

# The Soft Power Approach to Ship Sanitation <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Soft power is a geopolitics concept that implies achieving what one wants through non-coercitive measures. In the context of ship sanitation, port health authorities can provide “hard” and coercitive mandates, and also non-coercitive recommendations. Herein we examine the presence of soft power in ship sanitation literature, the advantages and limitations of hard power, and the importance of the legal framework. Soft power often requires investing time in dialogue and mutual understanding and maintaining a good image; but in any case in the context of ship sanitation awareness and collaboration of all involved parts is necessary for long-term success. To conclude we recommend a careful combination of hard power and soft power.

**Keywords:** soft power; ship sanitation; inspection; legal compliance



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## 1. Introduction

The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye, an American geopolitics professor and expert. Power is defined as the ability to get others to do what one wants; soft power involves others actually wanting what one wants. Soft power is also related to cultural propaganda and cultural influence, and can be defined as “persuasion through the force of ideas, knowledge, and cultural values”, while hard power is “coercion through political, economic, and military might” [1].

This concept and related ideas have often been discussed in popular culture:

*“I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman, and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she let's herself be overcome by these rather than by those who proceed coldly.”*  
(Niccolo Machiaveli)

*“When in doubt, do nothing.”* (Leo Tolstoi)

*“Abilities wither under criticism, they blossom under encouragement.”* (Dale Carnegie)

## 2. Material and Methods

In this communication, we describe the principles, practice, and limitations of soft power, from the perspective of a Spanish Port Health Authority.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The Principles of Soft Power in Practice

The key behind soft power when it comes to the relationships between public and private corporations is that an institution could have the legal ability to order and command to achieve some objectives, but chooses to engage in dialogue, communication, and understanding, so that these objectives are achieved in the long term with less effort.

The implications of this principle is that the short-term costs, in terms of communication and negotiation, are outweighed by the long-term advantages of a more fluid, swift, and sustainable achievement of the intended aims.

In any case, soft power can be seen as a complementary approach, i.e., another way of doing things. For example, in the context of quality management systems, the ISO 9001:2015 version introduced a risk-based approach; it could be postulated that risk prevention is better achieved when thinking in terms of risks pervade quality management, as a complement to “hard” regulations.

In Spain, the Administrative Procedure legislation (Law 39/2005) governs all acts in all public administrations, including the Foreign Health activities. In this procedure, administrative acts have several phases (initiation, ordenation, instruction, and finalization).

Soft power can be present in the form of precautionary measures with less precise objectives, which could require feedback, and in the form of the hearing tramit, in which personal face-to-face communication could help bolster mutual understanding.

Furthermore, those involved in an administrative procedure are bestowed with many rights, including being treated with respect and deference, being informed, receiving copies of the documents related to their procedures, making allegations that serve their cause, etc.

Finally, in the resolution phase, the legal framework and the specific circumstances of the case piece together in the form of hard power.

Soft power is strongly present in ship sanitation regulations, in the form of recommended practices (as opposed to requirements), for example, in the *WHO Guide to Ship Sanitation* (2011, 3rd edition) (e.g., “it is recommended that *E. coli* or thermotolerant (faecal) coliforms be monitored at representative taps (e.g., drinking fountains)”). In the checklists of the *WHO Handbook for Inspection of Ships and Issuance of Ship Sanitation Certificates* (2011), many items appear either as requirements or recommendations, both of which are to be provided by the inspecting officers (e.g., “adequate ventilation system or properly screened window should be in place, especially in sleeping rooms and mess rooms, to prevent the spread of disease”, “when appropriate, apply measures to ensure effective screening against vector entry”, p. 40).

This is also the case for the *European Manual for Hygiene Standards and Communicable Disease Surveillance on Passenger Ships* (EU Shipsan Act Joint Action, 2016, 2nd edition): “Recommended standards represent good practices, which are not currently legislated but the implementation of which will help ensure a high level of hygiene” (p. 14); “crew members are our eyes and ears—there should be regular training to maintain awareness” (p. 171); “ideally, maintain cold water below 25 °C (77 °F)” (p. 183).

The reason for the success of soft power is that authorities and those in charge of elaborating prescriptive rules usually have incomplete information about the practicality and long-term sustainability of preventive measures, including factors such as crew changes, ship maintenance, and future mechanic works in the ship. For example, in the event of a detected contamination during a ship inspection procedure, the implementation of a water safety plan, adapted to the characteristics of the vessel, along with recommendations to increase awareness, are reasonable and sustainable measures to reduce water contamination in the long term; whereas disinfecting and flushing the water circuit is a necessary short-term prescribed measure that would have a moderate/minor impact in the long term. Therefore, the dynamics of soft power are complementary and not opposed to hard power; a case-specific combination of both is reasonable.

Public image is a relevant component of soft power; in this context, a port authority could be perceived as a useful public service, and not just an authority that imposes sanctions.

### 3.2. The Limitations of Soft Power

- \* Variable compliance and effectiveness hinders the applicability of soft power.
- \* As soft power emphasizes communication and understanding, soft power requires time and patience, which are often limited resources in practice.

- \* Legal frameworks might not have provisions for soft power applicability. Soft power does not preclude the application of hard power, but often introduces nuances in the procedure.

#### 4. Conclusions

We consider soft power to be an effective way of acting by competent port health authorities when carrying out their inspections and control activities at ports and ships. Educating and convincing is better than forcing, although port health authorities must keep in mind that they have the capacity to force and sanction in the case of repeated non-compliance.

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