SOFT POWER AS A SECURITY THREAT: HOW GLOBAL VIDEO PLATFORMS ARE REDEFINING NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21970131

Abstract

For decades, soft power was understood as a peaceful instrument of international influence-a nation's ability to attract and persuade others through culture, values, and ideas rather than force. Today, however, the rise of global video platforms such as TikTok and YouTube has transformed soft power into something far more contested: a domain where influence overlaps with information control, data access, and narrative shaping, leading many governments to regard foreign-owned platforms not merely as commercial services, but as potential threats to national sovereignty. This article examines how third countries-across Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond-are caught between the enormous popular appeal of these platforms and growing concerns that they enable external powers to shape public opinion, harvest sensitive data, and bypass national laws. It argues that the soft power wielded through global video platforms has fundamentally altered the meaning of national sovereignty, extending competition into the daily feeds of ordinary citizens and forcing governments to defend their informational borders as seriously as their physical ones.

Keywords: soft power, digital sovereignty, global video platforms, national security, data sovereignty, narrative control, TikTok, content moderation, information borders.

1. Introduction: The Transformation of a Concept

When Joseph Nye introduced the idea of soft power in the early 1990s, it was widely seen as the gentle side of international relations-the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion. Cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, educational partnerships, and artistic exports were the tools of this trade. They operated openly, their origins were generally known, and they rarely threatened the fundamental authority of nation-states. Soft power was an addition to state power, not a challenge to it.[1]

The explosive growth of algorithm-driven video platforms has rewritten this understanding. Platforms such as TikTok, owned by China's ByteDance, and YouTube, owned by the United States-based Alphabet/Google, now operate in nearly every country on earth, serving billions of users with content selected by largely opaque recommendation systems. These platforms are formally private companies, yet they carry the cultural norms, business practices, legal obligations, and indirect influence of their countries of origin. They have become the primary public square for hundreds of millions of people, especially the young, and in doing so they have acquired powers that historically belonged only to states: shaping public discourse, deciding which ideas gain visibility, and collecting vast volumes of personal and behavioral data.[2]

This reality has produced a profound shift in perspective. For many governments outside the United States and China, soft power is no longer seen as a benign cultural exchange. It is increasingly viewed as a tool of foreign influence—a means by which great

[1] Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5–12.
[2] Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Data, Influence, and Sovereignty: Global Perspectives on Digital Platforms* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2025), 14–18.

powers can project power inward, across borders, directly into the daily lives of their citizens, without ever deploying a soldier or signing a treaty. Soft power, in this view, has become a security concern. This article explores why, and how the struggle over digital sovereignty is redefining what national sovereignty means in the twenty-first century.

2. Soft Power Turned Inward: The New Geography of Influence

Traditional soft power flowed outward: a great power projected its culture outward to win friends and influence abroad. Digital platforms have reversed this direction. Now, soft power flows inward: the United States and China project influence directly into other countries, through systems that citizens invite onto their phones voluntarily, often with little awareness of the broader geopolitical dimension.[3]

This creates a paradox that lies at the heart of the modern sovereignty crisis. Citizens in nearly every country want access to these platforms. They use them to communicate, create, learn, and entertain themselves. Platforms have become indispensable infrastructure of modern life. Yet because they are foreign-owned and operate across borders, they operate largely outside the full legal and regulatory control of the countries where they are most widely used.[4]

When a platform can determine which political topics trend, which cultural voices are amplified, and which viewpoints are suppressed, it exercises powers that are essentially public in nature—but are held by private companies subject to laws and pressures from a foreign government. When that platform also collects precise location data, behavioral patterns, biometric information, and social connections from millions of citizens, it creates risks that no traditional broadcaster or cultural institute ever posed. In this sense, the platforms do not merely carry soft power-they embody it, institutionalize it, and make it continuous and inescapable.[5]

For smaller and mid-sized countries, this creates an uncomfortable reality: the most powerful communications systems operating within their territory are owned and controlled by companies based in Washington or Beijing. This alone represents a partial erosion of sovereignty. Authority over the national public square has partially migrated abroad.

3. The Data Dimension: Sovereignty Over Information

One of the clearest ways video platforms challenge national sovereignty is through data. Sovereignty has always meant authority over what happens within national territory. Today, much of what happens within a country—communications, commerce, social interaction, political expression—leaves a digital trail that is stored on servers, often located outside national borders, and subject to the laws of another country.[6]

Concerns differ depending on the platform. Governments examining TikTok have expressed fears that user data could be accessed by the Chinese government under national security legislation, creating a means of monitoring populations, tracking dissidents, or mapping social and political networks within another country. Governments examining YouTube and other American platforms note that United States law requires companies to hand over data to federal authorities upon request, often without notifying the user. In both

[3] United Nations, *Digital Borders and National Sovereignty in the 21st Century* (New York: United Nations, 2026), 22–24.

[4] Pew Research Center, *Public Perceptions of Foreign Platforms and Data Security Across 24 Nations* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2025), 31–35.

[5] CSIS, *Data, Influence, and Sovereignty*, 21–23.

[6] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Global Digital Sovereignty Report 2025* (Geneva: UNCTAD, 2025), 47–52.

cases, the concern is the same: a foreign power may have access to detailed information about citizens and residents that their own government cannot fully control or protect.[7]

This concern has driven a wave of policy responses grouped under the idea of data sovereignty: the principle that data generated within a country should be subject to that country's laws and preferably stored within its borders. Nations across Central Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Europe have introduced or considered laws requiring local data storage, limiting cross-border transfers, or restricting what data platforms may collect. These measures are not merely about privacy; they are about reasserting basic national authority. If a government cannot protect the information of its own people from foreign access, its sovereignty is compromised regardless of its military strength or diplomatic standing.[8]

4. Narrative Control: Who Defines Reality Within Borders?

Even more sensitive than data is control over the flow of ideas. National sovereignty depends in part on the ability of a state to maintain its own public discourse, set its own national priorities, and explain its own policies to its own people. Global video platforms complicate this profoundly, because they introduce powerful external forces that shape what citizens see, hear, and believe.[9]

Critics argue that recommendation systems act as invisible editors. They can amplify certain narratives and suppress others, either by design or through the cumulative effects of their ranking logic. This becomes politically significant when external narratives-whether about geopolitics, social values, protest movements, or government legitimacy-spread rapidly across a platform, reshaping domestic public debate in ways that elected authorities did not author and may not welcome.[10]

Different governments perceive different risks. Some worry that foreign platforms will be used to promote political dissent, destabilize elected governments, or encourage protest movements aligned with foreign interests. Others fear that platforms will be used to spread propaganda favorable to a great power, to normalize certain geopolitical viewpoints, or to erode local cultural values in favor of foreign norms. In both sets of concerns, the underlying fear is the same: loss of narrative sovereignty-the ability to decide what is discussed within national borders.[11]

This is why content moderation policies have become such a source of friction. When a platform removes or restricts content that is legal within a host country, or allows content that the host country considers harmful, it is effectively exercising a form of extraterritorial authority. It is saying: our standards, not yours, apply within your territory. For many governments, this is an unacceptable assertion of power. It means the most powerful speech regulator in the country is a foreign corporation.[12]

5. The Regulatory Trap: Caught Between Appeal and Authority

The central difficulty facing most countries is that they cannot simply ban or replace these platforms without alienating their own populations. TikTok and YouTube are not merely services; they are cultural ecosystems, economic engines, and essential communications tools. Banning them can cut citizens off from global culture, education,

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[7] European Commission, *The Digital Services Act: A Framework for Digital Sovereignty* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024), 33–36.

[8] UNCTAD, *Global Digital Sovereignty Report 2025*, 54–58.

[9] CSIS, *Data, Influence, and Sovereignty*, 28–30.

[10] Network Contagion Research Institute, *Algorithmic Curation and Narrative Control* (Princeton: NCRI, 2024), 11–15.

[11] East Asia Forum, "Platforms, Public Opinion, and Sovereignty in Southeast Asia," 2025, 4–6.

[12] European Commission, *The Digital Services Act*, 41–43.

commerce, and family connections abroad. It can also drive young people to use unofficial means of access, making oversight harder rather than easier.[13]

This creates what might be called the regulatory trap: governments recognise the platforms as challenges to sovereignty, yet they also recognise that they cannot fully control them and cannot easily replace them. Different countries have responded in different ways:

- The European Union has pursued a middle path through the Digital Services Act, imposing uniform transparency, moderation, and data rules on all platforms regardless of origin, attempting to create a neutral third standard that protects European sovereignty without aligning with either Washington or Beijing.[14]
- Nations in Central Asia and parts of the Middle East have tended toward stricter oversight, demanding local data storage, requiring transparency reports, and occasionally restricting features or access when platforms are seen as interfering in domestic affairs.[15]
- Southeast Asian countries have generally sought negotiation and compromise, working with platforms to remove locally prohibited content while accepting that full control is impossible.

Notably, almost no country has found a fully satisfactory solution. Every approach involves trade-offs: stricter rules may push platforms to leave or operate less effectively; lighter rules may mean ceding greater influence abroad.

6. Competing Visions of Digital Order

The debate over platforms is ultimately a debate over the future of the internet itself. Two competing visions are emerging:

The first is the borderless vision, associated largely with the United States and its major technology companies. It holds that information and services should flow freely across borders, that standards should be global, and that private companies should play a central role in governance. Soft power, in this view, is the natural outcome of openness: the most attractive ideas and products will win global influence, and governments should accept this reality.[16]

The second is the digital sovereignty vision, advanced by many countries including China, Russia, and numerous nations across the Global South. It holds that the internet must respect national borders, that governments must retain authority over information and data within their territory, and that no foreign power or corporation should be able to shape public discourse or collect data without permission. In this view, unregulated platforms are instruments of foreign influence, and soft power deployed through them is a form of coercion.[17]

Neither vision has fully prevailed. What is clear is that for most countries, the era of unregulated global platforms is ending. Governments everywhere are learning that soft power projected through video platforms is not neutral. It carries the values, interests, and potential influence of its country of origin. And when that influence operates at the scale of billions, it is indistinguishable from power itself.[18]

7. Conclusion: Sovereignty in the Age of the Algorithm

The rise of global video platforms has fundamentally redefined what it means to be a sovereign nation. In the past, sovereignty meant control over territory, borders, and

[13] Pew Research Center, *Public Perceptions of Foreign Platforms*, 42–45.
[14] European Commission, *The Digital Services Act*, 55–60.
[15] United Nations, *Digital Borders and National Sovereignty*, 37–39.
[16] CSIS, *Data, Influence, and Sovereignty*, 44–46.
[17] United Nations, *Digital Borders and National Sovereignty*, 45–48.
[18] UNCTAD, *Global Digital Sovereignty Report 2025*, 66–68.

institutions. Today, it increasingly means control over information, data, and the systems that shape public perception.

Soft power, once welcomed as a gentle alternative to force, has become a source of insecurity precisely because it is now so powerful, so pervasive, and so difficult to trace. When a foreign platform shapes what citizens see, where their data resides, and which ideas gain influence within national borders, it does not merely compete for attention—it erodes the practical authority of the state. That is why governments increasingly treat these concerns as security matters. They are not overreacting; they are recognizing that influence at scale is itself a form of power, and that power exercised within one's borders, without consent, is a challenge to sovereignty.[19]

The solution will not be found in banning platforms or surrendering to them. It will be found in a new international settlement—one that acknowledges the global nature of these services while respecting the legitimate rights and interests of the countries where they operate. Until that settlement exists, the tension between global platforms and national sovereignty will remain one of the defining struggles of the twenty-first century. Soft power has become a security threat not because it is inherently bad, but because it has grown too large, too powerful, and too unaccountable to be treated as mere culture. It has become an instrument of state power, and sovereignty demands that it be treated as such.

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[19] Nye, *Soft Power*, 132–135.