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COOL JAPAN!

The term ‘soft power’ originates from Professor Joseph Nye, former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, pictured with me above. Nye refers to ‘hard power’ as military and economic power and to ‘soft power’ as that derived from “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas and policies”. In the post-Cold War international system, and an increasingly globalized world, ‘soft power’ has gained prominence. However, ‘soft power’ has always been significant for post-WWII Japan, which renounced military ‘hard power’ as a means of pursuing state policy, embracing pacifism.

With a wealth of ‘soft power’ resources, Japan continually strives to enhance the attractiveness of its image overseas through human, cultural and intellectual exchange, and public diplomacy. In particular, Japan’s so-called sub-culture of animation (anime), movies, comics (manga), pop music and Japanese cuisine, has significant global reach. It is a tremendous diplomatic resource, and asset for Japan’s international relations. In a 2002 *Foreign Policy* magazine article entitled “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, Douglas McGray claimed that “Japan has become one of a handful of perfect globalization nations (along with the USA) and Japan’s growing cultural presence has created a mighty engine of national cool.”

McGray also contends that “commercial trends and products can serve political and economic ends”. The Government of Japan actively supports the Japanese cultural industry, which produces, promotes and exports popular culture and, in so doing, disseminates positive images of Japan. One example is the ‘International Manga Award’, which the Japanese Government has held annually since

2007. 'Brand Japan' or pop culture diplomacy is far-reaching and, as Ambassador of Japan, one of my favorite parts of the role is to showcase hip, modern Japan alongside our cherished traditional Japan Inc. of kimonos, ikebana (flower-arranging), tea ceremonies, and the concept of 'wa', encompassing harmony and peace, and 'kyosei', the idea of coexistence with nature.

One particularly well-known 'brand Japan' pop culture ambassador, 'Hello Kitty', turns 40 this year and is worth \$7 billion, appearing on over 50,000 products that are sold in 70 countries. 'Hello Kitty', originally drawn for children by Japanese designer Yuko Shimizu, encompasses a quality that the Japanese call 'kawaii' or 'loveable', 'cute' and 'adorable'. 'Kawaii' is deeply engrained in both Japanese pop culture and the Japanese psyche. The root word 'kawai' is formed from 'ka' meaning 'acceptable' and 'ai' meaning 'love', and has taken on the secondary meanings of 'cool', 'charming', 'non-threatening' and 'innocent'. These qualities are displayed throughout our much loved mascots in Japan. Mascots are known locally as 'yuru-kyara', or 'loose', 'relaxed' characters and are ubiquitous; used to promote everything from soap, food and train lines, to Japan's Self Defence Forces, regions, and even [prisons](#). Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses Japanese cartoon characters as representatives of Japanese pop power to the world, such as Doraemon, a futuristic robotic cat, who embodies core Japanese values of respect and harmony, and was elected as an international ambassador for the country. An iconic anime character, he will be competing with 'Hello Kitty' and others to be Japan's 2020 Tokyo Olympics mascot. In the Middle East, 'Captain Majid' is the Arabic name for the popular Japanese cartoon 'Captain Tsubasa'. When the Government of Japan distributed water in Iraq in 2003 to help rebuild the nation through Japan's International Cooperation Agency, as part of Japan's Official Development Assistance in the region, they put an illustration of 'Captain Majid' on the water tank lorries, having learned of the happiness he brought to Iraqi children on the soccer pitch, and as a visible sign of Japanese friendship and values.

The world's third largest economy, Japan is also a nation with a high-tech, high-quality image, and is regularly ranked among the top patent producing countries. Around 20% of global research and development expenditure comes from Japan, a nation which accounts for only 2% of the world's population. Japanese technology is one of our pivotal soft power resources and, coupled with the fact that globalization and technology have further empowered non-state actors in international diplomacy, every Japanese company and product acts as an ambassador for Japan, or agent of Japan's 'soft power'. Japanese brands have long been committed to shining the spotlight on quality materials and skilled craftsmanship, which have set them apart from others on the market. This mark of quality extends to non-tech industries such as Japanese cuisine; Tokyo has more Michelin Stars than any other city in the world, including Paris. The medical industry is another area where Japan shines.

The final aspect of Japan's soft power I would like to humbly touch upon is the nation's resilience, perseverance and orderliness. These qualities are prized in our collectivist culture, and are evidenced by the manner in which Japan deals with natural disasters, however devastating, which never result in civil disturbance. During the recent FIFA World Cup in Brazil, it made me deeply proud to see Japanese football fans cleaning up every last trace of their litter from the stadium on their way out, which the international media picked up on. In our modern day 'global village', each of us, diplomat or otherwise, has a role to play in our nation's soft power narrative.