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The Relevance of Soft Power Thinking in Democratic Statecraft [1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece is a revised version of a Foreword published in International Broadcasting and its Contested Role in Australian Statecraft: Middle Power, Smart Power (Anthem Press, London & New York, 2023) by Geoff Heriot.*

Since the end of the Cold War, few foreign policy concepts have drawn as much attention as *soft power* — the ability to influence the behavior of others through the power of culture, political ideals and sound foreign policies. The normative underpinning was that a soft power-minded foreign policy could strengthen a country's reputation and hence its ability to shape and influence its international environment. When Joseph Nye Jr. published *Bound to Lead* in 1990, coining the soft-power term as a conceptual rebuttal to Paul Kennedy's American-decline thesis in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, he could hardly have predicted the worldwide scholarly and policy debates that it has generated in the three decades since. Nye himself has been an active participant in those arguments, writing several books and many articles

. Geoff Heriot's book joins the debates at a worrying time of international armed conflict and growing doubts about the relevance of soft power.

In its most intuitive form, soft power is the opposite of *hard power*, the latter usually associated with the use, or threatened use, of military force and coercive economic measures. A key question in both policy and scholarly deliberations was how to find a balance between hard and soft power. A conceptual compromise was developed as *smart power*, devised and promoted in a 2007 independent commission report co-authored by Nye. For Nye, smart power was seen as "the successful combination of hard and soft power resources into effective strategy."

If a weakness of soft power was its perception as a blunt instrument partly out of reach from governmental mediation in democracies, then the smart-power refinement promised a sense-of-balance between "national self-interest" and "good international citizenship." As a sophisticated interpretation of smart power, Heriot's book reshapes consideration of the soft power-hard power dichotomy, obliging us to focus on the symbiotic relationship between them.

With the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the impact of global terrorism in the early 2000s, soft power was linked inextricably to the remarkable rise of public diplomacy as state practice and as a field of academic study. The surging interest in public diplomacy was partly facilitated by its ability to ride the soft-power wave. Heriot's analysis draws *inter alia* on Nicholas J. Cull's influential five essentials of public diplomacy practice: listening, advocacy, culture, exchange and education, and international broadcasting.

Heriot elucidates international broadcasting as an instrument of "social," or "discursive," power with properties distinguishing it from other forms of state outreach. He writes that international broadcasters of the liberal tradition pursue a policy purpose while usually operating at arms-length from the government. They bargain ceaselessly for the attention, trust and engagement of intercultural audiences, applying practices of agenda-setting, discourse framing and — through their conduct and presentation — the modeling of norms to influence what people think about and how they think about issues (not necessarily *what* to think). Heriot thus reinforces key research insights of the field: that good public diplomacy cannot compensate for bad foreign policy, that a country's image or brand must closely resemble reality, and that public diplomacy is not a short-term, one-way monologue, but a long-term, multidimensional dialogue (which may even involve mutual transformation of the interests and identities of interacting actors).

Smart power requires consistency over the long term. Heriot's excellent book underscores the idea that — from everyday human relations to international statecraft -— reputation matters.

Adding to the debate's conceptual uncertainties is "sharp power," a term that describes techniques deployed by authoritarian countries to manipulate democratic political and digital information environments. Heriot's book resonates with Nye's warning to liberal democracies not to overreact to Chinese and Russian sharp-power disinformation and to

avoid the same methods which would only serve to undercut democracies' soft-power advantage.

The book's intellectual and transprofessional breadth is impressive, offering harrowing journalistic accounts of events in Southeast Asia alongside astute interpretations of major theorists. Using Australia as a consequential middle-power case study, Heriot presents an erudite political history of the country's contested use of international broadcasting as public-interest media. In a social media-obsessed world, Heriot retains the term *international broadcasting* to encapsulate state-funded media as a multi-platform instrument of statecraft covering all media.

Heriot argues that a core strategic function of international broadcasting is to reconcile and represent both interests and values, to engage with intercultural audiences, with fit-for-purpose competence. The emphasis on sustained "trust" and "engagement" is key. Seeing Australia as a democratic, middle-power international broadcaster, Heriot's account of the late Cold War history of Radio Australia is finely-grained and critically balanced. His case studies of Australia's often-fraught relations with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea and the story of Radio Australia's impressive out-of-area role in the 1990-1991 Gulf War are riveting. These accounts are balanced by astute observations of the Canberra political ecosystem and the organizational cultures of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Radio Australia.

When Australia's conservative coalition government launched a Soft Power Review in 2018, it seemed that Australia was about to have a much-needed national conversation about its soft-power assets and reputational vulnerabilities. However, the then government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison regrettably abandoned the review in 2020. There seemed little doubt about its preference for a hard-power, grand strategy tethered to Australia's traditional " Fear of Abandonment" by great and powerful friends, best illustrated by the controversial 2021 AUKUS nuclear submarine pact. Fear rather than smart power's nuanced fusion of soft and hard power informed the security outlook.

The election of a Labor Government in 2022 was an opportunity for smart-power thinking to resurface, given the scholarly interest in developing a progressive, left-of-center foreign policy. Heriot's final chapter brings the contested story of Australia's middle-power international broadcasting up to the 2022 elections. Incoming Foreign Minister Penny Wong committed the Government to developing an Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy and to providing additional funding for the Australian services. As much as Heriot welcomes these developments, his update serves to highlight his thesis and decades-long concerns about Australia's continuing cycle of policy reversals and inconsistent commitment to international broadcasting. Smart power requires consistency over the long term. Heriot's excellent book underscores the idea that — from everyday human relations to international statecraft -— reputation matters.