

Is the world growing softer or just becoming wiser?

LONDON – It was on this very page more than 30 years ago that the so-called soft dimension to public policies and world affairs first began to be discussed, in an article with the headline “Softnomics: Wise lessons from Japan,” in June 1987. The earlier development in Japanese university circles of the concept of “softnomics” was aired, being the new lens through which the behavior and evolution of the digitalized and increasingly knowledge-based global economy could be viewed, measured and understood, and policies accordingly modified.

A few years later, in a brilliant insight, the great Harvard thinker Joe Nye expanded the concept to apply to international affairs through the notion of soft power, the conduct of international relations and the exertion of influence, with persuasion and cultural cooperation replacing coercive power in world affairs. The concept spread like wildfire as old military notions of “might is right” seemed to meet with growing frustration and failure in a knowledge-laden and increasingly connected world. Old-fashioned hard power, in other words plain force, seemed to crumble in its instigator’s hands.

Then came soft management, the notion spreading through business that top down-hierarchies issuing strings of commands and rules from the top of the company or corporation didn’t seem to work so well in the digital age. Instead, constant streams of data would increasingly shape decisions and replace managerial ukases from on high, both in business and in public administration.

Then there was soft protection, the idea that the safety and defense of societies and citizens was as much protected through deep intelligence and cyber safeguards as through troops and military hardware.

And now finally there comes the call for “soft” leadership, the subtle combination of strategic guidance with mass empowerment, demanding a mixture of humility and wisdom from the top in governance and ruling cadres that still seems sadly lacking in today’s world.

All these ideas, upending as they do traditional thinking about how the world works, or how good outcomes can be best achieved, are of course still emerging. And they are contradicted by many obvious examples of hard and ugly power still prevailing, from the unspeakable brutality of Islamic State in the Middle East to brute tyranny and harsh injustice evident in many countries, or to murders and violent riots, or to outright assassinations — such as that of the Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani — among others. Nor does mass populist empowerment, enabled by new technology, turn out always to be gentle or particularly tolerant. An angry populace is often far from soft.

Yet the trend toward softer, more tolerant and more subtle approaches in all branches of governance and management, whether of relationships or institutions and businesses, or in social behavior, is clearly there and widely supported. It is

subsuming the old political divisions between right and left and between conservative and liberal.

Perhaps the very word “soft” misleads, since, of course, what is proposed can still amount to real pressure, which can be remorseless and compelling, even when in a soft glove. For example, economic sanctions may be used rather than bombs, but they can still cause real suffering at the receiving end.

Maybe “clever power” or “wiser economics” are better phrases for achieving ends by subtle means. More than 2,000 years ago, Chinese Gen. Sun Tzu knew all about soft power and how to get one’s way without hard confrontation or conflict.

Today we speculate about war without human casualties, battles between drones, with robotic and unmanned armies, navies and air forces on the front line.

In fact it is now inevitable that as robots take over the routine hard stuff and the physical stuff — the heavy lifting, even the fighting — humans are bound to find themselves filling different roles. It is brains, not brawn, that are bound to be increasingly applied to resolving the world’s worst problems and tensions.

That means teaching the next generation to accept uncertainty, tolerate paradoxes, live with unknowns, develop skills in asking the right questions, challenge “scientific” assertions, surveys and polls, and hard-sounding “facts” that turn out to have soft centers — all the things the cleverest robot will never be able to do.

Perhaps also the rising role of women in governance almost everywhere gives the “soft” and practical approach to tough world issues further strong momentum.

And with instant testing of every single person’s views through mass data technology now possible, the dangers and disadvantages of impetuous “tough” action by leaders, claiming to “know” the will of the people, become more obvious.

Whatever the way things go, power at the top now has to meet power at the bottom, in ways never before so clearly defined.

Even today’s remaining dictators and autocrats are learning that.

The world is still a hard place — very hard indeed for millions of suffering refugees and displaced families, and oppressed minorities. And there is still North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with his ridiculous rockets, or China with its dodgy combat aircraft on its even dodgier South China Sea instant islands, to remind us that some people think hard power gesturing remains the winning way.

But it is becoming slowly recognized that violence backfires and that soft methods, rather than harsh and confrontational measures and battle plans, now stand the best chance of stabilizing societies and alleviating the conflicts out of which suffering comes.

Perhaps thanks to hyper-connectivity, total transparency and artificial intelligence — all the outcomes of the microchip age — Sun Tzu’s time has come round again. That is truly progress of a kind in the human condition.

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