Soft Power, Smart Power Or Public Diplomacy? Australia Fumbles

By Alison Broinowski

As traditional diplomacy is complemented by emerging concepts such as public diplomacy, soft power and more recently ‘smart power,’ Australia is grappling with how best to shape and alter perceptions of the country and extend its influence, writes former Australian diplomat Alison Broinowski. Despite many initiatives, it has a long way to go to catch up with efforts being made by other countries.

Faced with two irrecusable opposites, warring and soft power, the United States under President Barack Obama came up with a compromise concept, smart power, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accepted with alacrity. It was reportedly the brainchild of former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Suzanne Nossell, who is now executive director of Amnesty International USA. What appears to attract both the State Department and the Pentagon to smart power is that while it promotes Internet freedom and human rights, it can also be used to embarrass, isolate or overthrow selected regimes without putting any, or many, US boots on the ground. In 2011, the technology arm of the Pentagon, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), announced a $42 million program to “detect, classify, measure and track the information, development and spread of ideas and concepts (memes)” in social media. Wired magazine called the program the Pentagon’s “social media propaganda machine.” Its operations complement the work of the US Special Forces, whose Unconventional Warfare Manual (2010) recommended techniques for sabotaging technology, infiltrating social media, exposing a regime’s vulnerabilities and causing sectarian/ethnic division, discord and economic hardship. The Arab Spring, particularly in Libya, was the military’s opportunity to test-drive the program under NATO cover. The manual cites President Kennedy in 1962 anticipating a new type of US warfare to be conducted by “subversives, insurgents, assassins.” Under one heading, “Sabotage,” it recommends acts to injure or destroy that “include human and natural resources” — a euphemism, apparently, for assassinations like those of Muammar Gaddafi, Osama bin Laden and Iranian nuclear scientists.

The US system operates soft and smart power in tandem. Though smart power might seem to contradict Nye’s basic idea, the Harvard academic himself has gone along with it, saying that a combination of the two is necessary, for example, to deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan. What democratic governments seem to like about smart power is that it bridges the chasm between soft-edged diplomats and hard-headed militarists. In today’s environment, debt-laden democratic governments favor investing in “national security” over setting out on new military adventures.

AUSTRALIA GOES ‘SOFT’ NOT ‘SMART’

Australia plays the diplomatic game with much smaller stakes than the United States, and the initiatives it can put on the table are modest. Ever responsive to American opinion, however, Australian officials and so-called “track two” commentators willingly endorsed soft power, in name at least, even though many were still absorbing the earlier concept of “public diplomacy.” That concept remained so new that an Australian Senate inquiry in 2007 found little understanding of it in Australia, limited academic research and minimal public discussion. Sydney’s Lowy Institute for International Policy in 2009 reported that public diplomacy, by whatever name, has long been on the far margins of Australian official policy. In 2010, Lowy’s Fergus Hanson pointed to the slow uptake by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of new technology and social networking as public diplomacy tools. In June 2011, a public forum of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) confirmed that Australia lags behind other countries in public diplomacy. But Mark Scott, the chief executive officer of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is upbeat about the Australia Network, the television service beamet to Asia by the ABC with guaranteed annual funding of A$21 million ($22 million) from DFAT for 10 years. Joseph Nye himself opened Australia’s first academic center for...
soft power and public diplomacy at Macquarie University in April this year.

Not until February this year did a public debate on smart power occur in Australia. A government-backed AIIA forum in Canberra included diplomats, academics, defense and intelligence officials, the Australian Federal Police and representatives of aid agencies and NGOs. The gathering agreed that Australia could do more, and should seek to be better appreciated in its own region. They took as a case study the part that Australia has played since 2003 in settling a long-running territorial dispute through the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Earlier Australian initiatives in conflict situations in Bougainville, Cambodia and East Timor, which were more speedily resolved, could also have counted as smart power, had the term existed then. None of them, however, comes close to resembling smart power as presently practiced by the US.

Like most people, Australians hope others see them as benignly as they see themselves, or better. Somewhat complacently, participants in February’s smart power forum concluded with a fairly standard formula: “Australia, generally, is seen as a rich, developed Western democracy that is politically and economically stable, that values the rule of law, human rights and people’s freedom, that is generally tolerant of race and religion and treats its citizens well. It is viewed as a good ‘good citizen.’ Australia has no expansionist or hegemonic ambitions, works well and comfortably with other nations in bilateral and multilateral partnership arrangements, would exercise leadership where required, is a generous donor of quality aid and is committed to and contributes to the activities of the UN. Generally, Australians are open and direct in expressing their views, and what you see is what you get.”

Little correspondence exists between these reassuring self-images and perceptions of Australia elsewhere. Australians are perennially viewed in South Pacific countries and in Papua New Guinea as neo-colonial bullies, criticized for whatever they do, and blamed for whatever goes wrong, wrote former Radio Australia journalist Graeme Dobell last year in the Lowy Institute’s *The Interpreter*. Australia’s image problem is more acute in India, where media outrage over violence against Indian students in Melbourne two years ago made a huge impact, compounded by Australia’s reluctance to sell uranium to India. Indonesians have been irritated by Australia for much longer. In the 1980s, the Indonesian poet W.S. Rendra politely suggested Australia should be “the West for Asia,” meaning: don’t interfere. Indonesian Ambassador Dor at the time Sabam Siagian thought Australians should give up trying to identify with Asia, and urged DFAT instead to represent Australia in ASEAN countries through opera, ballet and classical music. To this day, Indonesian graduates of Australian universities such as Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa and Dewi Fortuna Anwar, an adviser to the Vice President, do not hesitate to impart sharply worded advice to Australia. Anwar reminded Australia in August of its insignificance: unless a particular problem arises, she told a Melbourne audience, Indonesian elites pay Australia little attention. She chose a good example — the suspicion voiced by commentators in Indonesia about Australia’s purpose in allowing the US to base marines in the Northern Territory.

Leaving Jakarta at the end of 2009, Geoff Thompson, a correspondent for the ABC, remarked gloomily, “The rest of the world regards Australia with much the same level of interest as we regard New Zealand.” His experience in several Asian countries no doubt led him to this conclusion. In the 1990s Australia was classified in China, for example, among “small and weak countries” and reference books emphasized its isolation and insignificance. China has since become Australia’s top trading partner, taking 25 percent of Australian exports, and Chinese make up the majority of tourists and foreign students in Australia. Census data for 2011 show that Chinese languages are spoken in more households in Australia than any other apart from English. Yet Australia still occupies much the same position in China’s hierarchy of perceptions and in the attention it receives. That changes suddenly, however, if Australia rejects an investment proposition by a state-owned Chinese company, or receives a dissident leader, or some Australian urges greater vigilance against China. This could improve, advises Richard Woolcott, a former senior Australian diplomat, if Australia were to consult China and Indonesia as regularly and attentively as it does the US.

**A LONGSTANDING ALSO-RAN**

Australia’s image problem goes back to its earliest years as an appendix to Britain’s colonial empire in Asia, and it was not improved by the White Australia policy. To solve the problem requires changing not only the perceptions held by others, but also the reality of Australia itself. Perceptions of Australia need attention among the participants in the government-commissioned White Paper on Australian in the Asian Century that is currently the subject of much public debate in Australia. If few Asian countries end up supporting Australia for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council in October this year, it will confirm that something is seriously amiss.

Recognition of all this is not new. Efforts have been made ever since 1945, mainly by DFAT’s Cultural Relations staff members, to put out positive messages, sponsor visits, offer scholarships and send exhibitions and performances to Asian countries. A Council for Australia Abroad, estab-

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lished in the 1980s, spawned a flock of bilateral councils to foster specialized cultural exchanges with Japan, China, Indonesia, South Korea, India and other Asian countries, as they continue to do. The renamed Australia International Cultural Council and DFAT’s Public Diplomacy Branch also manage large “Year of…” events presenting Australian education, society and culture in selected countries: in India this year, Vietnam in 2013, Indonesia in 2014, Turkey in 2015 and Brazil in 2016. Australian Expo pavilions at Shangh hai (2010) and Yaesu (2012), and the newly rebuilt Australian site at the Venice Biennale are large national “showcases.” Other forms of image projection are multifarious and, within their limited resources, inventive. Australia House Japan, replaced after the Tohoku earthquake at the urging of the Tokyo Embassy staff, now provides a stylish and creative performance space a couple of hours by train from the metropolis. A unique web portal, www.australiahelps.gov.au/japan, was set up only a month after Japan’s earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in March 2011. A touring exhibition of indigenous art, “Message Stick,” is currently revealing urban Aboriginal experiences to viewers in the Pacific, Africa, the Middle East and India. The newly established Australia India Strategic Research Fund is the largest bilateral scientific research initiative Australia has, and one of India’s largest sources of support for international science. A bridging program has been set up by the Australia Indonesia Institute to enable school children to study for extended periods in each other’s countries. In India, China, Japan and other countries beyond Asia, a patchwork of Australian Studies centers are spread across the tertiary sector, offering some scholarships and sustained in large part by the diligence and devotion of scholars who first encountered Australia decades ago. Asialink, a privately endowed center at the University of Melbourne, manages much of DFAT’s visual art projection to the region, as Musica Viva does for music, and Asialink is currently promoting employment of “Asia-capable Australians”.

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

Awaiting the Asian Century White Paper, many Australians hope that timely implementation of the recommendations by the task force’s head, Ken Henry, will reverse two decades of neglect, particularly in studies of Asia and Asian languages. But a senior official laments DFAT’s lack of resources, which shrank in 2012/2013 and are set to shrink further, while the funds that Australia devotes to domestic and foreign intelligence have risen by more than 400 percent. Overseas aid spending has also soared. Out of the 2012/2013 DFAT budget of A$1.45 billion, Public Information and Public Diplomacy are allocated just over A$26 million, most of which goes to the ABC to fund the Australia Network.

John McCarthy, a former ambassador in several Asian countries, asks how Australia, already perceived to be an insignificant Western country, can improve its public diplomacy with next to no money. Bravely, the DFAT handbook tells all staff they share responsibility for public diplomacy, even in overseas posts fortunate enough to have a dedicated person on staff. Somewhat like a Lonely Planet guide it offers hints on what they can do for less than A$1,000. “Smaller posts,” the handbook instructs, “are expected to undertake only limited, targeted public diplomacy activities as appropriate.” When I asked an ambassador in one significant Southeast Asian country about his post’s cultural programs, he said he had none: “Get me the money and I’ll do something.”

Not surprisingly, and through no fault of dedicated Australian diplomats, an outsider searching for public diplomacy programs in many Australian Embassies in Asian capitals may find them incoherently branded, poorly co-ordinated, erratically delivered and hard to access in fortress-like buildings, particularly after office-closing hours. Online interactivity is still limited, presumably due to security concerns or lack of staff, with some exceptions in China, South Korea, Japan and Indonesia. DFAT proudly cites the Jakarta Embassy’s Facebook page as a “key outreach tool to engage the world’s third-largest Facebook user base.” But DFAT’s official in charge of public diplomacy admits that Australia is behind the competition. It trails the big players in North America, Europe and North Asia with their dedicated organizations such as the United States Information Agency, the British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut, Japan Foundation and Confucius Institutes, and Australia cannot match the efforts of smaller competitors either, in Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Nordic countries. Australia has always lacked an exportable narrative, a confident culture, an independent identity and the political will to make them a high priority and to pay for projecting them abroad. What Australian public diplomacy now needs as well is thoroughgoing modernization.

The modernizing impulse in public diplomacy has spread even to traditional-minded countries, says worldwide authority Jan Melissen of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael).4 In Berlin, the non-profit Institute for Cultural Diplomacy runs week-long Academy sessions throughout the year, attended mainly by young diplomats and people in civil society. Their multilateral co-operative approaches — encouraging dialogue, understanding and trust — avoid any mention of smart power. So far, Australia has shown little interest in catching up with them, changing its technology, or exploring new dimensions of public diplomacy which, Melissen says, emphasize common interests rather than national agendas, and increasingly use non-state, non-official actors. This is what some now call citizen diplomacy, and others, like Australian National University academic Ramesh Thakur, describe as networking. It is a modern departure from the top-down hierarchy and center-to-field direction of traditional public diplomacy. In 2007, the Australian Senate accepted that DFAT had come to believe public diplomacy was “a standard arm of statecraft.” But is public diplomacy much like Australia’s old “cultural relations” with a new name?

Australia’s foreign policy establishment seems unclear about whether to opt for European-style collaborative public diplomacy or US-style persuasive soft power, but it is unlikely to attempt interventionist, manipulative smart power techniques. For Australia, other initiatives are more likely to work: it could host an Asian regional Institute for Public Diplomacy, for example, and establish a free-standing Australia Foundation to present a more coherent, interesting narrative to the world.