheaply and U.S. companies that have thrived because they have been able to manufacture at low cost in China. And those winners outweigh the losers.

Nevertheless, more Americans are viewing China as the poster child for a growing sense of economic insecurity in the face of the rapid economic change otherwise brought on by globalization. It is an insecurity that in a small minority of our population is very immediate. But in a much larger, probably even a slight majority of our population, this insecurity is more pervasive and long-term. The question one often hears from members of the latter group is, “How are we going to have a middle-class lifestyle in the United States in the next half century?”

The challenge for the next administration is to re-frame the debate. Currently, the debate about China is trending toward a “them vs. us,” “we’re losing our jobs to them,” zero-sum kind of argument. The next administration has to turn that narrative around. It must develop a new story to tell -- a true story – for the American people that this ultimately is about U.S. competitiveness in a global economy.

In many respects, the United States already is a globally competitive, very strong, resilient, adaptive economy. But we must modernize our economy and at the same time create a basic sense of economic security for the average American.

That means not only expanding trade adjustment assistance, which is something we already have but in very small measure, but more importantly it also means investing in infrastructure, widening access to higher education, investing in primary and secondary education, resolving the health-care dilemma so this issue no longer constantly hovers over 50-60 million Americans, investing in a retirement system that people can count on, and investing in immigration reform. It is a long list of domestic policies.

The next president might then stand up before the American people and say, “I’ve got a deal for you. We’re going to make your health care more secure, create greater access to high-quality education for your kids, make sure no one in retirement will end up below the poverty line, and so forth.” And the American public’s part of the deal is to allow the United States to remain open; to keep our doors open to economic involvement in the world.

Some commentators are skeptical that the United States would ever resort to full-blown protection because we are so entangled in the global economy. But I like to remind people that the last great period of globalization in 1880-1920 came to a halt as a result of growing disillusionment with the painful costs of industrialization and a failed war. One could draw a very rough, historical analogy between that period and this one, between 1980 and 2010. There has been rapid economic growth, rises in prosperity fueled by technological change and an open global economy, inadequate development of a safety net to address the needs of “losers,” and a failed war. The next administration needs a new way of thinking about challenges now facing American.