

The Role of Soft Power in US Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: A Quantitative Analysis

*Ala Alkhaldeh¹, Ayman Hayajneh¹

¹Yarmouk University, Jordan

Abstract

This study explores the numerous cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors that impact U.S. policy in the Middle East. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the authors of this paper investigate the role of public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capabilities as mediators in this context. An online survey was administered to 349 professionals, professors, journalists, and government officials to collect data. Through intermediaries such as institutional capacity, public opinion, and diplomatic engagement, soft power has a positive influence on U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East, the study demonstrates. The study emphasises the significance of soft power in defining U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East, as well as the need for effective public diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capacity development to enhance U.S. soft power in the region.

Keywords: Middle East, PLS-SEM, Soft Power, US foreign policy

1. Introduction

Multiple nations, including the United States, are increasingly utilising the concept of soft power as a framework for their foreign policy. Soft power has been identified as an important weapon for the United States to achieve its strategic goals in the Middle East, where it has a long-standing and complex relationship. Soft power is the ability to influence others without resorting to force, as defined by Joseph Nye (Kumari, 2022). Culture, politics, and foreign policy all contribute to a country's soft power. To achieve its foreign policy goals in the Middle East, including as promoting democracy, human rights, and regional stability, the United States has learnt the value of employing soft power. The United States aims to establish confidence and foster collaboration with Middle Eastern nations through non-military techniques such as cultural and economic contacts. As an example of cultural diplomacy, the United States has supported students and intellectuals from all over the world, including the Middle East, through the Fulbright Programme (Sustarsic & Cheng, 2022). The State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) has similar goals; it aims to promote democracy and economic growth in the Middle East by aiding local civil society. As a subset of soft power, the United States has used economic aid and development projects.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has contributed funds to initiatives aimed at fostering economic growth and reducing poverty in the Middle East. Also, the United States has backed regional economic integration through programmes like the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA). Recent Middle Eastern events have brought to light the significance of soft power in determining American

*Corresponding author

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foreign policy (Siniver, & Tsourapas, 2023). For instance, the political climate of the area saw major upheaval as a result of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, and the U.S. had to modify its strategy to address these developments. Public diplomacy and cultural outreach were used as soft power strategies to bolster the regional population's desire for democracy and stability. A region with a long history, many different cultures, and intricate political dynamics is the Middle East. In addition, it has been characterised by terrorism, instability, and violence for many years (Njoya, et al., 2022). The region's massive oil deposits, the potential for terrorism, and its geostrategic location make it crucial to the United States strategically. Since the middle of the 20th century, the U.S. has taken a leading role in the region, with strategic objectives ranging from securing access to oil deposits to fostering democratic values and stability. The United States has also tried to manage and contain enemies like Iran while also trying to support allies in the region like Israel (Ramos, & Hikmawan, 2022). Notwithstanding the substantial financial and military resources that the United States has committed to the area, the use of hard force has not always been effective in accomplishing US strategic goals.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have highlighted the limitations of hard power and the significance of soft power in determining American foreign policy towards the Middle East. The promotion of cultural interaction, education, and economic development through soft power programmes has grown in significance in terms of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East. The United States has acknowledged that such projects can aid in relationship development, understanding, and cooperation with countries in the Middle East (Jones, 2022). One of the most effective programmes promoting cultural exchange is the Fulbright Programme, which awards scholarships to students and intellectuals from all over the world, including the Middle East, to study and perform research in the United States. By cultivating a greater understanding of American culture and values and encouraging intellectual and scientific cooperation, it has aided in the development of close connections between the United States and Middle Eastern nations. Programmes for economic development in the Middle East are another illustration of American soft power there. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has engaged in initiatives to support regional economic growth and reduce poverty. These activities can assist in generating economic possibilities and minimising the elements that fuel violence and instability (Elfversson, et al., 2023). It has been controversial to deploy soft power in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Initiatives for cultural interaction, education, and economic development are criticised for possibly failing to advance American strategic goals in the area and for possibly coming across as attempts to impose Western ideals and conventions on Middle Eastern society (Kara, 2022). In addition, some contend that the United States has not completely embraced the idea of soft power and that its initiatives in this regard have been inconsistent and inadequate (Husain, & Sahide, 2023). The paper aims to explore the potential of soft power in achieving US foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. Specifically, the study examines the mediating role of public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capacity in the relationship between US soft power and its foreign policy outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a theory of international relations that emphasises the significance of concepts, rules, and values in determining the course of global politics. Constructivists contend that there are other essential considerations in international relations in addition to a state's material interests. Instead, governments are viewed as players whose ideas, values, and identities impact how they engage with one another on a global scale (Meyer, & Li, 2022). Constructivism would propose that the deployment of soft power in the context of US foreign policy towards the Middle East indicates the country's attempt to promote its values and culture in order to influence other countries' behaviour in the area (Timuş, 2022). The United States may strive to

encourage Middle Eastern nations to adopt more liberal and democratic ideals or to work more closely with the United States on topics of shared interest by using its soft power resources, such as its cultural and ideological influence (Durrani, 2023). Constructivism places a strong emphasis on how socialisation and education play a part in international relations. This theory contends that governments gain knowledge through their contacts with other states, international organisations, and other entities (Collins, & DeWitt, 2023). This may indicate that the US can use its soft power assets to influence Middle Eastern nations to adopt more Western standards and values, such as democracy and human rights, in the context of US foreign policy towards the Middle East (AL-Obaidan, 2022).

2.2 Institutionalism Theory

A theory of international relations known as institutionalism emphasises the significance of international institutions and norms in influencing state action (Pan, 2022). According to this view, the institutions and standards that underpin international contacts have an impact on state behaviour in addition to material interests. Institutionalists contend that the strength and legitimacy of the institutions advancing soft power methods determine how effective they are in the context of the use of soft power by the US in the Middle East (Ellis, & sEntERs Piazza, 2022). For instance, if the US is fostering cultural exchanges or business alliances as part of its soft power strategy, the accomplishment of these activities may depend on the standing and legitimacy of the organisations supporting them (Alqaraleh, et al., 2022). However, institutionalists would contend that for the US to effectively advance its soft power objectives in the Middle East, it may be necessary to cooperate with the region's already-existing international institutions (Bell, & Kennan, 2022). This may entail collaborating with international organisations, like the United Nations, or working through regional groups, like the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council, to promote its principles and culture across the region (Freer, 2022). Overall, institutionalism suggests that the strength and legitimacy of the international institutions and norms that support them are crucial to the success of soft power strategies in the Middle East and that effective communication and collaboration with these institutions is crucial for fostering understanding and cooperation in the region.

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1 Effect of Soft Power on US Foreign Policy

Numerous issues are covered in the considerable literature on the application of soft power in American foreign policy. The usefulness of soft power in attaining foreign policy goals has been the subject of numerous studies. Scholars have proposed that cultural exports and exchange programmes can be utilised to affect the international system, advance democracy, and shape perceptions (Keating, & Kaczmarska, 2019; Blair, et al., 2022; Mol, et al., 2022). Numerous case studies have highlighted the difficulties in influencing people's opinions in the Middle East and advocated for the advancement of American soft power through assisting civil society (Zhu, et al., 2019; Farouk, 2023). According to recent studies, the perceived failure of US democracy and the isolationist actions of the Trump administration are two reasons why US soft power has decreased (Nye, 2023). However, researchers have also hypothesised that through encouraging cooperation and bolstering international institutions, soft power can handle major issues like pandemics and climate change (Dolan, 2023). Hence, based on the above evidence, this study developed the following hypothesis:

H1: *There is significant and positive effect of Soft Power (Cultural Influence, Economic Influence, Political Influence, and Ideological Influence) on US Foreign Policy*

3.2 Effect of Soft Power on Diplomatic engagement, Public opinion, and Institutional capacity

The capacity to attract people to one's aims without using force is referred to as soft power. In terms of US foreign policy, it has grown increasingly important. In order to change public opinion, deepen diplomatic ties,

and enhance institutional capacity in the US, soft power can be used. This literature review will look at recent empirical studies in this area. Recent studies have demonstrated how soft power may shape public opinion, encourage diplomatic engagement, and strengthen US institutions. Military actions frequently have a detrimental impact on how the public views the US, whereas exchange programmes and the promotion of American culture can have a beneficial impact (EK, 2022; Yaseen, et al., 2022). Soft power, when combined with hard power, can promote cooperation and trust between states, especially in circumstances of interdependence (Guha, 2022). Through language study and cultural awareness training, especially in encounters with foreign communities, soft power can also improve the institutional capabilities of the US military (Ellis, & sEntERs Piazza, 2022). These studies highlight how crucial soft power is to US foreign strategy. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: *There is significant and positive effect of Soft Power (Cultural Influence, Economic Influence, Political Influence, and Ideological Influence) on Public opinion, Diplomatic engagement, and Institutional capacity*

3.3 Effect of Diplomatic engagement, Public opinion, and Institutional capacity on US Foreign Policy

Public opinion, diplomacy, and institutional competence are the main determinants of US foreign policy. Recent empirical research on how institutional strength, public opinion, and diplomatic engagement affect US foreign policy decisions is summarised in this literature review. According to recent studies, public opinion has a considerable impact on policymakers' choices regarding issues like military intervention, trade deals, and alliances (Jora, 2022; Pollard, et al., 2022). The decisions made by policymakers on matters like climate change, human rights, and nuclear disarmament can also be influenced by diplomatic involvement (Dumdum, 2022). Institutional capability can also affect choices about cybersecurity, international aid, and counterterrorism (Marschlich & Storie, 2022; Rhee et al., 2023). For instance, the Obama administration's success in identifying and neutralising terrorist threats depended critically on institutional competence, whereas the Trump administration's ability to strengthen institutional competencies was necessary to increase the effectiveness of US foreign aid (Rice & Bush, 2023). Consequently, the following hypothesis was developed:

H3: *There is significant and positive effect of Diplomatic engagement, Public opinion, and Institutional capacity on US Foreign Policy*

3.4 Diplomatic engagement, Public opinion, and Institutional capacity as a Mediators

The 21st century has seen the rise of soft power as a major element of foreign policy, although the success of soft power in influencing foreign policy results depends on a number of mediating elements, including public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capability. The results of US foreign policy may depend on these factors, according to recent empirical study. Higher levels of popular support have been linked to greater positive outcomes for US foreign policy (Tang, 2023; Dakiliç, 2023) suggesting that public opinion acts as a mediator between soft power and these outcomes. When it comes to achieving foreign policy goals like promoting democracy or human rights, for example, having popular support for US policies and activities can improve the efficacy of soft power. Soft power can be more effective when engaged diplomatically. The US can increase the legitimacy of its policies and actions by engaging in diplomacy and developing close diplomatic ties with other nations. This will increase the influence of soft power on the results of foreign policy (Ha, 2022). For developing nations in particular, institutional capacity is essential for effectively transforming soft power assets into foreign policy outcomes. The ability of the government to develop, carry out, and oversee foreign policy initiatives is referred to as institutional capacity. Without sufficient institutional ability, soft power measures might not be carried out successfully, having a lessening effect on the results of foreign policy (Gallarotti, 2022). Policymakers should place a high priority on institutional

capacity building and taking part in diplomatic initiatives to boost public support for US policies and actions in order to maximise the impact of soft power. These activities may help to boost the credibility of US foreign policy initiatives and the influence of soft power on the results of foreign policy. Finally, the following hypothesis was developed:

H4: *Diplomatic engagement, Public opinion, and Institutional capacity mediate the effect of Soft Power (Cultural Influence, Economic Influence, Political Influence, and Ideological Influence) on US Foreign Policy*

4. Theoretical Framework

To provide a thorough understanding of the methods through which soft power affects US foreign policy towards the Middle East, the study draws on a number of theoretical frameworks. The study emphasises the significance of taking into account the intricate interconnections between various variables in determining the outcomes of foreign policy by exploring the mediating roles of public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capability.

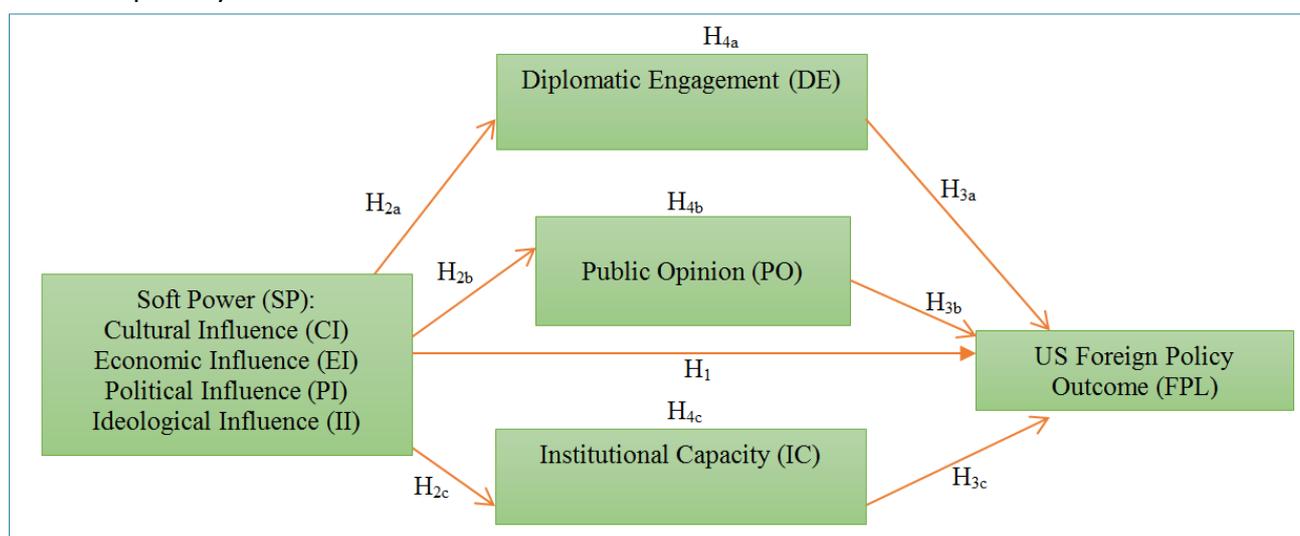


Fig. 1 Research Framework

5. Research Methodology

In order to collect data for this study, a purposeful sample of people with knowledge or experience of US foreign policy towards the Middle East was administered a questionnaire. The study focuses on Middle Eastern nations like Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel that have been the centre of US foreign policy. Purposive sampling was used for this study's sample strategy, which entails choosing instances according to predetermined standards that are pertinent to the research subject. The cases chosen for this study are those that are pertinent to US Middle Eastern foreign policy. The sample includes decision-makers, academics, journalists, and specialists who have knowledge of or experience with US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Hence, the sample consists of 349 policymakers, scholars, journalists, and experts. The data for this study is collected from primary sources using a self-administered online questionnaire. The questionnaire includes questions that measure the soft power, public opinion, diplomatic engagement, institutional capacity, and US foreign policy outcomes. The questions are based on established scales and indices that have been validated in previous studies. In this study are US soft power, public opinion, diplomatic engagement, institutional capacity, and foreign policy outcomes. US soft power is the independent variable, while public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capacity are the mediating variables. Foreign policy outcomes are the dependent variable. The Soft Power (Cultural Influence, Economic Influence, Political Influence, Ideological Influence) adopted from the previous studies of Mozaffari, and Akbar, (2022); Rabêlo Neto, et al., (2022). In addition, US foreign policy outcomes were adopted from Chu, and Recchia,

(2022). Finally, the items of public opinion, diplomatic engagement, institutional capacity were adopted from Adetiba, (2022); Moreschi, (2022). This study uses a ten-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (10).

Before the data collection, a sample of individuals with knowledge or experience in US foreign policy towards the Middle East was identified. The interviewee includes policymakers, scholars, journalists, and experts. The policymakers consist of government officials and diplomats. Government officials currently serve in critical positions within the US government, such as the Department of State, National Security Council, and other relevant agencies. They offered insights into the processes involved in formulating policy, making decisions, and carrying out US foreign policy in the Middle East. Diplomats with experience in the region are familiar with regional dynamics, bilateral relations, and Middle Eastern-related issues through personal experience. Additionally, academics, researchers, and specialists who have in-depth understanding of the political, economic, international relations, and social dynamics of the Middle East are referred to as scholars and experts in this study. Additionally, they offer analysis and viewpoints on the effects of US foreign policy and their experience in particular nations. Last but not least, media professionals and journalists have written extensively about US foreign policy in the Middle East. They gave local perspectives, firsthand accounts, and analyses of how the media affects public opinion. The media commentators and experts regularly provide analysis and commentary on US foreign policy in the Middle East. They offer perspectives on media coverage, public perception, and the interaction between media and policy.

The interviewer conducted a small group from the sample have been chosen to pre-test the questionnaire. The feedback from this pilot study was used to refine the questionnaire, ensuring it is clear, understandable, and accurately captures the required data. The interviewee fills out the questionnaire independently (self-administered), and the online survey platform automatically collects their responses. After all, responses have been received, and the data is exported for cleaning. After a suitable period, the interviewer sent reminder emails to interviewees who had not completed the survey to improve the response rate. The interviewer checked for incomplete or inconsistent responses, eliminated duplicates, and ensured the data quality before analysis. Also, the data collection was started from May 2022 to February 2023.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), a statistical technique frequently employed in social science research, was utilised to analyse the data that had been gathered. Latent variables are variables that are not directly observable but can be inferred from observed variables. PLS-SEM is particularly well suited for studying complex interactions between latent variables. PLS-SEM is an effective technique for this study's investigation of the mediating roles played by institutional capability, public opinion, and diplomatic engagement in the relationship between soft power and US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Researchers may evaluate the directionality and intensity of these associations by using PLS-SEM, revealing light on the ways that soft power affects US foreign policy in the Middle East. PLS-SEM enables the simultaneous analysis of many latent variables, allowing for a thorough assessment of the intricate interplay between institutional capacity, institutional capacity, soft power dynamics, and public opinion in the context of US foreign policy. Researchers can better understand how public opinion, diplomatic efforts, and institutional variables mitigate the influence of soft power on US foreign policy decisions by modelling these interactions.

6. Results and Discussion

It is crucial to get accurate and thorough data in order to avoid biases in the study. Missing data is a problem that researchers regularly run into since it happens when respondents don't answer certain survey questions. To address this, each measurement item's percentage of missing values was calculated using a missing value analysis. To make sure the data was as thorough as possible, the missing values were replaced with the median response for that particular question. Outliers, which are extreme results that differ greatly from the

rest of the data, are a problem that researchers also need to take into account. Outliers have the potential to affect the study's accuracy, which also makes drawing conclusions challenging. Each variable's standardised (z) values as well as histograms and box plots were evaluated to look for outliers. An outlier case was recognised if a standardised score was 4.0 or greater. This standard was developed based on earlier research by Fatemifar, et al., (2022). Any numbers above this cutoff were regarded as outliers, and remedial action was performed. The researcher in this study finds missing data and outliers in the dataset and addresses them appropriately. This guarantees that the data is as accurate and trustworthy as possible and that any biases or outliers will not have an impact on the analysis's findings.

6.1 Measurements Model

To ensure the reliability and validity of the measures used in this study, several tests were conducted. The composite reliability (CR) values were evaluated to assess internal consistency, which measures the extent to which a set of items consistently measures a latent construct. Good internal consistency was shown by CR values for all variables being more than 0.7 (Table 1). Furthermore, factor loadings were analysed, and just one variable had a factor loading below the minimum allowed value of 0.6. Previous research (Sovey et al., 2022; Guenther et al., 2023) suggests a range around this value is safe. The Cronbach Alpha (CA) value was more than 0.7, indicating high internal consistency (Kono & Sato, 2022). Finding the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values was done to test for convergent validity; AVE values above 0.5 were considered acceptable. All AVE values in this study exceeded 0.5 (Table 1), indicating good convergent validity. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker test and Hetromonotrait Analysis. The Fornell-Larcker test compares the square root of the AVE for each latent variable with the correlation between the latent variables. If the square root of the AVE for each latent variable is greater than its correlation with other variables, then discriminant validity is supported. As shown in Table 2, the variables met the criteria for discriminant validity. The Hetromonotrait Analysis involves comparing the correlation between two constructs to the correlation of each construct with itself. If the correlation between two constructs is greater than their correlation with themselves, then there is a potential issue with discriminant validity. However, in this study, all HTMT values were considerably below the threshold of 0.90, indicating that discriminant validity was not a concern (Table 3). Overall, the reliability and validity tests conducted in this study demonstrate that the measures used are reliable and valid, and that the data collected is suitable for analysis.

Table 1 Measurement Model

Variables	Loading	CA	CR	AVE
US Foreign Policy Outcomes		0.884	0.916	0.686
FPL1	0.777			
FPL2	0.881			
FPL3	0.867			
FPL4	0.824			
FPL5	Deleted			
FPL6	Deleted			
FPL7	0.785			
Soft Power		0.867	0.897	0.525
CI1	0.949			
CI2	0.950			
EI1	0.883			
EI2	0.902			
II1	0.915			
II2	0.878			

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PI1	0.859			
PI2	0.777			
Diplomatic Engagement		0.895	0.919	0.657
DE1	0.707			
DE2	0.856			
DE3	0.862			
DE4	0.88			
DE5	0.846			
DE6	0.692			
Public Opinion		0.849	0.885	0.599
PO1	0.774			
PO2	0.797			
PO3	0.798			
PO4	0.828			
PO5	0.748			
PO6	0.717			
PO7	0.713			
PO8	0.671			
Institutional Capacity		0.804	0.837	0.596
IC1	0.720			
IC2	0.651			
IC3	0.730			
IC4	0.705			
IC5	0.805			
IC6	0.653			
IC7	0.729			
IC8	0.689			

Table 2 Fornell-Larcker criterion analysis to check discriminant validity

	DE	FPL	IC	PO	SP
DE	0.811				
FPL	0.754	0.828			
IC	0.683	0.613	0.772		
PO	0.676	0.697	0.589	0.706	
SP	0.660	0.514	0.654	0.509	0.725

Table 3 Heterotrait Analysis Discriminant Validity

	DE	FPL	IC	PO	SP
DE	-				
FPL	0.799	-			
IC	0.664	0.764	-		
PO	0.688	0.672	0.507	-	
SP	0.716	0.602	0.686	0.796	-

6.2 Common Method Bias (CMB)

In this study, the results of Harman's single factor test showed that the first factor explained 45.218% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold, indicating that CMB is not likely to be a major concern. Moreover, the CLF analysis also indicated that the addition of a common factor did not improve the model fit, further supporting the absence of CMB in the study. Consequently, these analyses suggest that the study results are not significantly affected by CMB.

Table 4 CMB Result

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	12.661	45.218	45.218	12.661	45.218	45.218

6.3 Goodness of Fit (GoF)

As PLS-SEM lacks a comprehensive Goodness of Fit (GoF) index, researchers frequently depend on the R2 value to assess the model's explanatory power (Aybek, & Karakaş, 2022). In this study, the model's fit was assessed using the Goodness of Fit (GoF) index for PLS-SEM. The examination of measurement and structural models indicated that all models were accurate and that the proposed theoretical model had powerful predictive and explanatory abilities.

$$GoF = \sqrt{AVE \times R^2} = \sqrt{0.686 \times 0.741} = \sqrt{0.508} = 0.713$$

Table 5 presents the R2 values indicating the proportion of the dependent variable's variance explained by the independent variables. The findings reveal that US Foreign Policy Outcomes predictors account for only 74.1% of the variance, while the remaining 15.9% of the variation is attributed to error variance. Additionally, the Diplomatic Engagement, Public Opinion, and Institutional Capacity predictors account for 43.5%, 50.3%, and 73.0% respectively of the variance. Furthermore, all exogenous latent constructs in this study have small predictive relevance Q2 values. According to Gamil, and Abd Rahman, (2023), a Q2 value of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate small, medium, or large predictive relevance for a particular endogenous construct, respectively.

Table 5 Summary of the Co-efficient of Determination

Variables	R ²	R ² Adjusted	Q ²
US Foreign Policy Outcomes	0.741	0.739	0.499
Diplomatic Engagement	0.435	0.429	0.263
Public Opinion	0.503	0.502	0.235
Institutional Capacity	0.730	0.729	0.286

6.4 The Results of the Structural Model Analysis

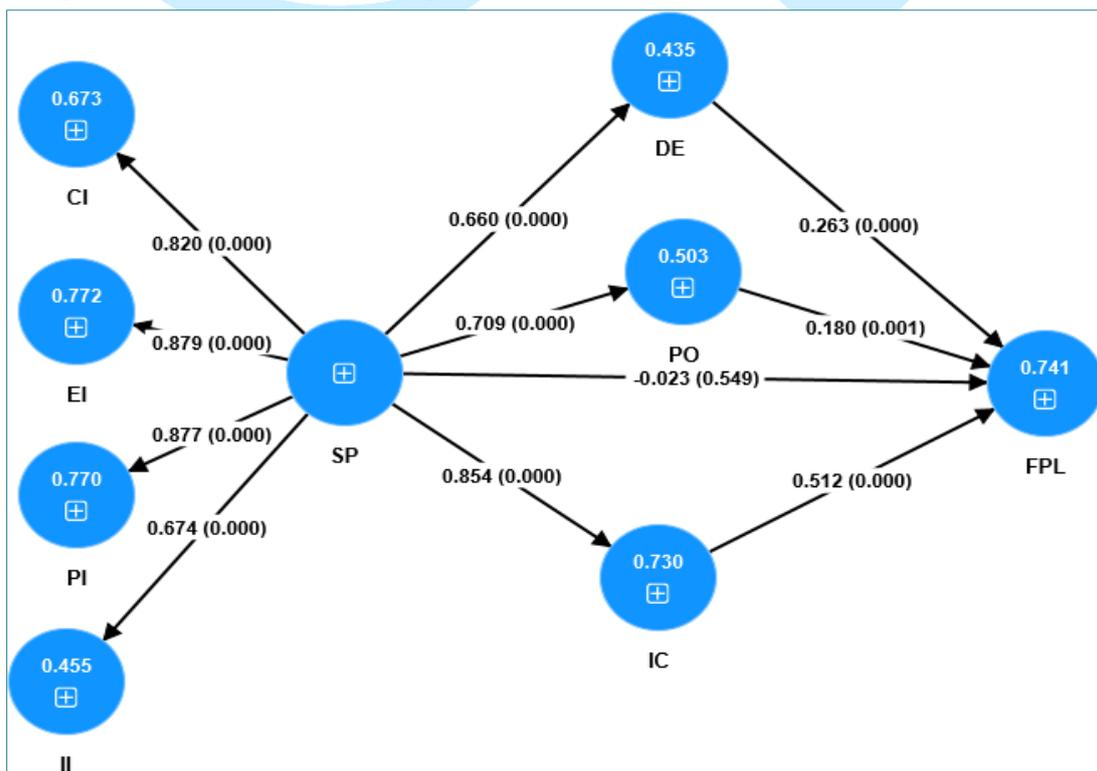


Fig. 2 Results of the Structural Model Analysis

Table 6 Summary of Path Coefficients

Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Decision
SP -> FPL	-0.023	0.039	0.599	0.549	Rejected
SP -> DE	0.66	0.02	33.743	0.000	Accepted
SP -> PO	0.709	0.016	44.588	0.000	Accepted
SP -> IC	0.854	0.012	74.199	0.000	Accepted
DE -> FPL	0.263	0.045	5.872	0.000	Accepted
PO -> FPL	0.18	0.053	3.392	0.001	Accepted
IC -> FPL	0.512	0.052	9.864	0.000	Accepted

According to the results of Table 6, US investment in soft power has an insignificant negative impact on its foreign policy in the Middle East. Soft power alone may not be enough to influence the opinions or behaviors of Middle Eastern countries, especially when other geopolitical or strategic considerations are at play (Keating, & Kaczmarska, 2019). The effectiveness of soft power is also contingent on the perceptions of the target audience, and the US's policies in the region may have eroded its soft power (Blair, et al., 2022). Soft power diplomacy may also need to take into account cultural and social variations (Mol et al., 2022). The US must combine soft power with other techniques and factors that take into account the region's complexity in order to accomplish its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East (Farouk, 2023). Table 6 shows that soft power significantly enhances diplomatic engagement with the Middle East. Numerous studies, including those by Zhu et al. (2019) and Nye (2023), which highlight the beneficial effect of soft power in enhancing relations and fostering collaboration between diverse Middle Eastern countries, confirm this conclusion. Building ties and advancing peace and stability in the region has been found to be successful with non-coercive means including cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contacts. For instance, Dolan (2023) claims that Italy's cultural diplomacy initiatives have contributed to the creation of prospects for economic and political collaboration as well as a favourable perception of the nation in the Middle East. Similar to how Altin (2022) suggests that China's support in Middle Eastern soft power efforts has aided diplomatic and commercial ties between the two nations.

According to Table 6, soft power can significantly improve popular perception of the Middle East. This is important because public opinion shapes foreign policy choices in a significant way, and a supportive public can help foster diplomatic engagement and collaboration. The effect of soft power on public opinion towards the Middle East has been studied in academic studies, and it has been discovered that cultural diplomacy projects and people-to-people contacts can enhance perceptions and boost support for diplomatic engagement and collaboration. Real-world examples, such as the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) investment in soft power programmes, also indicate the positive effect of soft power on public opinion. Countries can strengthen ties with Middle Eastern nations, foster favourable impressions, and increase support for diplomacy and cooperation by engaging in soft power programmes.

The discovery that soft power has a significant positive impact on institutional capacity towards the Middle East leads to the conclusion that non-coercive methods, such as cultural diplomacy, people-to-people contacts, and public diplomacy initiatives, can be successful in enhancing the capacity of institutions in the area. According to numerous academic studies, soft power activities like cultural diplomacy, people-to-people interactions, and public diplomacy have a favourable effect on institutional capacity in the Middle East. Examples include the development of alliances, networks, and resources among universities and cultural organisations in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iraq. This finding is significant because attaining foreign policy goals and fostering regional peace and stability depend on robust institutions. Examples from the real world show the value of non-coercive methods for fostering diplomacy and collaboration in the region, such as the United

Arab Emirates' involvement in cultural diplomacy initiatives. Countries may strengthen institutions and develop a more stable and affluent region by investing in soft power efforts.

A rising international relations literature supports the conclusion that diplomatic engagement significantly improves US foreign policy towards the Middle East. According to recent studies, diplomatic engagement, which entails establishing and preserving connections between nations through diplomatic channels, is essential for US foreign policy interests in the Middle East. For instance, effective diplomatic engagement was crucial to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiations between the US and Iran and to the US-led coalition's operations to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In addition to promoting security, economic cooperation, and conflict management in the region, diplomatic involvement is a powerful weapon for advancing US foreign policy goals. Building confidence, encouraging cooperation, and managing conflict in the Middle East therefore require diplomatic contacts with Middle Eastern nations.

The findings in Table 6 indicate that public opinion has a large favourable impact on US foreign policy towards the area, underscoring the significance of comprehending and interacting with Middle Eastern public opinion. According to recent studies, US foreign policy can be greatly influenced by Middle Eastern public opinion, which can either constrain or provide opportunities for decision-makers. Public opinion, for instance, has shaped US policy in relation to problems like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iran nuclear agreement, and the Syrian civil war. To increase public support for their programmes and prevent actions that can be interpreted as hostile or disrespectful, policymakers in the Middle East must interact with the public there. Recent events, including Qasem Soleimani's murder and the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, have emphasised how crucial it is to comprehend and interact with regional public opinion.

The finding that institutional capacity has a major positive impact on US foreign policy towards the Middle East leads to the conclusion that it is crucial for Middle Eastern nations to be able to govern and carry out policy successfully in order to build strong relationships with the US. According to research, institutional strength is a key factor in determining US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Higher institutional capacity is linked to more US foreign aid, support for Palestinian state-building efforts, and investment in institutional capacity in Iraq, according to studies by EK, (2022); and Yaseen, et al., (2022). This demonstrates how crucial it is to fund Middle Eastern institutional capacity in order to advance regional peace, stability, and favourable relations with the US. As part of broader efforts to advance US interests in the Middle East, policymakers should think about funding initiatives targeted at enhancing institutional capacity in the region.

6.5 Mediation Analysis

To test the mediating relationship, this study adhered to the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008). The bootstrapping method and indirect effect were used to assess the mediating relationship. According to Preacher and Hayes (2008), the indirect effect should have a 95% boot confidence interval (CI: LL-UL) that does not include zero between the variables. Table 6 displays the findings of the mediating hypothesis.

Table 7 Indirect Effect

Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
SP ->DE->PO->IC-> FPL	0.738	0.030	24.263	0.000

The finding that diplomatic engagement has a significant positive partial mediation on the effect of soft power on US foreign policy toward the Middle East suggests that diplomatic engagement plays a critical role in translating soft power into actual foreign policy outcomes. Diplomatic engagement is an important factor that mediates the relationship between soft power and foreign policy outcomes, according to recent studies. Positive views of the United States among foreign publics are linked to perceptions of US diplomatic

engagement, while diplomatic engagement is positively associated with improved US relations with Middle Eastern countries and increased cooperation on political, economic, and security issues. Building relationships based on shared values and interests through diplomatic engagement is essential for the United States to leverage its soft power to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East and globally.

The finding that public opinion acts as a partial mediator between soft power and US foreign policy toward the Middle East is consistent with previous research. Recent studies show that public opinion significantly shapes US foreign policy in the Middle East, where anti-American sentiment is often prevalent. Policies that were viewed as insensitive or antagonistic were the result of failing to take regional public opinion into account. Public opinion is significant, as seen by recent events like the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Israel-Palestine conflict. The finding emphasises the need of comprehending the history, culture, and values of the area as well as engaging with and listening to the people's perspectives.

The discovery that institutional capacity mediates the relationship between soft power and US foreign policy towards the Middle East in part emphasises how crucial it is to have strong institutional frameworks to enable successful foreign policy outcomes. In the Middle East, institutions have a big impact on how foreign policy is carried out. An important factor in determining the success of foreign policy is institutional capability, which includes political and economic institutions. Recent regional developments emphasise the value of making investments in robust institutional structures to promote successful regional foreign policy results.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors, among others, influenced US foreign policy towards the Middle East. The study examined the mediating roles of public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capability in this connection using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The study's conclusions imply that soft power influences US foreign policy towards the Middle East favourably. This link was discovered to be mediated by public opinion, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capacity, underscoring the significance of effective public diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and institutional capacity building in boosting the US's soft power in the region. The study's findings have significant strategic implications for the US since they show that soft power is an essential weapon for determining US foreign policy in the Middle East. The study advises policymakers to concentrate on creating plans to strengthen the US's soft power in the region, including funding programmes for cultural and educational exchange, fostering commercial links, and launching successful public diplomacy projects. The study does, however, have certain drawbacks, including the use of self-reported metrics and the possibility of response bias due to social desirability. The relationship between soft power and US foreign policy may be impacted by outside events like political unrest and violence in the Middle East, which were not taken into account in the study. Future studies could address these restrictions and deepen their investigation of the intricate connection between soft power and US foreign policy in the Middle East. Overall, this research advances knowledge of the role of soft power in determining US foreign policy in the Middle East and offers suggestions for how to strengthen US soft power there.

8. Managerial Implication

For US policymakers, the PLS-SEM study on the use of soft power in Middle Eastern foreign policy has various management ramifications. First, the report emphasises the value of funding cultural exchange initiatives to boost US soft power in the region. To strengthen people-to-people ties between the US and Middle Eastern nations, policymakers should devote resources to developing cultural understanding and exchange initiatives. This could make people less angry at the US and make it easier for the two areas to work together. According to the findings of the study, one of the most effective ways to increase one's level of soft power is to create

economic linkages between the United States and the Middle East. The strengthening of economic integration in the Middle East through increased trade and investment, as well as providing assistance to Middle Eastern nations in the management of their economies, should be the top priority for policymakers. This has the potential to strengthen what is known as the United States' "soft power" in the region and to encourage the growth of closer business connections amongst the nations that are involved. Thirdly, the research highlights how important it is to have efficient public diplomacy programmes. In order for policymakers to acquire a more in-depth awareness of the expectations and points of view of local communities, it is imperative that they invest in the establishment of closer ties with regional media outlets. It is possible for the United States to boost its "soft power" and win greater support from the people in the area if they take these steps. The importance of enhancing the capabilities of the individuals who work in regional institutions is another point that is driven home by the study. By providing assistance of a technical kind and working to improve people's skill sets, the United States has the potential to contribute to the development of democratic institutions in the Middle East and to promote good governance. By doing this, the US might be able to make more links and gain more power in the area. To sum up, the study shows policymakers how to improve the US's "soft power" in the Middle East. Policymakers can make it easier for the US and Middle Eastern countries to understand each other and work together by putting a high priority on culture exchange programmes, economic links, public diplomacy activities, and building institutional capacity.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

I confirm that this research is consistent with ethical principles and that there is no conflict of interest with the participants in the research

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Declaration of Conflict

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