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Soft power still packing a punch

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By SHOLTO BYRNES

NOT so long ago it seemed that everyone was talking about “soft power”, the concept developed by Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University and much discussed in international affairs policy circles, especially in America in the late 2000s.

Co-option, not coercion, was the key to “obtaining outcomes” that countries desired, according to Nye, a former assistant secretary of defence in the Clinton administration. Subsequently, he developed the term “smart power”, which combined hard and soft power and was very much in vogue in the early years of the Obama White House.

Today, however, you hear little of it, to the point that a recent *Foreign Policy* magazine essay was titled “Soft Power Outage”.

On the face of it, the idea seems to have fizzled out – another amiable-sounding theory that could not withstand the brute reality that some states prefer confrontation and force.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea may have been the most startling display of hard power in Europe since the end of the Cold War, if not before.

China, meanwhile, has not hesitated to forcefully declare its claims to seas, islands and reefs in the region that it regards as historically its own. The views of nearby countries with their own claims and dec-

Even though you hear little of soft power today, that doesn’t mean soft power has had its day. Malaysia is a prime example of a small country using soft power to punch well above its weight.

ades of de facto ownership were pithily rejected in 2010 by the then foreign minister, Yang Jiechi. He is reported to have told his Singapore counterpart: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact.” As a statement of hard power, that’s hard to beat.

In the Middle East, the main response to the Islamic State – air strikes – obviously falls into the hard power camp.

Meanwhile, every attempt to use soft power techniques such as diplomacy and negotiations has failed to bring to an end the civil war in Syria.

Even the United Nations personnel involved have confessed to despair over the scale of the crisis and their inability to persuade the disparate parties to agree to any kind of compromise.

The *Foreign Policy* essay focused on the United States, and after the release of the details of the Central Intelligence Agency’s torture tactics, the author may well have been correct in criticising the US for taking “its soft power for granted, like oxygen in the air, assuming it will always be there. This approach not only carries risk, it under-utilises a strategic resource”.

This is true in light of the devas-

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tating international reaction.

But that doesn’t mean soft power has had its day. It’s just that its use has shifted to other countries, which are finding it a very useful tool or are investing in it more than they had in the past.

Palestine is one example. Israel has punished the Palestinian Authority for having the temerity to bid last week to join the International Criminal Court by announcing that it will freeze payment of the taxes it collects on the Palestinians’ behalf.

It did the same in April when Palestine applied to join 15 international treaties and conventions. But while Israel may create facts on the

ground with settlements, the PA’s president Mahmoud Abbas is creating facts internationally through the exercise in soft power.

At the end of last year, the French and Irish parliaments called for recognition of Palestine as an independent state.

Sweden had done so two months before. Israel has plenty of hard power, but it is of no use in the face of global opinion that is shifting inexorably in favour of Palestinian statehood.

Much of Britain’s continuing clout comes from soft power. Its international development budget has been commendably protected, even during a programme of austerity, to afford greater outreach to Commonwealth countries under Prime Minister David Cameron.

Malaysia is a prime example of a small country using soft power to punch well above its weight. Its population of 30 million is one-eighth that of Indonesia, which lies to its south, and less than half of Thailand, to its north.

But it has been the discreet, personal diplomatic efforts of Malaysia’s Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak that have borne the most fruit, both regionally and beyond.

It was Najib who facilitated the

historic Bangsamoro peace deal in the Philippines which should bring to an end decades of violence that have claimed the lives of at least 120,000 in the country’s south.

It was soft power – for none other was available – that saw him secure the return of the MH17 black boxes from the rebels in Ukraine after the plane was shot down last summer.

And it was under Malaysia’s chairmanship that Myanmar was admitted into Asean in 1997.

The move was criticised at the time, but the idea that Myanmar’s inclusion in international forums would encourage change has been justified by its transformation from a pariah-like state to one that has seen remarkable (if unfinished) reforms.

Sanctions failed to achieve what dialogue, openness and cooperation, and examples of economic advancement – all forms of soft power – could and did instead.

So don’t count soft power out yet. It’s not dead. It has, perhaps, merely moved to a different address.

Superpowers may currently neglect it, but what US commentator Fareed Zakaria described as “the rising rest” recognise its potential. And they are tapping into it as never before.

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