Educating our future military leaders on the importance of smart power

January 4, 2023 By Gretchen Klingler (https://www.usglc.org/staff/gretchen-klingler/)

There is no doubt the American people have great respect for our military servicemembers. As a result, the United States military is well resourced, equipped, and expertly trained. For many of our servicemembers, that training starts as officer candidates at a military service academy.

As one of five military service academies, the Air Force Academy educates and trains our future Air and Space Force officers in core courses for their academic degrees, as well as military competencies, to be the next generation of national security leaders. One lesson established early in the cadets' education is on the various elements of national power, and the importance of combining these elements effectively. This includes not only the hard power of military tactics, but also soft power tools that should be utilized to round out our nation's larger geopolitical strategy.

Teaching Hard and Soft Power

"Grand Strategy" aims to secure (https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_18.pdf) and advance a nation's long-term, enduring, core interests over time. Beyond individual battles, operations, and conflicts, a "Grand Strategy" is a vision combined with a multi-dimensional action plan that employs the various instruments of "national power" represented by the acronym DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic).

The military "M" in DIME places a significant focus on preparing for the use of hard power. "Hard power includes kinetic strikes on targets: bombs, missiles, strikes, guns—mostly firepower—however any measurable and quantifiable impact on a target can be considered a type of hard

power," shares Master Sergeant (MSgt) Bonnie Rushing, one of the first enlisted instructors at the Air Force Academy. This hard, military-focused power is taught as one of several instruments in our nation's grand strategy tool kit. The Academy also teaches our future military officers the importance of soft power.

3:02

Soft power contains elements of the remaining DIME letters: diplomacy, information, and economics. Rushing teaches that soft power is more qualitative. "It includes elements like diplomacy, information operations, and international aid programs—all of the pieces that form the picture of our country's reputation and influence on the world stage." Although the effects of soft power occur more slowly over time and can take longer to be able to measure than the results of hard power, the results are often seen in stronger and more stable relations with friends and allies, and fewer people around the world living in zones at risk for conflict.

Smart Power as effective Military Strategy

There has been a significant push for adding "smart power" to the Air Force Academy's course curriculum. "Smart Power" is a more tailored approach to how we utilize hard and soft power, using the various elements of each concept to create the right level of impact on the intended audience.

In addition to her role as Course Director for Air Power and Joint Operations Strategy, Rushing also teaches International Security Studies. Both of these mandatory courses include lessons not only on the hard power of the military, but also on the strategic use of diplomacy and development, including what it means to implement a smart power strategy. "We have to think about the specific and unique needs of an intended audience, including their culture and perceptions, and how both nations can benefit from American efforts."

Some are surprised to learn that MSgt Rushing does not advocate for a continuous "military forward" foreign policy. Even if hard power must be employed, Rushing's view is that it must be utilized in conjunction with soft power. "There are a lot of people that think it's strange that I'm in the Air Force, I teach at the Air Force Academy, and I am telling the cadets: Hard Power is a last resort." In her opinion, the "M" in DIME should, whenever possible, only be used when all other options have been exhausted.

“We can use our military to protect the national security of both ourselves and our partners during situations where malevolent actors don’t give us other options.” The goal is to share that although the military is an effective tool, it’s not the only tool nor is it an effective or necessary tool in every situation. Diplomacy, information, and economic development programs are equ... important in our national security strategy, and that lesson is instilled in our Air Force and Force officers even before they commission.

3:02

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer and contributors and do not reflect the view or positions of the U.S. Air Force Academy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Space Force, or the Department of Defense.

Photo Credit: Checkpoints magazine (USAFA AOG)

GRETCHEN KLINGLER (HTTPS://WWW.USGLC.ORG/STAFF/GRETCHEN-KLINGLER/)
Veterans Outreach Manager