

# Love from above: the soft power of aviation



## Essay by Jonathan McClory

Never before has the ability of a government to attract and engage with international audiences been so important to its prosperity, security, and international influence.

Governments today – whether national, regional, or municipal – face an increasingly challenging global context as unprecedented shifts in power and technology reshape the determinants of success in tourism, trade, investment, and foreign policy.

For savvy governments, the response to this shift has been to build up and leverage their ‘soft power’, effectively using the power of attraction to meet major economic and political objectives. This means nations need to have a strong global brand. Importantly, this is not just about glossy PR campaigns, but what countries do, how they contribute to the global common good, and the opportunities they offer to the rest of the world. While it may not seem immediately obvious, aviation is a crucial source of soft power for nations. Well-run national carriers can lift global perceptions of their home country, but more broadly, aviation is a great facilitator of soft power, closing distances and connecting people, cultures, companies, ideas, innovation,

and opportunity.

As a concept firmly rooted in foreign policy studies, ‘soft power’ has made a swift transition from university lecture halls to the corridors of power. In the last few years the term has come to populate news stories, fill op-ed pages, feature in the speeches of world leaders, and dominate foreign ministry strategy papers. This sudden rush of enthusiasm for soft power, however, has managed to erode some of the original clarity of concept.

‘Soft power’ was first coined in 1990 by Harvard professor Joseph Nye. Nye used the term to describe the ability of a country to use attraction and persuasion in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives, as opposed to offering payments or deploying force. In short, soft power is the ability to get others to want what you want via the pull of attraction and admiration. While often used in the context of high-level statecraft, soft power also has huge implications for foreign direct investment, tourism, trade, and even access to increasingly mobile global talent.

The growing interest in soft power stems from the need for governments to develop suitable responses to a rapidly changing world, shifting as a result of four primary factors. The first factor is the diffusion of power, which is

happening on two fronts. Power is moving between states as the global centre of power drifts from west to east. At the same time, power is shifting away from states altogether, as non-state actors play an increasingly significant role in world affairs.

The second factor is the communications and IT revolution. The speed with which information is disseminated throughout the globe and the subsequent democratisation of access to that information creates a more informed – and increasingly activist – global public. The rapid movement and availability of information has made individuals better informed and more powerful than at any point in history.

The third factor is the rise in international networks. The proliferation of new channels of information and platforms for engagement mean that transnational networks can spring up in a matter of hours. These networks are mobilised across a diverse set of issues from broad political movements to single transnational issues like climate change or disarmament.

The final factor, which is linked to the second and third, has been difficult for many governments to accept: propaganda is dead. Governments no longer have the luxury of

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saying one thing and doing another. With easy access to instant information, global publics are smarter, more engaged, and likely to dismiss propaganda when they see it.

As a result of these shifts and the subsequent challenges they present, soft power has become a critical tool for governments looking to assert themselves internationally. However, recognising the importance of soft power is easy, using it is not. Any attempt to use soft power must begin by answering the question ‘what soft power do we actually have?’

Indeed, the first step for governments hoping to deploy soft power is measuring it. Without a clear account of the ‘soft power resources’ at a government’s disposal – including where those resources will be most effective – they cannot hope to use it effectively. Putting soft power into practice is still very much in the early stages of development. Moreover, the growing enthusiasm for the concept betrays most governments’ ability to use it.

In 2010, the Institute for Government (IfG), working in collaboration with Monocle magazine, set out to address the soft power measurement challenge for the first time, creating a composite index that ranks countries according to their soft power. The IfG-Monocle Soft Power Index comprises over 50 metrics assessing countries according to their values, government, diplomacy, culture, education, business friendliness, and capacity for innovation.

Aviation features prominently in the IfG-Monocle Soft Power index, and with good reason. The index includes metrics like ‘annual number of international tourists’, ‘average tourist spending’, ‘number of international students’, and ‘quality of national air carrier’. Aviation also has an indirect influence on

much of the index as most of the metrics relate to or rely on seamless global connectivity in some way.

The value of connectivity is illustrated in the Flight Connectedness Index (FCI), a research product compiled using flight data from IATA. The FCI ranks countries according to the number of commercial international flight routes, gauging the international connectivity of 190 countries. Looking at the most recent results of the IfG-Monocle Soft Power Index, the rankings are strikingly similar: Germany, UK, USA, and France all feature in the top five of both the FCI and the IfG-Monocle Soft Power Index. Of course, correlation is not causation, but the above rankings would suggest that connected countries are influential countries.

In addition to the benefits of greater connectivity air carriers provide the countries they serve, they also make a significant impact on their nation’s soft power. For many tourists, business travellers, or visiting dignitaries to a destination, a national airline will be responsible for passengers’ first impressions of the eventual destination.

As unofficial ambassadors, national carriers – even those like British Airways that operate independently of government control – play a significant role in contributing to the international reputation of their home country. While this fact has certainly escaped some carriers and their patron governments, there are a number of airlines that have

Rank	Flight Connectedness Index	Soft Power Index
1	Germany	Germany
2	France	UK
3	UK	USA
4	USA	France
5	Italy / Netherlands	Japan

embraced their ambassadorial role. Singapore Airlines stands out as a carrier that brilliantly reflects the culture, values, and ambitions of

its country – seen in the diversity of its staff, the cuisine, a welcoming service, pristine equipment, and highly efficient service. As a result, Singapore Airlines is a valuable soft power asset for the internationally minded Asian city-state.

Like Singapore Airlines, Emirates and Qatar Airways have been part of a government strategy to boost awareness, recognition, and even admiration for their respective countries, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Putting an emphasis on quality of service, and an expanding international route map, both airlines have helped develop the soft power of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

But perhaps the most impressive use of a national carrier as an instrument of soft power is found in Turkey. The Turkish government has been pursuing a soft power approach to foreign affairs under Prime Minister Erdoğan, and Turkish Airways has been a pillar of the country’s strategy to improve relations and build new ties across the world. Backed by public investment, Turkish Airlines now flies to more countries than any other carrier – 197 destinations in 104 countries. Expanding Turkish Airlines network and delivering a highly regarded service has been an astute soft power play by the country’s government. The expansion of Turkey’s national carrier has lifted the overall brand awareness of the country as a whole and generated new opportunities for prosperity and influence through an expanding network of international flight routes.

Individually, high-performing national carriers provide a boost to the soft power of their respective countries of origin. But taken in aggregate, an expanding and advancing aviation industry yields benefits that are shared globally. Economically, the new opportunities for international business links, trade, and face-to-face sharing of ideas help generate greater global prosperity. For students, the chance to study in another country, explore new ideas, and build lasting relationships ultimately leads to better understanding between nations and cultures. The expansion of international tourism too, has positive ripple effects for world culture and even international relations.

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Diplomacy itself – where soft power is put into action – has been transformed by aviation. Henry Kissinger demonstrated the power of face-to-face negotiation when he ushered in the era of ‘shuttle diplomacy’. Flying constantly to meet with all sides, Kissinger helped bring an end to the crisis of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. More recently, in visiting 112 countries during her tenure as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton showed that even in a digital world, nothing trumps a handshake. Globally, the number of summits, conferences, trade talks, and negotiations has ballooned over the years. The progress made during such meetings would be impossible without bringing key parties together for face-to-face discussions. Indeed a more efficient aviation industry makes diplomatic engagement easier – at least logistically. Better air transport may not bring aggrieved parties to an agreement, but it does make getting them to the table easier.

Building better international relations is about creating opportunities to engage with, learn about, and build trust between different peoples. Over the last 100 years, aviation has fundamentally transformed our ability to generate and leverage these opportunities. On a global level, aviation facilitates international engagement, thereby encouraging the use of soft power. At the individual country level, aviation provides a useful tool to lift the global brand of a country, while generating new international links. As it expands and grows more efficient, aviation will continue to shape a world where soft, rather than hard, power drives change for the better.

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