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Soft Power and Reviewing Australia's Global Appeal [1]

Few foreign-policy concepts have drawn as much attention as “soft power” – the ability to influence the behaviour of others through the power of attraction and ideas. As coined by Harvard’s Joseph Nye, soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. It is the opposite of “hard power,” usually associated with military power.

As promised in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop last week launched Australia’s first review of soft power, the stated aim “to ensure Australia remains a persuasive force in our region.”

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The tough part of this review is that every country has soft-power weaknesses, and Australia is no exception. Although the current leadership crisis had not unfolded publicly at the time the review was announced, from a soft-power/attractiveness perspective, responsive and thoughtful engagement with policy critics abroad will work better where Australia is widely seen to be under steady political leadership. Over the years, Australia has drawn international criticism, for example, with regard to its asylum, immigration, and visa-entry policies; indigenous rights and opportunities; and for its relatively low GDP aid percentage.

These are thorny policy issues, but the key message for soft-power reputation is for Australia to demonstrate a capacity to listen and engage with its critics responsively and thoughtfully. However, that capacity is challenged by frequent leadership changes.

Australia has a lot to be proud of. A soft-power minded foreign policy will strengthen Australia’s reputation and ability to influence the behaviour of others consistent with our values and interests.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is leading this review, which will examine all aspects of government, and Bishop envisaged that it will take the form of a “national conversation” about the nature of Australia’s regional influence. To inform the review, DFAT is calling for submissions from the public in Australia and overseas.

I worked with DFAT early in the review phase and welcome the inclusive idea of a national conversation about soft power, one that considers the pros and cons of the concept, including considering whether soft power should be elevated as a central element in Australia’s foreign policy. This consideration is becoming even more pressing as soft power advocacy is being challenged by so-called “sharp power” techniques. These techniques are increasingly being deployed by some authoritarian states to manipulate digital and information environments in democracies such as Australia.

After working in three Australian embassies, at a major American philanthropic foundation, and at an American university and (now) at an Australian university, I am in no doubt that reputation matters in international affairs. Soft power can increase Australia’s international standing and hence the country’s ability to shape and influence the international environment

in line with its interests and values.

That said, we need to address such challenges as how to find consensus on what we mean by soft power, how to measure it, how to put it into practice, and how to ensure balance between hard and soft power; this balance was branded by Nye as "smart power". For all its limitations, the soft-power concept's advantages outweigh its disadvantages.

Australia's diplomats – at 117 posts abroad involving 23 Australian government agencies – play a crucial role in mobilising Australian soft power, through both their official and public interactions. Clearly, Australia's soft-power engagement is broader than the work of DFAT. Every government agency potentially contributes to Australia's soft power. So too do business firms, universities, and civil-society groups. In short, soft power is a whole-of-society thing.

Australia has substantial – if often latent – soft-power assets. How might they be incorporated more centrally into the country's foreign policy? Here are some examples.

- The *education of international students* generated $20 billion in 2015/16 in export income for Australia. On a soft-power approach, international education is not simply a marketable export industry, but a broad policy instrument that deepens Australia's international engagement. It also reinforces, at many levels, the nation's reputation as a democratic, diverse, and welcoming society.

- Australia's (hard power) *defense force* combines substantial soft-power assets, such as international military-to-military exchanges. Research shows that such exchanges help countries transition from authoritarian governance to democracy.

- Australia's *sporting culture* is impressive, evolving from its brilliant natural athletes of the past to a new era characterised by elite sports coaching, advances in sports medicine, and magnificent sporting venues. Sydney's narrow win over Beijing as host city for the 2000 Olympics likely reflected the city's soft-power attraction. The Sydney Games brought huge gains to Australia. And the synergies implicit in soft-power thinking were on display at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games: indigenous themes, equal medal chances for men and women, and expanded para-sports coverage, setting powerful international soft-power norm markers.

- A range of soft-power strategies could be developed ahead of Australia's *2029-2030 UN Security Council bid*, such as encouraging more Australian creative talent to partner with UN Goodwill Ambassador programs as with actress Nicole Kidman's advocacy on violence against women. Australian business could also become more visibly involved in the UN's Global Compact's principles of corporate responsibility and sustainability.

For me, the balance of all these arguments point in the direction of Australia's need to give more weight in its international policies to soft-power considerations.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece originally appeared in The Interpreter at the Lowy Institute and is reprinted here with the author's permission.*
