

Sarina Theys (2025). *The soft power of non-Western small states: The cases of Bhutan and Qatar*. Abingdon: Routledge. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-1-0325-5206-4. £120.00.

Soft power has become a widely studied, highly debated, and consistently contested concept in international relations, yet much of the scholarship has traditionally focused on major powers. Sarina Theys' latest book challenges this dominant perspective by offering a compelling analysis of how Bhutan and Qatar – two small actors with contrasting political and economic profiles – exercise influence on the international stage.

Through detailed comparative discourse analysis, Theys situates her work within broader debates on what constitutes soft power and how its manifestations can be identified and studied in the contexts of small states beyond the traditional European system. The book's main contribution lies in its innovative methodological approach, offering much-needed tools to explore how these states project soft power despite limited material capabilities and adverse physio-geographic and geopolitical constraints. Theys' work provides a major service to the literature, offering a valuable dual contribution: on the one hand, it addresses the longstanding definitional dilemma that has permeated the small-state debate for over seven decades by asserting that the meaning of "small" is not fixed but a socially constructed and dynamic phenomenon. On the other hand, by expanding our understanding of how smallness is perceived, utilised, and received within non-Western paradigms, Theys elevates the discourse on soft power by framing it as an outcome-oriented exercise, rooted in cultural, perceptual, and receptive dimensions, often in contrast to traditional, West-centric interpretations of soft power.

The book contains seven chapters, structured into three parts. The first part discusses how Theys defines small states and, contrary to other approaches, integrates this definition into a broader discussion of what constitutes soft power. This section lays out the conceptual parameters and theoretical framework of the study, offering a clear and engaging foundation for how soft power should be defined and refined in the given context. The second part presents a rich and nuanced empirical examination of Bhutan's and Qatar's soft power strategies, focusing on various dimensions, including how their state identities are shaped domestically, how these identities are projected externally, and how they are received by international actors. The final part of the book offers a comparative analysis, drawing insightful conclusions from the two cases and tying the overarching arguments together with a coherent and compelling line of reasoning.

Among the book's most compelling features is that the author builds her own *intersubjective* model of small-state definition by bridging the objective (measurable and materially verifiable) parameters with subjective (perception-driven and qualitatively comparative) criteria. In the thematic literature, these two sets have often existed in parallel abstraction. Theys' definitional model centres on how state agents themselves perceive and identify the state they govern and represent, thereby reclaiming the authority to define 'smallness' from external observers. In doing so, the intersubjective approach offers a nuanced middle ground that incorporates elements of both, while prioritising context-specific, shared understandings of smallness over externally imposed classifications.

The book's key strength, however, is its critical engagement with Nye's concept of 'soft power' and its deep reconceptualisation. Building around a core argument that the soft power parameters can be grounded on non-materialistic reflections and identity-informed and perception-based political manifestations of it, the book lays a solid conceptual foundation by effectively reconciling Nye's at times vague and unstable concept with Wendt's thoughtful constructivist model of state identity. This theoretical synthesis allows the author to detect and assess the exercise of soft power in the empirical cases of Bhutan and Qatar. Moreover, as part of the broader scholarly effort to de-Westernise soft power theory, Theys refines the concept by shifting Nye's agent-focused projection toward an audience-centric model of reception. In

doing so, she enriches the soft power concept with a pertinent theoretical framework that opens up new, promising horizons for research as its interpretation of soft power is now tied to state identities, beliefs, perceptions, and persuasive narratives directed at both domestic and international audiences. Guided by this contextualised intellectual apparatus, Theys advances a novel definition of soft power as “the ability of an actor to convince another actor that something is true, genuine, or real,” which she empirically operationalises by examining how state identities are developed, projected, and received (pp. 29–30).

While the book offers valuable insights, several limitations merit critical reflection. First, Theys’ conceptualisation of soft power as a purely performative phenomenon – one that exists only through successful audience reception – risks underplaying the relevance of resource-based and agency-driven components in enabling such performances. By asserting that soft power materialises only when a projected identity is accepted as true, genuine, or real, and that it ceases to exist when rejected, the book may inadvertently lead to misreading that material or strategic resources have little to do with soft power projection. Although cultural capital, institutional credibility, and normative appeal do not automatically translate into influence, they are nonetheless enabling conditions that facilitate the exercise of soft power. In this sense, the act of convincing may depend on the prior possession of certain capacities (i.e. intellectual, institutional, or symbolic) which the book does not fully acknowledge.

Second, the book’s sharp conceptual distinction between “convincing” and “persuasion” may prove too rigid in practice. In real-world diplomacy, these modes of influence often overlap; states may simultaneously appeal to beliefs and attempt to shape behaviours, with outcomes ranging from ambivalence and partial adoption to strategic compliance, all of which may still constitute forms of soft power. While Theys accurately stresses audience reception, some complexities of asymmetrical relationships remain underexplored, particularly how smaller states elicit attraction from more powerful actors, and how that attraction functions in the context of stark power asymmetries. This ambiguity is particularly salient in contexts where compliance may not result from persuasion alone but also from calculation, opportunism, or structural incentives, which sets the stage for further research into the mechanisms and limits of soft power in asymmetrical relationships.

Finally, Theys convincingly portrays Bhutan’s successful deployment of its national identity in cultural diplomacy; but the analysis at times overlooks the geopolitical constraints shaping that strategy, especially Bhutan’s strategic dependency on India. In this context, the line between soft power projection and acts of appeasement or clientelism gets blurred.

Overall, *The soft power of non-Western small states* makes a significant contribution to the still scarce literature on non-Western small states and offers a long-overdue fresh perspective on the highly contested concept of soft power. It fills an important gap in the study of non-Western small-state diplomacy by shedding light on the nuances, characteristics, and patterns of non-Western statecraft and the distinct foreign policy-making perspectives that accompany them. Theys’ work is a well-executed and thought-provoking study of how small states in the 21st century can exercise influence in the international arena. It serves as an excellent resource for students seeking to understand the strategic behaviour of small states, and it is a must-read for diplomats and policymakers interested in alternative approaches to global influence.

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