# SOFT AND SHARP POWER CONTEXT: EMPOWERING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION WITH THE DISARM FRAMEWORK

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*Résumé : Dans le contexte de tensions géopolitiques accrues et d'un environnement rapidement numérisé, la lutte pour « gagner les cœurs et les esprits » devient de plus en plus intense et la nécessité d'une compréhension nuancée des stratégies de « soft power » est primordiale. Cet article met en évidence le rôle de la communication stratégique à la lumière de l'approche du « soft power » et de l'application du cadre DISARM pour analyser les risques potentiels et concevoir une réponse efficace dans ce contexte. L'article explore la mise en œuvre pratique des stratégies de « soft power » qui s'appuient sur la communication stratégique, englobant des techniques telles que la diplomatie publique, la propagande, le FIMI et la communication d'intérêts (Mitrović, 2019). À cet égard, le cadre DISARM, un outil permettant d'aborder les éléments critiques des campagnes de communication en les décrivant sur des TTP (tactiques, techniques et procédures), propose l'approche étendue du décodage des interférences d'informations externes et de la conception de stratégies de communication efficaces.*

*Mots-clés : soft power, communication stratégique, cadre DISARM.*

### Introduction

The most commonly used concept which describes the persuasion of the desired outcome in international relations and the nonmilitary influence of attraction remains soft power by J. Nye (1990). Nevertheless, the level of global uncertainty requires the revision of the power delivery way, including the influence we call "soft". In today's increasingly complex, digitalized, and polarised world, strategic communications concepts are essential for projecting soft power under different circumstances. In contrast, deploying other nonmilitary influences with a subversive scope, usually described as sharp power, can be broadly analyzed through foreign information and manipulation interferences (FIMI).

A broad understanding of soft power concludes one's ability to shape the attitudes of others by cultivating attraction rather than coercion (Vellycia, 2021) (Nye, 2008) (Nye, 2019). However, geopolitical tension and intense competition make soft power strategies increasingly challenging and tend to be harmful. The soft power approach is usually witnessed within the competitive environment, in which nonmilitary confrontation is represented as the hard power, which means coercion instead of attraction.

Nevertheless, even in the condition of military conflict or geopolitical confrontation, when it is becoming harder and harder to promote interests relying on the state attractiveness, soft power instruments remain broadly applied by their counterparts, even if, in such cases, we do not mean promoting attraction.

However, it still does not aim to coerce. In this circumstance, we usually confront the instruments of persuasion used for targeting the internal affairs of the counterpart by influencing emotions, perceptions, and cognitions of societies in a way that cultivates losing position; we call this approach sharp power within the J. Nye concept. Therefore, the soft power concept generally requires a more nuanced interpretation of current circumstances.

Strategic communication is the practical way to influence and project power (Nye, 2008). In particular, communication means influencing the receiver with the sender's message. Therefore, in the current geopolitical context, strategic communications are critical in forming and delivering messages and responses in terms of geopolitical competition. At the same time, sharp powers remain the instruments of influence, which various scholars have analyzed as manifestations of disinformation, fake news, propaganda, information operations, etc. Foreign information manipulation interferences (FIMI) represent multifaceted threats to democratic processes and institutions corresponding to sharp power goals. The FIMI concept highlights the role of foreign nature in such interferences as well as the necessity to analyse not only the information environment but also actors' behaviour as the influence of other areas. Therefore, in terms of sharp power FIMI involve a deliberate effort by external actors to exploit vulnerabilities in a target country's information ecosystem, often using sophisticated techniques to amplify divisive narratives and manipulate public opinion (Bârgăoanu & Pană, 2024).

However, none of the approaches—neither strategic communications in the context of soft power, nor FIMI in the context of sharp power—give a clear and structured taxonomy of the methods applied to project power. The lack of comprehensive system analyses affects the capabilities to analyse both soft and sharp power manifestations, their stages of application, and their effects, and creates difficulties in designing effective responses.

The DISARM Framework, developed to address the FIMI (foreign information and manipulation interferences) threats, was created in 2022 by MITRE, FIU, and CogSecCollab groups of experts, who worked over merging the best cybersecurity frameworks such as AMITT and SPICE to create the methodology to confront malign information threats, especially foreign information and manipulation interferences.

This article examines the application of the DISARM Framework to sharp and soft strategies within the J. Nye concept. It analyzes its effectiveness, potential risks, and the ability to design responses. The paper also addresses the gap by utilizing the DISARM Framework to analyze strategic communication and FIMI campaigns in this context.

### When "Soft" Is Coming "Sharp"

While soft power, as the ability to shape the attitudes and preferences of others and the power to attract, often leads to acquiescence, the ability to get the outcome one wishes from others because of appeal relevant to the cultural or ideological context (Nye, 2004). This understanding is only meaningful within a competition or a conflict of objectives, where persuasion and attraction are seen as the means to influence behaviour.

While the liberal paradigm, mainly from the nation-centred approach, considers soft power as the instrument with which a particular state intends to maximize its gain, the realism approach to international relations suggests the context in which states are engaged in international rivalry, and simultaneously, soft power becomes the instrument of this "rivalry" (Patalakh, 2016). Several recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further digitalization, Russian aggression against Ukraine, etc., have drastically impacted international relations and the way governments interact and influence each other, illustrating this rivarly in verious extensions. This shift also influences the way of power projection and its nature over adversaries and allies.

The concept of soft power has undergone several adjustments since Joseph Nye introduced it in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Nye, 1990). In its narrowest sense, soft power is particularly the power of attractiveness, which consequently creates a capability to "get others to want what you want" with this power, which consists of your good reputation, positive image, and other elements. However, Nye's latest definition of soft power is much broader, which persists that the soft power is "the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the option means of framing the agenda, persuasion, and positive attraction" (Nye, 2004).

Even though redefinition has generated some confusion over the concept among scholars (Fan., 2006), Nye's conception of soft power seems to have always been the same: to influence someone with the use of soft power means to be capable of getting from what you want without any resort to payment or coercion. Unlike the broad term, soft power covers state capacities to project own will through the positive image, ability to shape perceptions in the target society and obtain desired outcome (Patalakh, 2016).

However, the "softness" of soft power and its presumable focus on noncoercive methods and instruments are still very relative. In contrast to hard power, which is primarily military capacity, economic power can be considered "soft". Still, economic power is moderately hard compared to cultural power. Therefore, all powers depend on context—who relates what to whom under what circumstances. Therefore, soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of a willing interpreter and receiver (Fan, 2008).

Strategic Communication corresponds with J. Nye's conceptual understanding of the ability to co-opt instead of overtly coerce, shape preferences, and conform to national interests. This gives extended room for composing a comprehensive understanding of the instrumental role of communication in this context. Therefore, strategic communication can be a manifestation of soft power, which delivers and frames means as well as the elements of soft power attractiveness. In this political context, strategic communication will derive from the goal of projecting influence and protecting against foreign penetration.

While soft power provides the notional understanding of what influence is, how it can be set, proceeded, and even its effect measured, strategic communications consider techniques how to deliver narratives and messages strategically in order to put influence, therefore, answering the question "how". Via this approach, we can suggest that strategic

communications are one of the tools delivering soft power and the tool for obtaining the main scope of soft power—which is influence.

The notion of sharp power is also relatevely between soft power and hard power or even the mix of both in a particular circumstance and describes the use of noncoercove capacities of state, but not for projecting attractiveness, but for undermininig other states' systems and meddle into the internal affairs. Compared to the soft and hard power, sharp power seeks to manipulate and deceive, rather than attract or coerce. It involves disinformation, censorship, propaganda, foreign information and manipulation interferences (FIMI), the exploitation of openness in democratic societies vulnarabilities etc.

However, conceptualization of sharp power is vastly different from that of hard and soft power because it relies on the various sources compared to the soft and hard power. Soft and hard power both aim to shape the behavior of others, but sharp power seeks to distort and manipulate the information landscape and often targets the context itself, rather than targeted actors' cognitive disposition or both.

From the perspective of the competition, sharp power's starting point becomes manipulation with with considering local context in order to cultivate desired outcome, thus subverting or corrupting facts and information to achieve strategic goals. (Ikenberry & Nye, 2004) (Vuving, 2009).

**The DISARM Framework for FIMI and Stratcomm Analysis in the Context of Soft and Sharp Power Projection**

Strategic communications emerge as a vital mechanism of soft power as the means of persuasion, offering instruments for shaping narratives, managing public diplomacy, and fostering cultural affinity within the information environment. However, modern geopolitical competition increasingly involves communication and behavioural influence, as seen in foreign information manipulation and interference incidents, which go far beyond the informational space into the broader behavioural settlement (EUAC, 2022).

Sharp power has emerged as a distinct concept that differs from soft and hard power. Forged by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (Walker at al., 2020), the term sharp power refers to using manipulative information techniques, coercion, and interference to undermine institutions, distort narratives, and erode democratic resilience. Unlike soft power, it seeks to exploit openness to manipulate and deceive, often in ways that blur the line between influence and coercion.

Therefore, while strategic communications focus on narrative influence within the information environment, modern influence operations extend beyond just communications—they involve coordinated behaviours aimed at shaping the political, social, and psychological landscape of target audiences. This is where the DISARM framework becomes relevant.

Initially developed for disinformation threat analysis, the DISARM Framework is highly valuable in strategic communications, particularly when analyzing and countering foreign information manipulation and interferences (FIMI) and soft and sharp power operationalization.

Strategic communications, as a soft power instrument, aims to influence perceptions, shape narratives, and guide public opinion through attraction; the DISARM Framework offers a structured methodology, allowing the unfolding malign impact of the FIMI and influence operations, helping to identify boundaries and limitations of the soft and sharp power.

The DISARM Framework is a methodology for analyzing influence campaigns based on the best cybersecurity (primarily STIX – Structured Threat Information eXpression) and disinformation analysis (AMITT – Adversarial Misinformation and Influence Tactics and Techniques) models. It was created to address information threats in 2022, and it represents the detailed taxonomy of FIMI manifestation in its tactics, techniques, procedures, and countermeasures. The framework provides a common language for documenting influence operations, extending a grasp of a decades-long struggle for "hearts and minds" via propaganda, influence operations, and information warfare, meaning via sharp power strategies (Terp & Breuer, 2022).

DISARM framework provides a defensive and offensive blueprint for influence in international relations, ensuring that soft power strategies are resilient against adversarial sharp power threats. In particular, it consists of the "Blue team" with the list of defensive TTPs and the "Red team" with the models of attacks and malign interferences and open-source repositories of descriptions, mitigations, and examples (AMITT Design Guide – version 1.0). DISARM Framework enables observers to monitor, collect, and label incidents and campaigns within a common language, facilitating standardized knowledge dissemination and response design.

The DISARM Framework approach is rooted in AMITT disinformation understanding, which is represented by a triangle with several levels. The bottom level is the artefacts (visible pieces of information). Artifactsare the messages, images, accounts, relationships, and groups a disinformation actor uses to create narratives and incidents. Artefacts are visible in each incident, often in large volumes, and are the disinformation layer that data scientists and other data specialists usually work on.

The next level is the narrative, which represents the story that usually directs beliefs. Narratives are the stories on which people base their beliefs: "identity narratives" about who they are, "in-group" and "out-group" narratives about the groups that they do and do not belong to, and other narratives about what is happening in the world around them. The next level consists of incidents. These are shorter-term sets of disinformation activity regarding a specific topic or event. An event might drive them, such as the opportunity to make money or other motives.

The top level is the campaign, the general strategy of communicating or physically arranging the needed perspective. It has longer-term objectives. Clint Watts states that longer-term actors are labelled "advanced persistent manipulators" (APMs). Usually, APMs are nation-state actors who use disinformation to attack. Campaigns typically contain numerous incidents, sometimes happening simultaneously.

While the attacker sees the whole pyramid from the top down, the defender usually sees it from the bottom up, working back from artefacts to understand incidents and campaigns. The response for each FIMI manifestation aims to provide a detailed catalogue of the FIMI threats with a description of their peculiarities.

AMITT's phases are grouped into activities and generally represent four phases: planning, preparation, execution and evaluation (DISARM Framework). And they are the following:

- Strategic planning: define the desired strategic end state of the incident.
- Objective planning: create clear, measurable, and achievable tactical task objectives for the incident.
- Develop people: develop online and offline users and agents, including automated personas.

- Develop networks: develop online and offline communities and transmission methods.
- Micro-targeting: target particular populations of people.
- Develop content: create and acquire content used in the incident.
- Channel selection: set up specific target, delivery, amplification and manipulation channels for incidents.
- Pump priming: release content on a targeted small scale before general release, including releasing seed narratives.
- Exposure: release content to the general public or push to a larger population.
- Go physical: move the incident into the physical world.
- Persistence: keep the incident 'alive' beyond the incident creators' efforts.
- Measure Effectiveness: measure the effectiveness of the incident for use in planning future events.

In this context, the DISARM framework emerges as a promising tool for defence against such threats. It provides a structured approach to identifying, analyzing, and mitigating the risks of disinformation and influence operations (Bârgăoanu & Pană, 2024). The framework's effectiveness lies in its comprehensive model for mapping the purpose, actions, results, and techniques of influence campaigns.

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