



Australian Institute of International Affairs

Submission to the Soft Power Review

12 October 2018

The Australian Institute of International Affairs (www.internationalaffairs.org.au) is an independent, non-profit organisation that promotes interest in and understanding of international affairs in Australia. The AIIA was formed in 1924 as a branch of Chatham House and established as a federal body in 1933. The AIIA provides a forum for discussion and debate but does not seek to formulate its own institutional views.

The AIIA achieves its mission through:

- More than 200 events per year nationwide
- Books, journals and online publications
- International dialogues
- Youth and community programs

In 2017 the AIIA was ranked top think tank in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region in the Global Go To Think Tank Index for the third consecutive year.

Australia is in a position of soft power strength both in the Indo-Pacific region and globally. It should seek to utilise this to promote Australia's interests, which include strengthening the rules-based international order, maintaining its international partnerships and promoting Australia as a destination for work, study and travel.

A more concerted whole-of-government approach to maximising Australia's soft power is a positive development. The AIIA makes recommendations in the following three areas:

1. Promoting people-to-people links
2. Supporting partnerships between the private sector, civil society and government
3. Investing in Australia's diplomatic capacity

1. People-to-People Links

Australia should promote people-to-people links to improve perceptions of Australia by citizens of other states and to ensure Australia continues to be a favoured destination for work, study and travel. It should continue to foster engagement by Australians in international affairs.

The AIIA commends Australian Government initiatives to facilitate educational and cultural exchanges. In particular, the New Colombo Plan and the Australia Awards are vital to ensure that Australians understand the region we live in and that future leaders of the Indo-Pacific make connections with Australians while they study. The AIIA's study tours are another means to promote positive engagement and to increase cultural awareness and understanding on both sides. Other initiatives such as international volunteering and business secondments provide opportunities for Australians to act as ambassadors and advocate for Australian interests and values.

Australia's culture, environment and people leave indelible marks on those whom visit Australia. People from other nations should be encouraged to visit Australia for travel, work and study. The government should take advantage of Australia's natural and cultural appeal in tourism campaigns and should ensure that barriers to travel such as visa requirements are minimised. Technological advancements should be utilised to their fullest extent and can provide opportunities for virtual exchanges and open discussion.

2. Partnerships between the public sector, civil society and government

In an increasingly globalised world, partnerships between government, business and civil society organisations are increasingly vital to promoting Australian values and interests abroad. This was acknowledged in Chapter 8 of the Foreign Policy White Paper and should be central to Australia's soft power strategy.

The Australian Government should partner with think tanks and other civil society organisations to increase understanding of Australian strategic interests and utilise Australian soft power. This could be done through several mechanisms. Track-two dialogue and diplomacy is a vital means of promoting understanding of Australia's interests. Partnerships between civil society organisations and business groups can result in valuable knowledge-sharing. The DFAT International Relations Grant Program is vital to ensuring that organisations such as the AIIA can continue to play a role in promoting understanding of Australian foreign policy and international affairs among the Australian population.

Government support enables the AIIA to facilitate forums for debate and exchange of views on Australia's interests and soft power, such as through the AIIA's recent "Australia and the Rules-Based International Order" conference supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Attorney-General's Department and ANU Coral Bell School.

3. Australia's Diplomatic Capacity

Australia needs to build its structural capacity to ensure its security and prosperity in the long term. It is vital that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) be appropriately resourced to pursue this agenda.

It has long been known that Australia was underinvesting in its diplomacy; a 2011 Lowy Institute study showed that Australia had the smallest network of diplomatic missions of all the G20 countries and only nine out of 34 OECD countries studied had fewer diplomatic missions than Australia. More recently, Australia has expanded its diplomatic representation, by opening new missions. This is an important development and should be continued. The AIIA commends the endeavour of maintaining a strong diplomatic network across the globe that will help Australia to stay relevant and able to exert its influence.

Appropriate funding for DFAT would be an investment with a big impact as a proportion of the federal budget: DFAT's funding base is low at one-twentieth of the Defence budget, which aims at a spending target of two percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Australia should also aim to restore its overseas development assistance (ODA) and increase it gradually to reach the international benchmark of 0.7 per cent of total GDP.

While the AIIA accepts that there is a need to curtail public expenditure, it believes that the importance of promoting Australia's foreign policy interests in the face of unpredictable international developments warrants increased spending, as DFAT manages the key interactions between Australia and the world. Any further tightening of the budget for DFAT will have implications for Australia's influence globally. Australia should aim to meet the average budget that OECD countries allocate to their foreign affairs departments as a benchmark.

The Australian Institute of International Affairs National Executive



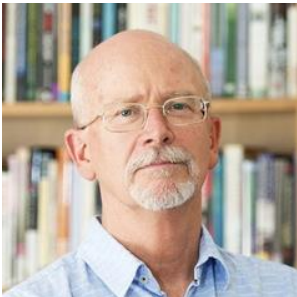
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