
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/25810/
Australia as a Southern Hemisphere ‘Soft Power’

Benjamin Reilly

Sir Walter Murdoch School of Public Policy and International Affairs

Murdoch University

The 2014 G20 leader’s meeting in Brisbane was hailed as the largest gathering of international leaders ever held in Australia. While media attention was focussed on the presidents of great powers of the Northern Hemisphere – the US, China, Russia in particular – the meeting also featured the first Australian gathering of the major powers of the Southern Hemisphere too, including Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and of course Australia itself.

This was significant not just for its symbolic heralding of the rise of the Global South in international affairs, but also its implications for Australian foreign policy. While Asia is clearly the main game for Australia’s hard economic and security interests, southern regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South America are becoming increasingly important to Australia across a range of other ‘softer’ dimensions of power. This commentary, drawing on an earlier ASPI paper, investigates our emerging role as a Southern Hemisphere ‘soft power’ (Reilly 2013).

To understand this shift, it makes sense to start with the different conceptions of Australia’s place in the world. There are various ways to do this. One of the simplest is to think about our relative capacity in three distinct spatial arenas – the global, the regional, and the hemispheric:

The first sees Australia as a global player – emphasised by our role not just with international bodies such as the United Nations but also global forums such as the G20 and, most recently, as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

The second, and the dominant theme of most analyses, sees Australia as a key player in the Asia-Pacific (or, increasingly, the ‘Indo-Pacific’) region – the focus of so much
of our foreign policy thinking over the past few decades, and epitomised by our efforts over many years to both shape and join Asia’s regional architecture such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the East Asian Summit.

I suggest that increasingly there is a third spatial realm in which Australia is becoming increasingly active across a range of key interests – strategic, scientific, and commercial. That is the idea of Australia as a Southern Hemisphere power – an idea that was once fundamental to our conception of ourselves but which has been largely forgotten.

What is the Southern Hemisphere? The region comprises four continents (Australia, most of Africa, South America, Antarctica) and four great oceans, three of which (the Pacific, Indian, and Southern Oceans) border Australia. It contain two of the world’s emerging giants, Brazil and Indonesia, several influential middle powers (Australia, as well as other G20 members such as Argentina and South Africa), two innovative smaller states in Chile and New Zealand, some resource-rich ‘fragile states’ (Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Peru), the odd economic disaster (Zimbabwe) as well as a host of small island states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The region has always been peripheral to the global distribution of power. Part of this is simple demographics: only a quarter of the world’s population live in the Southern Hemisphere – 390 million in South America, 875 million in sub-Saharan Africa, 240 million in Indonesia and 36 million in Oceania. Over 80% live in either Africa or South America, two continents with which Australia has maintained a limited and fairly superficial relationship. This will have to change. With a total population of 1.541 billion, the Southern Hemisphere is today economically and strategically more important than ever. Australia’s engagement with our own hemisphere highlights some important and often overlooked aspects of international relations, particularly in terms of Australia’s ‘soft power’.

Figure One: the Southern Hemisphere

Soft Power
Geographic isolation has traditionally limited Australians’ appreciation of the role of power in international affairs. As a country which has moved from close alignments with first Britain and then the United States as the major maritime powers, Australia has been on the winning side in terms of the global power balance. At a regional level, similarly, Australians have paid little thought to their own power relative to others: until the end of the 20th century, for instance, the Australian economy was larger than all of Southeast Asia combined, with a military superiority to match. And within its limited sphere of influence in the Southwest Pacific, Australia has always been the largest power by a considerable margin.

This situation, however, is starting to change. In terms of the core dimensions of power, our military alliance with the United States remains key to Australia’s security, but the US is less dominant today than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Similarly, Australia’s own relative weight in sheer demographic terms is also diminishing in comparison to the rising economies of Asia, being dwarfed not only by China, Japan and India but also by rising powers such as Korea, Thailand and, increasingly, Indonesia.

At the same time, the weight of Africa and Latin America is growing in world affairs. Partly this is a result of political developments: almost all the major states of sub-Saharan Africa and South America are today electoral democracies, a far cry from the dominance of one-party autocracies or military juntas of earlier decades. Partly it is a result of demographics: after Asia, these are the world’s most populous continents, with some of the youngest and fastest-growing populations. And partly it is a result of economics, and the growth trajectories of what are relatively young economies. The combination of political stability, a large and youthful population, and fast-growing economies is key to the emergence of countries like Brazil and Indonesia as major powers-to-be of the 21st century.

**Figure Two – “Electoral democracies’ in the world, 2013**

Discussions of soft power typically contrast it with classic “hard” power resources such as economic and military force. For Australia, these have long been focussed north:
• In most economic areas, our ties to the northern hemisphere are dominant. Of our top-10 trade partners, only one country (New Zealand) is in our own hemisphere. China, Japan and other northeast Asian countries are at the top of the list.

• Similarly, our hard security relationships are dominated by the US alliance and the US-led military coalitions with which we have regularly participated in Asia and the Middle East.

• Culturally, we are a European-origin country with a significant attachment to US cultural exports, and an increasingly diverse immigrant base which also comes overwhelmingly from the northern hemisphere.

But what of Australian ‘soft power’? As defined by Joseph Nye, soft power, in contrast to the classic ‘hard’ resource of military might, “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion” and relies on “the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye 1990, 154). As Nye noted in his original formulation of the concept, a country’s soft power include not just culture and diplomacy but also factors of technology, education, aid and trade, all of which are becoming more significant in international power. It is these kinds of soft power resources that are key to Australia’s role in the Southern Hemisphere.

Ten years ago, in a stimulating series of public lectures, Paul Kelly bemoaned our lack of understanding of soft power, calling it “a powerful idea [which] is undervalued as a tool for Australian policy” and arguing that “Australia's singular recent failure lies in its inability to conceptualize its soft power as a national strategic asset” (Kelly 2004, 42). This may be starting to change. Recent years have seen a marked shift in emphasis towards Australian soft-power in science, education, and sport in our own hemisphere.

One example is Australia’s distribution of international development assistance. Most of Australian aid, as has long been the historical pattern, goes to our near neighbours in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. But recent years have seen this complemented by the growth of new aid initiatives in Africa and Latin America. In combination with the upscaling of aid under the Rudd-Gillard Labor government, and the renewed focus by the Abbott government on Indonesia and Papua New Guinea as the two largest recipients of Australian aid, this resulted in a much greater
concentration than previously on the global “south”, geographically defined, which in 2012/13 received 60% of all Australian aid (see Figure 2).

Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of Australian ODA, 2012-13

Another aspect is the changing composition of Australian society. According to ABS statistics, over one-quarter of all migrants to Australia over the past 20 years have hailed from the Southern Hemisphere (predominantly Oceania, but also with strong representation from Southern Africa). While the CER treaty which guarantees freedom of movement between Australia and New Zealand is the major part of this story, also important is the long wave of post-apartheid immigration from South Africa, which is now the fifth-largest source of permanent migrants in Australia (behind New Zealand, the UK, China, and India). By contrast, permanent migration from the Americas has been negligible.

When it comes to the other big component of long-term arrivals in Australia – education – the picture is reversed: there, amongst the southern hemisphere regions it is Latin America which is today a booming market for Australian higher education, ‘Latin American student enrolments have grown fourfold since 2004, with annual growth of more than 34 per cent, making Latin America one of the fastest growing sources of foreign students for Australia’ (Smith, 2010). With African enrolments also growing fast, stimulated by the growth in Australia-Africa scholarship awards, the higher education export market is, in many ways, the *sine qua non* of Australian soft power (Bryrne and Hall 2011).

A final, more symbolic, example of the increasing people-to-people links between Australia and the other Southern Hemisphere countries is in the area of professional sport. As Nye noted in his original conceptualisation of soft power, new forms of communications and transportation have a revolutionary effect on economic interdependence. In terms of Southern Hemisphere regionalism, nowhere is this intertwining more apparent than in the rugby alliance between South Africa, New Zealand and Australia (SANZAR) which, along with Argentina, form the basis of professional competition at the international (Rugby Championship) and provincial
(Super Rugby) level – and which are, by some margin, the most geographically dispersed major sporting competitions in the world today.

**Trade and Investment**

Trade and investment is another area of international affairs where Australia’s role as a Southern Hemisphere power is increasingly apparent. In particular, the trade groupings Australia has led, such as the Cairns Group of agricultural exporting countries, tend to be overwhelmingly southern-hemisphere focussed. Half of all Cairns Group members are Latin American countries, which tend to share Australia's objective of global agricultural trade liberalization. This gives the Cairns group a strategic role as a rare body in which southern hemisphere views dominate.¹

**Figure 4: The Cairns Group**

APEC too, while based around Asia, also includes Mexico, Chile and Peru amongst its membership, as does the putative Trans-Pacific Partnership (currently Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, Chile, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam + US).

The massive investment boom in mining and other resource projects current occurring in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, has likewise led to a massive increase in engagement by Australian companies and multinationals across the Southern Hemisphere.

According to government estimates there are now over 200 Australian mining companies exploring or producing in Africa, with over 450 projects; with combined investments of over $25 billion (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2011a). In Latin America, too, Australian trade and investment is growing strongly, albeit off a relatively low base. In the 2010-11 financial year, Australia’s

¹ Expansion of the Cairns Group to include South Africa was praised by then Trade Minister Tim Fischer as reinforcing the group’s “Southern Hemisphere axis” (Fischer 1998).
exports to the region grew by over 50 per cent, more than twice the rate of growth of exports from Australia to the world generally (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2011b).

Australia’s two-way trade with both Africa and Latin America is currently some $6 billion dollars in each case – a small total, but growing fast (12% per annum in relation to Latin America) – but with substantially higher investment levels, much of which is commercially valuable and thus not widely publicised. Australian business interest in Africa in particular has gone from negligible a generation ago to over 40% of international Australian mining projects today being in Africa. According to government estimates, the $24 billion of current Australian mining investment in Africa is likely to double as new projects come on stream (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2011b).

A broader issue here is simply one of scale and size: while Asia is the world’s most populous continent, Africa is the second-largest with more than a billion people, and Latin America third with over 600 million. Both are growing rapidly in economic terms and both can be expected to be much more assertive in international affairs in coming decades. Indeed, the most rapidly growing countries in the past decade have not been in Asia but Africa, which is home to six of the world’s ten fastest-growing economies.

**Regional Interventions**

Another example of Australian soft power can be seen in our peacekeeping and peace enforcement interventions in the Southwest Pacific. Australia has a long record of joining conflicts with our northern allies as a belligerent, and also of participating in peacekeeping and other forms of cooperative interventions. A hemispherical focus helps clarify the demarcation between these very different kinds of missions. While our role as subordinate partners in “hot” military coalitions of the willing has predominantly been in the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan) and before that East Asia (Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaya, Korea), our role in peacekeeping over recent decades has been quite different.

All the Australian ‘cooperative intervention’ style of peace enforcement operations have occurred in our own immediate neighbourhood – via the International Force for
East Timor (INTERFET), the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), peace monitoring missions in Papua New Guinea’s Bougainville province, as well as in Tonga following the burning of Nukualofa (with New Zealand playing a leading role). With the partial exception of East Timor, all these interventions have been non-coercive, multi-faceted exercises in peacebuilding underpinned by the soft power of development assistance and people-to-people links rather than conventional military power. Moreover, in many of these missions, much of the on-the-ground work was done via policing rather than outright military means: the Australian Federal Police’s International Deployment Group (IDG) is one of the few deployable civilian police capabilities worldwide, and AFP personnel have played a significant stabilization and capacity-building role in all the missions above, as well as in the short-lived Enhanced Cooperation Program in Papua New Guinea.

Australian-led multinational operations in the South Pacific are good examples of this distinctive velvet-glove application of Australian power within our own region. RAMSI initially comprised over 2,000 military, police and civilians from Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Fiji and Tonga, with Australia and New Zealand providing the bulk of the personnel and logistical support. Headed by a civilian Special Coordinator, RAMSI’s main task was to restore law and order and to help stabilize Solomon Islands’ finances, both of which were achieved in relatively short order. The longer-term challenge continues to be in the areas of law and justice, machinery of government, and economic viability. The mission has reinforced the importance of deployed civilian police in statebuilding operations. This was also evident in the 1998-2003 Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) in Bougainville, which replaced the New Zealand-led Truce Monitoring Group. Importantly, both these ‘cooperative interventions’ remained broadly popular with the bulk of their islands’ population – vital to any successful application of soft power (Wainwright 2010).

In sum, in contrast to our active combat role in a succession of conflicts in Asia and the Middle East, Australia’s interventions in our own hemisphere have been distinctive for their lack of an overt military character. This soft-power approach to hemispheric issues even extends to Australia’s power projection into the Southern Oceans and Antarctica. As an ASPI paper has noted, “Most strategic thinking in Australia is locked into hard power, but the oceans offer us great potential to apply soft power and creative diplomacy” (Bateman and Bergin 2009, 4). Nowhere is this
more true than in the Australian Antarctic Territories, our claim to some 42 percent of the Antarctic landmass. While this claim is contested or unrecognised by other major powers, it is the case that our activities within this zone are entirely focused on scientific research that, unlike some other claimants, have no military component (Fogerty 2011).

Geographic reality makes Australia’s interests in the Southern Oceans and Antarctica perennial, unlike that of some other claimants. The future of Australia’s Antarctic role will depend in large part on the extent to which we are prepared to build on our scientific investment there (Bergin and Press 2011). In the same vein, the increasing importance of Africa and Latin America to Australia only really becomes clear when we turn away from the economic statistics and look at the areas of scientific research, education, sport and other informal areas of cooperation. It is in these areas, discussed below, that the development of southern hemisphere regionalism has been most active.

**Science and Security**

Scientific research is one field in which pan-hemispheric collaboration has long been important. In some fields, it is essential. Perhaps the most prominent example is in the field of astronomy, where study of the universe depends on a network of trans-hemisphere telescopic facilities aimed at the southern sky, such as the cross-country research project involving the SkyMapper telescope (based in Siding Springs, New South Wales) and the Giant Magellan Telescope (to be constructed in Chile).

The most recent example of this southern hemispheric astronomical collaboration is Australia and South Africa’s shared hosting of the world’s largest telescope – the Square Kilometre Array. After an intense six-year battle between the two bidding nations, a split-site solution for the giant radio telescope will create over a square kilometre of collecting area, with more than 3000 antennas to be built in both countries.

Like the southern skies, the southern waters engage the interests of every regional state. Antarctica and the Southern Ocean are thus a shared concern of all the major littoral states of the Southern Hemisphere. This has stimulated various attempts at Southern Oceanic Rim cooperation over the years in areas such as the demilitarization of Antarctica and the protection of the Southern Ocean (and also significant disunion
over these same issues). New Zealand in particular has urged the so-called Antarctic ‘gateway states’ of Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand to collaborate more closely over the protection of living resources such as toothfish in the Southern Ocean and the environmental protection of the Antarctic.

One attempt to institutionalise these shared interests was the Valdivia Group, established with some fanfare in 1995 to take these common interests to a more formal level. Named after the southern Chilean city where they first met, the Valdivia Group’s membership brought together all the key southern hemisphere states Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and South Africa -- based on their common scientific interests in environmental issues such as ozone protection and protection of bio-diversity.

While the group has struggled to meet tangible goals, the identification of the Southern Oceanic rim as a shared interest of all member countries was an important step in geo-political terms (Dodds 1998). Alexander Downer made this argument explicitly in 1996 when he said:

“As countries of the Southern hemisphere, we should devote greater attention to collaborative structures with each other. The purpose of the Valdivia Group is to ensure that our ties with the northern hemisphere do not cause us to overlook our links to the east and west; links which stretch across the South Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans ... we Southern hemispheric countries share a very strong mutual interest in ensuring the success of international efforts to understand and preserve this vital part of our environment” (quoted in Dodds 1998, 734).

While probably ahead of its time, the Valdivia Group remains an indicator of the kinds of coalitions that may be needed in the future as changing environmental circumstances force countries to re-imagine their geo-political relationships (Bamsey 2003). One example of this re-imagining was the call in 2012 for Australia to establish a federated space agency with countries in the southern hemisphere to maximise the commercial return from our space research and technology (Australian National University 2012).
There is also an increasing security dimension to our satellite facilities. The US is currently building a radar station and a surveillance telescope near Exmouth in Western Australia, which according to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop "will make use of Australia's unique geography to increase the southern hemisphere coverage of the US's Space Surveillance Network" (Bishop 2014). At the moment, the US can track movements of Chinese and North Korean and other space assets in the northern hemisphere but not in the southern area, prompting Bradley Perrett of Aviation Week & Space Technology to claim that “The radar and telescope on Australian soil would be active and perhaps crucial in any confrontation between the US and China” (Hartcher 2014).

Similarly, the European Space Agency relies on another West Australian tracking station, in combination with a sister facility in Argentina. The crucial point here is simply one of geographic comparative advantage: in areas of scientific research ranging from astronomy and meteorology to oceanography and climate science, Australia’s Southern Hemisphere location gives us a global role far larger than our raw population and economic size would suggest (Matthews 2008).

**Conclusion: the Geopolitics of Australia’s Soft Power**

Thinking about Australia as a Southern Hemisphere power helps distinguish Australia’s enduring interests from its passing preoccupations.

For instance: at the time of writing Australia is supporting major international commitments in both Afghanistan and Antarctica, the former receiving far more attention that the latter. Yet our national interest in Afghanistan is, at the end of the day, likely to be utterly transitory, while our interests in the Antarctic are permanent, the dictate of geography and a shared environmental and spatial realm.

Thinking about shared space in this way is useful, as it helps knit together a series of regions that are often treated as separate – Antarctica, Oceania, Latin America, and Southern Africa – but actually have common and unchanging spatial contexts, and thus many common and unchanging interests. This is not a new insight. In the 19th Century, Australia’s role as a Southern Hemisphere power was eagerly embraced by our politicians. Australia, it was claimed, would become a kind of America of the
southern hemisphere -- “Mistress of the South Seas”, as Sir Henry Parkes told the federal parliament in 1890.

In the same vein, Australia's historical connections with both Southern Africa and Latin America are more also complex than many contemporary writers assume (Evans and Grant 1995). These have comprised a wide range of contacts from military involvement to migration to diplomatic, cultural and economic interaction, from Australia’s eager participation in the Boer war in South Africa in the to the failed attempt to found a utopian socialist settlement in Paraguay, *Colonia Nueva Australia* (Wilcox 2002; Whitehead 1997).

The imperial approach was particularly prevalent in the South Pacific, including Queensland’s annexation of Papua and the subsequent capture of German New Guinea and Samoa. The preamble to the initial draft of the Australian constitution included provision not just for New Zealand but also Fiji to join the Commonwealth. As Meany has shown, Australia’s own version of the Monroe Doctrine as applied to the South Pacific is another part of this story.

Over the course of the 20th century, the focus of Australia’s foreign affairs shifted, as two world wars, Korea, Vietnam and a long Cold War all focused our attention north, in the context of our military alliances first with Britain and then the United States. More recently the emergence of Asia as Australia’s (and the world’s) economic epicentre has only deepened this trend.

Today, our economic sights are set firmly north, as are our hard security interests and most of our diplomatic attention. The Southern Hemisphere is not and probably never will be the main game for Australia. But it deserves to be seen as part of the game, especially when so many key elements of our soft power – development assistance, international peacekeeping, trade groupings, and some of our most important scientific, educational and sporting initiatives – are now converging hemispherically.

One telling indication of this is the way in which Australia is conceived and perceived by others. In contrast to much of the world, in which Australia is frequently overlooked or ignored, three key Southern Hemisphere states – New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina - routinely compare themselves and their experience to Australia’s. In New Zealand, such comparisons (both positive and negative) are widely practiced and appear embedded in popular consciousness. In South Africa,
they have traditionally been the preserve of the white, English-speaking population and their relatives who have emigrated here, but also arise in the area of public policy, where Australian experience is frequently cited. In Argentina, the comparisons are more historical, usually bewailing the very different economic and political trajectories of what were the world’s two richest countries on a per capita basis a century ago. The experience of all of these “settler societies” influenced the work of historians such as Donald Denoon, who noted that the history and geography of settler colonialism in the ‘temperate’ southern hemisphere followed strikingly similar patterns.3

The tension between historical and contemporary interpretations suggests that the time is right for a re-evaluation of Australia as a southern hemisphere power. In sum, we need to start thinking of the Southern Hemisphere less as a peripheral region of marginal importance, and more as our forebears did – as a key arena for Australia’s engagement with the world in general, and for Australian soft power in particular.

References

Australian National University 2012. ‘Call for southern hemisphere space agency’, Campus Review, 8th October, 2012.


Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2011b), *Inquiry into Australia’s Trade and Investment Relations with Asia, the Pacific and Latin America*. Canberra: Parliament of Australia.


Matthews, Mark. 2008. 'Australia is in the southern hemisphere!', Australian R&D Review, June 2008.


Figure 2

Source: Freedom House.
Figure 3

Source: AusAid.