Schisms in Nation Brands: Identity Fissures, Image Fractures, and Reputational Fragmentation

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Abstract

This chapter presents a qualitative risk assessment model for tracking soft power loss engendered by schisms arising from political polarisation. Building on Cull's (2022) idea that a country's reputational security relies on strengths *and* vulnerabilities, it links two theories reflecting this dyad: Soft Power (Nye 2008), and Negative Watch (Durrani 2023). It conceptualises the spectrum connecting these as a new theory: Reputational Vulnerability.

Interpolating sociological and psychological theory, the chapter models reputational vulnerability across stages of schism formation: Identity Fissures, Image Fractures, and Reputational Fragmentation. In a digitally saturated world rife with political polarisation, with emergent AI interventions, algorithmically facilitated representational schisms are inevitable. The model is, therefore, useful for public diplomacy, place branding and psychological warfare scholars and practitioners, for understanding and predicting the dynamics and implications of reputational erosion.

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Introduction: Reputational Security – From Soft Power to Negative Watch

Nation branding and public diplomacy are discursively focused on external facing initiatives and outcomes (Fan, 2010) for establishing a 'competitive identity' for a nation brand (Anholt, 2007), enhancing global influence (Fan, 2007), via favourable images of a nation's policies, actions, and systems (Gilboa, 1998; Wang, 2005). Joseph Nye's (2008) theory of soft power embodies this approach. In 1990, Nye used 'soft power', to conceptualise co-optive power (ideology, cultural resources, etc). Nye (2008) defined soft power as the ability to get what

you want through *attraction*, rather than coercion or payments, arguing it comprises *culture* (when it is pleasing to others), *values* (when they are attractive and consistent) and *policies*. Joseph Nye has written extensively on soft power, focusing on China's rising soft power (Nye 2007; Nye and Wang 2009) and America's soft power setbacks (Nye 2009). He also coined the term 'smart power' - a combination of hard and soft power resources (Nye, 2011), and 'sharp power' (Nye, 2021), which relies on deception, and pierces political and information environments in target countries. However, the theory is critiqued for conceptually vagueness, and for ignoring the role of affect (Mattern 2005; Solomon 2014; Haugaard 2019). Furthermore, scholars argue that soft power is not without a dark side. As soft power resources can impact outcomes by making one alternative more attractive than another, the process involves evoking repulsion as well as attraction (Rothman 2011). Marlin-Bennett (2022) also distinguishes between benign and malign soft power, arguing that malign deployments of attraction are central to processes underlying disinformation flows on social media networks.

While pursuing soft power remains significant, this discursive paradigm is being re-evaluated due to changing socio- political dynamics. A central concept in these debates is *reputational security*. Cull (2022) holds that soft power was the perfect post-Cold War idea, because it explained how the West did so well, and Soviet Russia, so poorly. It then became the core idea underpinning public diplomacy. However, given the complexities of a post pandemic multipolar world order, we must evaluate national reputations across a spectrum. A soft power lens alone is insufficient – we must consider power gain *and* loss, strengths *and* vulnerabilities, the total sum of which is reputational security.

This idea parallels research examining non-state actors and 'alt agents' (Popkova, 2020; Pamment, 2021, 2022) actively utilising negative place branding to undermine the

reputational security of target nation states. It also aligns with an emergent concept from Sweden, called Psychological Defence. Classic definitions of the field focus on the state's ability to counteract deception and disinformation, to get their message out in a crisis, and to contribute to strengthening the population's will to defend their country (Rossback 2017). In such a situation, the reputational security of a state is highly reliant on its credibility, and the extent to which is it is trusted by internal and external stakeholders.

While soft power is a useful epistemological framework for examining reputational strengths and credibility gain, frameworks for examining reputational vulnerabilities arising from credibility loss are largely missing in public diplomacy. Holistic assessment of reputational security requires both. Given the digitalisation of place branding and public diplomacy (Manor, 2022), alongside the potential offered by social media to vilify people and places with speed, scale, and intensity (Milmo, 2021) in a process termed as algorithmic radicalisation (Durrani, 2023), public diplomacy scholars and practitioners are engaging in new modes of theorisation (Manor, 2019) departing from traditional post-cold war, west-centred theoretical paradigms (Repnikova, 2022). In that tradition, an emergent concept examining the consequences of reputational loss, is the idea of '*Negative Watch*' (Durrani, 2023). The term is inspired by investment terminology, where it refers to the status assigned by credit rating agencies to companies, when lowering their credit ratings. While political power differs differently from the finance sector, the theory extrapolates the central premise of credibility loss to construct a reputational 'Negative Watch'. A nation with good reputational credit reserves is rich in soft power. A nation consistently losing reputational credits may find itself on a reputational 'Negative Watch'.

Durrani (2023) presents Negative Watch as a theory of public diplomacy and place branding examining how representational dynamics surrounding a nation's governance and its people mediate power loss, eroding a country's political legitimacy and credibility. The

theory comprises of (1) An index comprising a typology of unfavourable narratives connoting negative affect towards nation brands (2) a heuristic model outlining a spectrum of outcomes precipitated by reputational decline. The former is described below; the latter is discussed later.

The Negative Watch Index (NWI) maps reputational erosion across three indicators: *systems of governance, people*, and *thematic portrayal*.
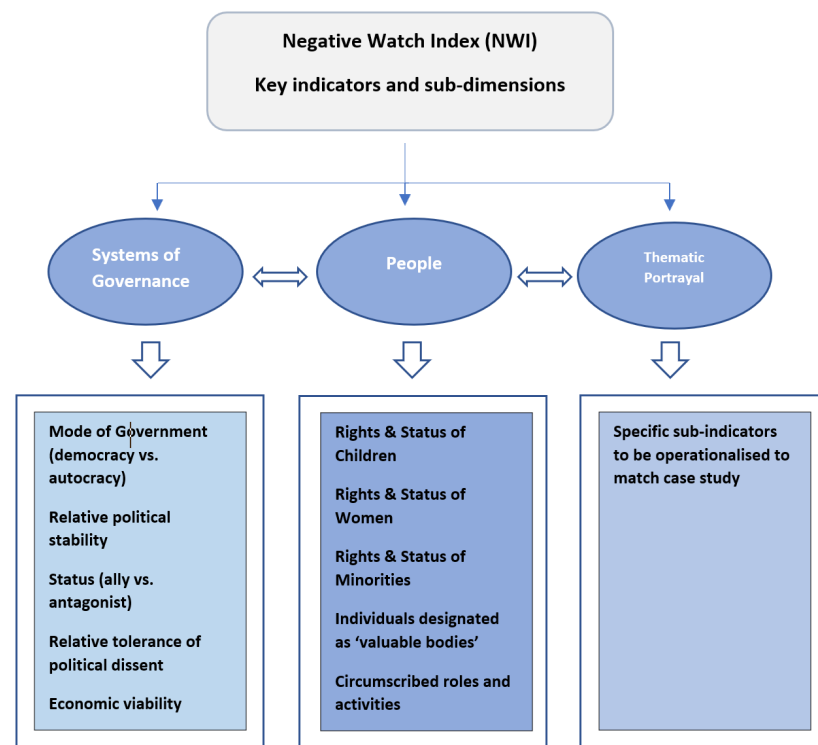
Figure 4: Negative Watch Index (NWI): A Synopsis

A country low in soft power, high on negative watch, is perceived as politically unstable, economically weak, often ruled by an unfriendly autocrat, intolerant of dissent. It does little to protect the rights of children, women, and minorities. Its people are represented in a limited variety of stereotypical roles, seen as engaging in limited activities, which often carry associations of violence. People lionised within international media narratives about the

country, considered as 'valuable bodies' (Butler, 1993), are likely to be dissidents, an implicit, unfavourable judgement of the nation's governance systems. Finally, the framework recommends tracking thematic portrayal of media coverage for a country (war, terrorism, science and technology etc.) to examine whether soft or hard news themes dominate its portrayals (e.g. 'Afghanistan' makes one think of war, poverty, discrimination against women - as compared to say, 'Australia' – beaches, tourism, sport).

The index can be used as a self-assessment tool by a nation to diagnostically track soft power loss; to facilitate systemic assessment of the reputation of external actors - allies and adversaries; and to strategically evaluate the choices of non-state actors and alt agents engaged in information based psychological operations.

Together, soft power and negative watch comprise two halves of reputational security. This leads to the question: what forces and processes propel a country along the spectrum of power gain to power loss? Most countries seek to present a positive, authentic image resonant with soft power– yet it does not always work. How can we conceptualise, and map, progressive stages of reputational erosion?

To that end, this chapter presents two inter-related concepts: representational schisms, and reputational vulnerability. A *representational schism* is defined a state of disharmony and dissensus characterising the interplay of a nation brand's identity, image and reputation *Reputational vulnerability* is defined as the progressive erosion of a country's reputational security via consistent loss of soft power, leading to a country being placed on negative watch.

The chapter unpacks these concepts by first outlining what counts as an authentic national image. Then, it develops a triangulated conceptual thesis mapping the progression of

reputational vulnerability across stages of schism formation: how an *identity fissure* grows into an *image fracture*, leading into *reputational fragmentation*.

Authentic Nation Brands: Identity, Image, Reputation

Conceptually, 'image' and 'reputation' dominate debates in public diplomacy and place branding. Despite great potential, 'identity' is comparatively under-researched (Anholt, 2002; Olins, 2002; Gilmore, 2002; Fan, 2010; Kaneva, 2011). This section interrogates the interdiscursivity of identity/ image; building on this foundation, the following section demonstrates how disharmony between the two precipitates reputation erosion.

Given the centrality of the term 'image' to public diplomacy endeavours, scholars ask: what makes for a believable, authentic national image? While seemingly a fundamental, common-sensical question, contemporary media dynamics have enhanced its significance. Disinformation runs rife; mediatised, curated, enacted performances of authenticity are commonplace. Notions of 'real' and 'authentic' are, therefore, increasingly relevant for constructing credible, trustworthy brands – whether corporate, or national. Politics is a contest of competitive credibility (Nye, 2008) - authenticity is a powerful asset for constructing credibility. But – what is a criteria for assessing brand authenticity?

In the corporate sector, authenticity is a seen as a triangular construct: *Antecedents*, *Strategic Decisions*, and *Outcomes*. *Antecedents* rely on (a) perceived connection to past and (b) perceived virtuousness of the brand (genuine, honest, trustworthy). *Strategic Decisions* comprise four C's: (a) Communication, (b) Commitment, (c) Coolness (d) Connection. *Outcomes* comprise a) brand trust, (b) brand loyalty, (c) perceived quality (d) cultural iconicity (Sodergren, 2021). An authentic brand, then, is one true to its past, with this ethos communicated in a contextually resonant manner, to target publics. For instance, Nike emphasises its commitment to athletic excellence, while tapping into evolving diversity and

inclusion discourses. Cadbury stays true to its mission to provide the ultimate experience of cocoa to food lovers, while creating new flavours and product lines with clear connections to its traditional strengths.

For nation brands, the corresponding trifecta is *Identity, Image,* and *Reputation* (Fan, 2010; Handayani and Rashid, 2013). Identity is a psychological bond arising from how a nation perceives itself. Image refers to what is projected to others, e.g. via advertising campaigns (Fan, 2010). Reputation comprises feedback received from others (Whetten and Mackey, 2002, p. 400). This, in turn, shapes how people perceive their national identity. This cyclical triad connects with the school of symbolic interactionism. Immortalised in Charles Cooley's "looking glass self" theory, this view holds that the social process shaping the self revolves around intersubjectivity. We see ourselves, as we imagine others see us - the self is a result of the social process whereby we learn to see ourselves, as others see us (Yeung and Marin, 2003). While the 'looking glass self' concept analyses how the individual self is constructed, research indicates that similar patterns can exist for construction of a national 'self. For instance, attitudinal surveys reveal that the negativity encasing Brand Pakistan's image has led to the internalization of pessimism among its citizens (Yousaf and Li, 2015), with the resultant negative affective climate contributing to their desire to migrate (Yousaf, Tani and Xiucheng, 2021).

In strategic terms, policymakers know and channel the significance of these connections. When devising soft power-oriented initiatives, strategists seek inspiration from discursive frameworks encasing national identity, drawing on elements of culture and values (Nye, 2008) which would be pleasing to external stakeholders. Strategic decisions are then made around communicating these cultural symbols as part of a national image construct, in a committed manner emphasising their 'coolness' while connecting with external stakeholders (Sodergreen, 2021). Ensuing outcomes are then manifested as national brand reputation. For

instance: the 'surfer/beach goer' lifestyle is integral to Australian identity. Australian government tourism campaigns emphasise this image, which in turn contributes to Australia's reputation as a sunny beach haven. China has similarly leveraged its ancient history and cultural traditions for soft power gain (Cull, 2008; Lai and Lu, 2012; Nye, 2023; Palit, 2017).

Conceptualising Reputational Vulnerability

While deploying identity features to maximize soft power is standard practice, there is a discursive, epistemological gap around assessing how identity schisms may lead towards negative watch. Building on this trifecta of identity, image, and reputation, the next section draws on ideas from advertising, sociology, and psychology, integrating these into a model of reputational vulnerability. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), the analysis lays out key concepts using a range of historical and contemporary case studies.

STAGE 1. Identity Fissures: Rifts in Selfhood

A country's authentic reputation strengths often derive from Antecedents (Sodergren, 2021) embedded in Identity (Fan, 2010). Identity is the basis on which Image and Reputation are built. As Socrates noted, the way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be, what you desire to appear (cited in Fan, 2010). This leads to the question – what happens when there are schisms in the communicative discourse around national identity, a contestation over its symbols? How does this disharmony impact the authenticity of a country's image?

To unpack these dynamics, the analysis interpolates a psychological concept underlying the mechanics of group identity construction – consensus reality. A consensus reality is a shared sense of facts, expectations, and concepts about the world (Askonas, 2022). How we judge our own identity is often mediated by this mental view, which is shaped by our social experiences. It is a specific way of thinking that leads people to believe that there is a single, unified reality in the world, with fixed paths for how to feel about things, and how to succeed

in life (Tsilimparis and Schwartz, 2014). As Cooley suggests, the self is a result of the social process whereby we learn to see ourselves, as others see us (Yeung and Marin, 2003). The notion of consensus reality assumes that there is an agreed upon, right way for the self to be seen, and accepted, and this shapes how we construct our identity.

Establishing a consensus reality is a constant negotiation, for individuals, for groups, for nations, as they grow, evolve, and change. Within the discursive structure of an identity, therefore, there always exists a degree of dissensus –narrow cracks, the liminal spaces of negotiation between competing interests, ideologies, and other forces. These are conceptualised here as '*Identity Fissures.*'

Nation states are complex socio-political entities. Demographics entrenched in various worldviews split along race, gender, economy, religion constantly negotiate consensus realities. The outcomes of these definitional battles become engraved in institutional processes – legislature, media, judiciary, educational and religious bodies. For instance, race is an entrenched historical identity fissure for the United States, with definitional battles over how related issues are articulated and conducted within legislation, in media, in educational institutions, etc. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, gender rights are a consistent identity fissure for Iran, with state enforced consensus realities circumscribing rights and permissible behaviours, regulated institutionally, for Iranian women. The rights and status of the First Nations, Aboriginal people, is an Australian identity fissure, a legacy of colonialism. Rising socio-economic disparity is a common, emergent fissure across many countries.

Ineffective management of a fissure may lead towards negative watch – effective management may result in soft power. Recent protests in Iran over gender rights, and the state's consequent crackdown (Kohli, 2022) have led to widespread condemnation. Post Trump, under the Biden administration, state rhetoric against Black Lives Matter movement has been dialled

down, with related issues integrated into discussions within America's public media and cultural discourse, visible to the world. In 2023, the Australian government proposed an historic alteration to the constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, which may make representations to the parliament (Allam, 2023). A modern nation state is in constant negotiation with its people to manage, and mediate, identity fissures.

The existence of multiple consensus realities within a nation is not new. What is new is how these consensus realities develop, and are disseminated, via technology. A synergistic combination of technological, social, and economic factors is re-ordering social reality (Askonas, 2022) into siloes and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). This provides an opportunity for both state and non-state actors to parlay the fissures into power gains. Trump's polarised views on race helped him with his voters. Russia's intervention in encouraging rifts along racial rights preceding the elections (BBC, December 2018) tapped into the same identity fissure. Jair Bolsanaro's rhetoric against minorities and women did little to damage his electability in Brazil. It suits populist leaders to tap into simmering fissures, encouraging them to sediment into fractures.

Furthermore, the speed and scale with which identity conflict narratives, expressed, for instance, via political protest, travel via social and mass media, is unprecedented in recorded human history. The 2022 Freedom, Life, Woman movement in Iran, and state repression of related protests, have received widespread global coverage in mainstream and social media. When the Black Lives Matter Movement arose in the United States, unfolding events – and Trump's tweets on it - received global, instantaneous coverage. The highly polarised campaign surrounding Australia's 'Voice' campaign (Bogle and Taylor, 2023) brought global attention to a uniquely Australian identity fissure. What may once have been characterised as internal

'squabbling', is now instantly rendered a globally visible gladiatorial contest – and this has significant, consequent ramifications for national Image, and Reputation.

This leads into the next stage of the reputational vulnerability model: image fractures.

STAGE 2: Image Fractures: Cracks in the Looking Glass

As discussed earlier - unresolved dissensus over national identity represents a fissure. So long as state institutions state remain in dialogue with publics, the fissure can be consensually managed, debated, mediated. Problems emerge when mediation stalls. Image is a story about the self *we* project to *others*. A coherent national image is the outcome of agreed upon strategic decisions woven together into an effective narrative around the most resonant, antecedent-oriented identity features. When strategic agreement (Sodergreen, 2021) over elements of culture, values and policy deemed desirable (Nye, 2008) weakens significantly, with thematic portrayal of governance systems in conflict with its people dominating media coverage (Durrani, 2023), identity fissures deepen into an 'image fracture'. We begin to see a transition from soft power to negative watch.

At this stage, the dissensus, and the absence of its effective management, manifests itself in conflicts openly visible to national, regional, international actors, in ways that diminish trust in a country's ability to solve its own issues. This may take various forms, including protracted protest movements, civil unrest, civil war. The country's agency over its image narrative declines. Diverging consensual realities of protestors and establishment led to the Iranian government opting for repression, with people opting for resistance. The resulting chaos manifested itself as an image fracture. When the BLM movement erupted, the world witnessed a sharp divergence in the consensual realities promoted by the Trump government, and BLM protestors/supporters. Trump aggressively labelled the protestors 'thugs', 'anarchists' and 'terrorists', with his statement seen as a reflection of a broader effort by his

administration to push back against the racial justice protests (Beer, 2021; Niadwiadeck, 2020). In both cases, a dissensus emerged between 'people' and 'governance' dominating the thematic portrayal of the country during that time (Durrani, 2023), centred around what version of culture was desirable, which values should be upheld, and what policies represented the best future course of action (Nye, 2008).

This is when a country begins to bleed soft power.

At this point, to better understand the dynamics of divergent consensus realities as facilitated by digital media on the national scale, let us draw on a psychological concept called 'Sentiment Override', used by psychologists working with couples in therapy. Sentiment override is defined as an overall global view of one's partner and one's relationship (Hawkins et al, 2002; Weiss, 1980). Evidence suggests that sentiment override and a couple's relationship satisfaction are associated. Research shows that sentiment override is predictive of expressed affect, and communication dynamics are important in governing whether sentiment override occurs in a positive or negative direction (Hawkins et al., 2002; Johnson, Tambling, and Anderson, 2015). Essentially, once a person gets locked into certain affective patterns around how they feel about their partner – positive or negative – this influences their view of *everything* their partner does or says. A positive pattern inclines one to forgive more easily. With a negative pattern, one is disinclined to give the other side a benefit of doubt, or to attempt reconciliation.

A pattern of negative affect is termed 'Negative Sentiment Override' (Gottman, Cole and Cole, 2018). It occurs due to conflict and arguments distorting one's view of their partners, wherein one or both sides perceive any interaction, regardless of its intention, as negative (Summers, 2021). This idea translates well to contemporary digital dynamics of public diplomacy, linking strongly with how social media algorithms influence strong affective

responses towards specific issues. This phenomenon has been utilised successfully by authoritarian populist leaders and non-state actors serving as 'alt agents' of public diplomacy, who utilize social media to connect with foreign constituencies (Popkova 2020, Pamment 2022) to sway public sentiment towards, or against, an issue, to influence the outcomes of political processes and collective, national decision making. At times, it is in the interests of these actors to provoke and promote collective negative sentiment override, to 'divide and conquer', for influencing internal political processes. A collectivised negative sentiment override contributes to algorithmic radicalisation, defined as the process whereby social media facilitates the creation of highly polarized political and social world views through siloed filter bubbles serving as echo chambers (Durrani, 2023).

This process of image fragmentation has, therefore, been exacerbated by global socio-political trends as leveraged by internal and external stakeholders. Technological evolution has merged synergistically with global socio-economic turmoil and the rise of populism, which thrives on polarisation and 'othering'. It suits populist and/or authoritarian leaders vying to prove to prove 'strongmen' credentials to domestic voting blocs, to leverage the power of social media to encourage hyper polarisation over culture, values, and policies. Aggregate IQ, a Canadian digital firm with links to Cambridge Analytica, a company at the centre of a well-publicised scandal over harvesting Facebook data, counted for 40% of the highly polarised Vote Leave's campaign budget, in the eventually successful campaign for Brexit (Cadwalladr and Townsend, 2018). Russian interference in the 2016 elections using social media to promote positive stories about Trump, and negative ones about Hillary, is well documented (Marineu, 2020). Russia also focused on targeting conservatives with posts on immigration, race and gun rights, while undermining the voting power of left-leaning African-American citizens, by spreading misinformation about the electoral process, and focusing on "developing Black audiences and recruiting Black Americans as assets," which included encouraging activists to

stage rallies (BBC, December 2018). White supremacist organisations used the Australian 'Voice' referendum as an opportunity to grow their base by disseminating hyper partisan social media content (Ngyuen and Workman, 2023). In essence, in all these contexts, alt agents consciously promoted algorithmically radicalised, hyper partisan behaviours. They leveraged existing identity fissures, exacerbating them into image fractures by encouraging a collectivised negative sentiment override amongst publics in differing digital echo chambers, to achieve specific geo-political goals. This tactic entails behaviour that may be termed as 'ideological cloaking' – alt agents construct messages drawing on ideological values with strong affective resonance for target publics, to disguise concealed strategic objectives aimed at disrupting information and soft power flows in the public sphere.

Displeasing foreign publics to enhance domestic appeal (Anholt, 2011) via digitally facilitated polarisation of identity dynamics is a frequently used populist strategy. Bolsanoro's rhetoric around women and minorities is viewed with disfavour by global media but strengthened his electoral prospects in 2018 (Assis and Ogando, 2018). International disapproval of Donald Trump's tweets calling BLM protestors 'thugs' did not matter –his loyal voters approved. China's 'wolf warrior' public diplomacy is not well received by global actors but allows effective management of nationalistic public opinion at the domestic level (Huang, 2021) linking with what Callahan (2015) calls China's negative soft power strategy. Qualifying for international negative watch is acceptable –if it leads to domestic soft power.

Cooley believed that how we imagine others see us, shapes the self (Yeung and Marin, 2003). Political leaders have traditionally balanced how they look, as reflected in the different looking glasses - held up by their voters, by their nation collectively, and by the global community. However, connecting with socially and algorithmically enclosed voting blocs via strategically enacted sentiment override procedures affords a greater chance of winning, and maintaining, domestic political power. Because social media allows for such digitally

facilitated, solipsistic constructions of national identity beneficial to electoral prospects, such leaders tend to select a pattern of strategic decision making which looks great to enclosed groups with strong views on what national identity should look like – but make little sense from an Image/Reputation perspective, to external, global stakeholders. The result is a fractured national image.

As the analysis demonstrates, it suits the interests, whether long term or short term, of certain internal and external stakeholders to provoke and promote image fractures, using social media. This raises the questions – what are the implications of this process for long term global political dynamics? Furthermore, how will these processes of fragmentation be impacted by emergent AI tools, given their massive potential to disseminate hyper personalised disinformation? Facebook's algorithms were seen as a driving factor in exacerbating identity based communal divisions in Myanmar's genocide of the Rohingya Muslim community (Amnesty International, 2022). What will happen when the technological processes underlying polarisation are turbo charged by yet to be regulated, or fully understood, AI tools?

A nation state chaotically conflicted over how to view itself is vulnerable when it comes to reputational security (Cull, 2022). As Abraham Lincoln put it succinctly - a house divided against itself cannot stand. Across the world, we see this scenario play out repeatedly - hyper partisan debates circumscribed by technologically spurred collectivised negative sentiment override, on cultures, values, and policies, with large segments of a country's people at odds with each other, and/or their government. When, because of consequent image fractures, governance structures are seen as authoritarian and/or inept, discriminatory towards segments of a country's people, the nation will have set foot on the first rungs of Negative Watch (Durrani, 2023).

Reputational Fragmentation: Splintered National Reputation

The looking glass theory holds that the self is a result of the social process whereby we learn to see ourselves, *as others see us*. A fractured image connotes instability. This may become a dominant motif in how a country is perceived by others, and even by its own people. The negative affective climate surrounding Brand Pakistan contributes to its citizens' desire to migrate (Yousaf, Tani and Xiucheng, 2019). This is the stage where image fractures begin to catalyse into reputational fragmentation.

A country irreconcilably conflicted over how to write its story, is experiencing reputational fragmentation. It becomes vulnerable to other, more powerful actors, defining its narrative. Seen as unable to successfully resolve internal and/or external matters, it is now vulnerable to being controlled, or coerced, in arrangement of its political and economic affairs.

Here, it's useful to delve into the sociological and psychological conceptualisations of control and coercion. In psychological terms, control is seen as a continuum (Johnson, 2008) – in interpersonal relationships, everyone will 'control', or constrain, a partner to some extent. Control is likely to take more coercive turn when there is a disparity between stakeholders in terms of agency, vulnerability, and socio-economic disparity (Schlangen, 2022). Psychological theory defines coercion as the use of force or threats to compel or dispel a particular response (Stark, 2007). Sociological theory defines coercion as a dynamic process linking a (explicit or implicit) demand with a credible threatened negative consequence for non-compliance (Raven and French, 1959). While relationships between nations are differently complex from interpersonal ones, the central ideas of reduced agency, power disparity, and heightened vulnerability to negative consequences can be extrapolated and distilled into a concept relevant for public diplomacy: *coercive management*. This is defined as a state of reputational vulnerability where a country's low credibility reserves culminate in a reduced agency over a reputational narrative, leaving it open to various degrees of punitive measures enacted by allies,

regional, or international regulatory bodies. Durrani (2023) provides a conceptualisation of specific types of coercive management outcomes.
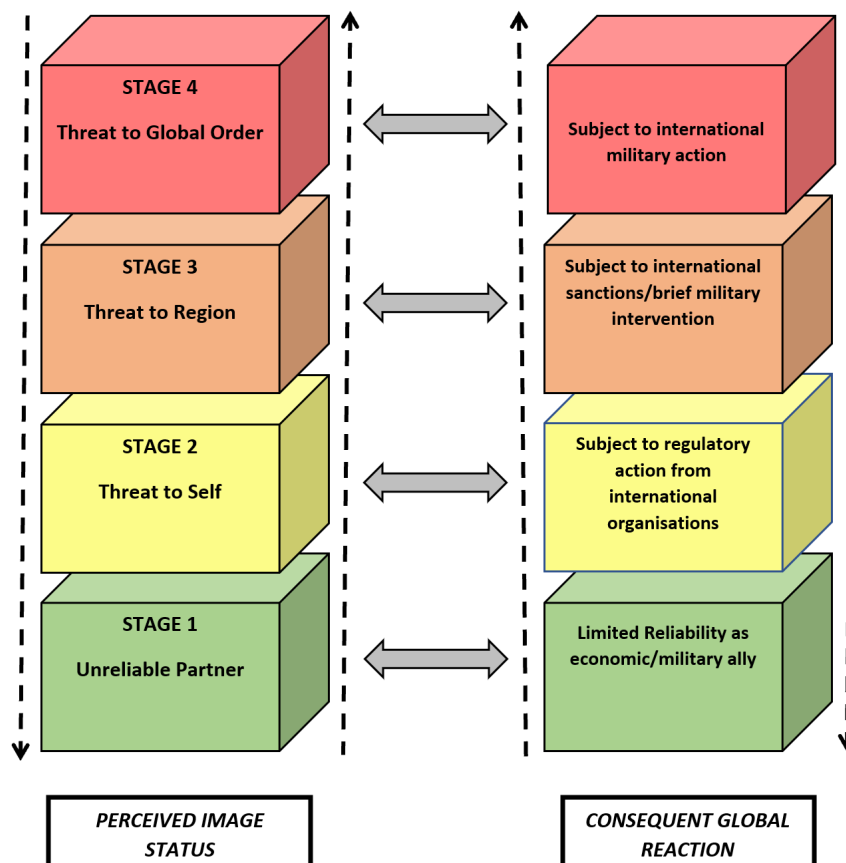
Figure 2: Negative Watch: Coercive Management Outcomes

Column 1 (left) illustrates a chain of holistic, bi-directional international reputational strategic narratives: unreliable partner, threat to self, threat to region, threat to global order. Column 2 (right) illustrates a spectrum of control mechanisms segueing into coercive management. The colour scheme references the Defence Readiness Condition (DEFCON), an alert system used by the US Armed Forces, to symbolise reputational erosion. Unreliable partners cannot attract allies. International regulatory organisations may step in if self-

management is seen as unsuccessful. A brief military intervention may occur if the country is seen as a regional threat. Finally, complete reputational and structural collapse may leave a country vulnerable to global military action to protect the world, and to 'rescue' it from itself. The stages are bi-directional (indicated by vertical arrows - the same country can travel up and downs). Iraq and Afghanistan, subjected to military action in 1990, 2003 and 2002, are stage 4 examples. In both cases, the countries were firmly on negative watch, with non-existent soft power reserves, characterised by dysfunctional governance systems seen as discriminatory towards their people. Iran sits between stage 2 and 3. While military invasion has been considered (Beeman, 2005; Quinn, 2020), its substantial regional soft power (Wastnidge, 2015) and hard power reserves inhibits further progression.

Conclusion

The chapter maps the impact of schisms on the integrity of a nation brand by conceptualising reputational vulnerability as a tri-stage model: Identity Fissures, Image Fractures, and Reputational Fragmentation. The model is summarised in the diagram below. The diagram references the DEFCON colour scheme to emphasise risk level. The bi-directional and shaded arrows indicate the fluidity of the process – nation states constantly move back and forth across the spectrum. Reputation erosion and restoration is an ongoing endeavour mediated via balancing soft power and negative watch.

Figure 3: Reputational Vulnerability – A Heuristic Model

In a polarised world with a digital infosphere and AI interventions on the horizon, algorithmically facilitated contests over a country's reputational security are inevitable. Public diplomacy needs to shift away from its dominant discursive focus on power gain, and towards an integrated approach to interrogating the dynamics of power gain *and* loss. Therefore, it is important to build predictive frameworks analysing a country's schismatic vulnerabilities; these schisms, when widened, will bleed soft power. The chapter addresses this gap. The proposed model of reputational vulnerability is useful for policy makers and scholars to better understand, predict, and protect their reputational security.

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