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At the Intersection of Informational and Soft Power

By Will Hanley and Ethan Mansour

Introduction

When Joseph Nye first termed Soft Power in his 1990 book, "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power," China was not quite the emerging power it has become today. Now, as China challenges U.S. preeminence, the nature of soft power has evolved, particularly in the context of human security and information warfare. While countries compete to have greater relative soft power—the influence to get others to want your desired outcome—its intersection with informational power has come into focus (Nye, 2004). Nye credits the United States' image and attractiveness as causing other countries to take in American culture, values, and foreign policies. China's lucrative Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) combined with information campaigns has, at times, strategically undermined or supplanted the U.S. image. Since Nye's definition of soft power in 1990, how soft power is used and the informational technologies now available have not only reinforced the criticality of informational power, but the cooperative (or destructive) interplay between soft and informational power. This Intersectional Power leverages emerging technologies and networks of influence—both physical and virtual—to both control and persuade via information (manipulated or otherwise) to reach and sustain desired strategic outcomes.

The resulting competition between state and non-state actors over intersectional power has a profound impact on populations and their sense of security—both perceived and actual. Confrontations over intersectional power can be geographically identified and localized around issues of human security. "Human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people (United Nations General Assembly, 2012)." Failure to apply intersectional power to human security not only jeopardizes immediate objectives but, more importantly, long-term access to soft power amongst strategic partners. One such case addressed here involves the heated, complex intersectional competition between the U.S. and China over the Pacific Island Chains (PIC). In the proceeding paragraphs, we will offer a definition of intersectional power and explain how it applies to strategic issues, particularly Human Security, using the PIC as a relevant case study.

Intersectional Power

While a plethora of scholarship and debate surrounds the concepts of Soft and Informational Power, little if any arguments have been made for a third dimension of power defined by their intersection and interplay. Yet, it is quite apparent that this third element or amalgam of the two is quite prevalent both in the past and present competition between people and powers. As such, there exists a concept of Intersectional Power. Before we elaborate further, Soft and Informational Power ought to be revisited.

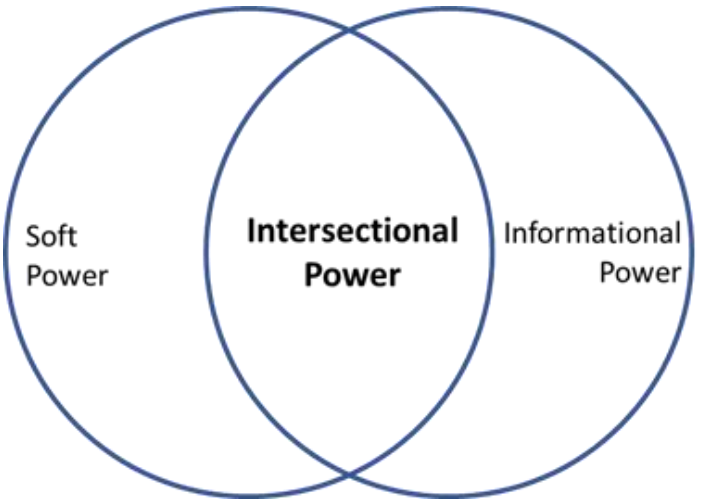

Figure 1. Intersectional Power (Reference: Mr. William Hanley, VT National Security Institute)

Broadly defined, Informational Power is essentially control over any information, data, and knowledge dissemination. In similar terms, the U.S. Department of Defense defines it in Joint Publication 3-04 as the "ability to use information to support achievement of objectives and gain an information advantage. The essence of informational power is the ability to exert one's will through the projection, exploitation, denial, and preservation of information in

pursuit of objectives (2022)." Exercise of informational power is influence over information in any temporal, physical, or virtual state. It is about methods ("how") and access to the information—its sources, mediums, and conduits—and the audiences. An example in politics could include the use of false or private information to discredit an opponent. In a military context, an example might be the use of intelligence on a target's information sources to support a psychological operation. In both cases the informational power is exercised through access and methods.

Soft Power, on the other hand, is the ability to persuade or attract through culture, values, policy, and diplomacy. It is more about the "what" and often related to such notions as "brand" and "winning hearts and minds." Perhaps Nye's most refined definition of Soft Power is found in his seminal work, Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics. In contrast to Hard Power, he defines it simply as "getting others to want the outcomes that you want (Nye, p.5)." He goes on to illustrate the interplay between Soft and Hard Power, arguing that it is evidently "not merely the same as influence (Nye, p.6)." A prominent strategic business example is successful efforts to position the U.S. dollar as the world's dominant reserve currency. In a military context, it could be the long-term reputation-building of the U.S. military as the premier "global force for good." In both cases, audiences are convinced or persuaded through extensions of culture, diplomacy, and economy. Some consider Soft Power a longer, more enduring, and positively oriented strategy while informational power can be more fleeting, perishable, targeted and tactical. In either case, both are very closely related, often hard to quantify, and challenging to master in a dynamic and competitive world. Today, it is evident that the perceived status quo of U.S. soft power dominance is challenged by an emerging world order—a strategic period of transition where both soft and informational power collide and cooperate.

Intersectional Power is the combination of Soft and Informational Power. Broadly defined, it is influence over the perception and cognition using both persuasive-soft and controlling-informational power. It is a sort of hybrid power of influence. One example includes China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which combines the export of predatory economics infrastructure and technology infrastructures with cyber-information operations. With the emergence of AI, use of deep fakes or state-controlled social media (i.e., Tik Tok) can be used to control narratives, trends, and an understanding (or lack thereof) of trusted sources and perceived truth. Identified instances of Intersectional Power can also serve as strong indicators of grand strategy objectives since they often involve various government stakeholders and agencies. Unlike Soft Power, Intersectional Power uses both co-option and coercion via levers of information control (i.e., access and projection) and persuasion. Intersectional Power can be more powerful. It is adaptable to short-term, tactical objectives and long-term strategic goals. It increasingly targets key terrain across all domains such as in cyber, electromagnetic spectrum, media, space, and geographies. However, it can also be riskier as it often levels the instruments of power in pursuit of strategic overmatch or dominance at points of high global interest.

The case for Intersectional Power—whether transitionary or emerging—ought to be investigated and debated further. These power concepts and their proposed definitions should be further examined through established and emerging lenses: Robert Dahl's Power Theory, Steven Lukes' "Three Dimensions of Power," Joseph Nye's "Smart Power," Manuel Castell's "Network Society" and emerging national strategies on the use of AI and Cyber as instruments of power to influence people. Ultimately, the great powers will compete to use 21st Century technologies, such as AI and crypto-currency, to exercise intersectional advantage—superiority in soft and informational power. While seemingly insulated, key strategic terrain and their populations will continue to be impacted. We see this developing now, particularly between China and the United States' roles in shaping Human Security issues across the Pacific.

Human Security

Human security was initially introduced as a concept in the post-Cold War era and formally established as a theory with the publication of the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report. Later, in 2000, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, spoke of Human Security (HS) as

"freedom from fear" and "freedom from want." In 2005, Annan further envisioned the freedom to live with dignity in his final proposal to the UN. This last inclusion can also be seen as freedom from shame and the right to human dignity (United Nations Human Security Unit, 2016). Finally, freedom from vulnerability stems from these, encapsulating the holistic concept of human security. Human security thus advocates self-reliance among individuals and their communities to protect against threats from hierarchical and environmental—top-down and bottom-up—sources. Still, it also considers the future and whether these individuals or communities face threats that could drastically affect them within their current system and infrastructure.

As originally envisioned, these four freedoms highlight the process of building up and supporting populations until they become sufficiently secure and self-reliant. Even if somewhat aspirational or even (at times) globalist in vision, the general concept can serve as a lens and model for understanding both the opportunity and impacts at the most fundamental human levels both domestically and internationally. A model of these freedoms and how they interact and relate is provided in Figure 2. Globally, some of the most significant threats to these freedoms include health threats, environmental/natural disasters, and food crises. Imbalances or crises in these and other areas can often prompt insecurities but also opportunity. For example, a natural disaster that forces mass migrations of local populations highlights not only the importance of the underlying "security" dependencies but the opportunity to influence nascent and sudden insecurities.

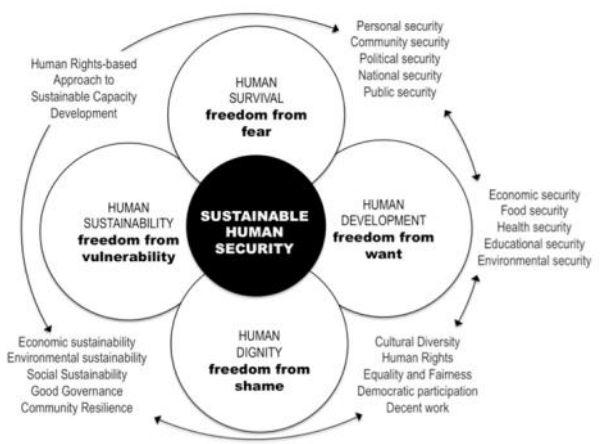

Figure 2: Breakdown of Human Security (Reference: www.weinstitute.org/human-security/html)

Before the creation of the 1994 UNDP report, Japan had begun to focus on the concept of comprehensive security, solidifying it as an official policy in the early 1980s (Byers and Ing, 1983). In their post-reconstruction era, the Japanese formally developed a view of national security threats as stretching far beyond military (or hard power) threats; they had far-reaching implications that affected economic, political, and social stability. This approach would also broaden and institutionalize into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This illustrates an early regional emphasis on cooperative and comprehensive security, which extends the concept of state security beyond traditional security borders to the information networks vulnerable to cyber and information warfare. The concept of comprehensive security combines human and traditional security, focusing on the state's overall security. It is not solely focused on military strength and security but on economic, political, and social threats to a state—all targets or priorities of Intersectional Power.

Like comprehensive security, the critical focus of human security is that the state is no longer the sole focus of security. Through security of its citizenry by ensuring certain liberties and human rights standards are met, states can be more secure from a wide range of threats. An influential figure within human security discourse and UN positions is Sadako Ogata. She was on the UNICEF Board, worked with the UN commission on Human Rights, and co-chaired the UN Commission on Human Security. Ogata states, these threats, including disease, pollution, terrorism, and others, are transnational, so there must be a focus on eliminating them within the population (Ogata, 2005). Ogata advocates for integrated strategies that encompass political, military, humanitarian, and development aspects (Ogata, 2003). Other key elements that Ogata talks about include addressing transnational issues, such as health and environmental threats. These statements from Sadako Ogata highlight the initial thought and discourse on human security and what become some of the threats it is meant to deal with.

Fittingly, modern notions of human security appear to have originated from the Pacific theater. While a relatively new concept in the ever-evolving international system, its more formalistic programs are

new. However, its foundation is rooted in early human rights and development. These principles are closely connected to human security and democratic values as key variables within the broader scope of human security (United Nations Human Security Unit). Thus, initial programs focused on human rights and development could and often do lay the groundwork for actualized human security organizations and structures across strategic geopolitical and security landscapes. The organizations (such as NGOs, businesses, state-sponsored enterprises, even military organizations) which navigate or support these physical, and increasingly virtualized structures, are often extensions of outside or domestic influence efforts which can serve mutually beneficial, one-sided, or uncertain ends. The PIC communities offer a unique opportunity to examine competition of the Great Powers; particularly in their adaptive use of intersectional power in a highly complex human security context.

Human Security & Cyber in the Pacific Island Chain

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and ASEAN countries face transnational issues and threats, widespread but also specific to a region in the Western Pacific which demarcates geographic lines of tension between China and the U.S. Due to a lack of capacity and infrastructure, many of the PICs share common concerns. These regions are also heavily prone to environmental changes and disasters. Thus, the nations rely heavily upon cooperative foreign support and aid. The Department of State (DOS), USAID (now transitioning to the DOS) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) have collaborated on several programs targeting human security issues since the early 90s. Such issues include disaster management, election trust and security, civil/social stability, and environmental resilience (Australia's Pacific Regional Development Program, 2025). These actions, alongside the establishment of cooperative security within ASEAN, help shape the human security picture (see Figure 3)—a human security condition which many of the PICs reference in their requests for external assistance. In a region of high interest to both China and the U.S., this situation presents both an opportunity and vulnerability, blurring the line between partnership and dependence.

Environmental security is one of the most significant sectors of human security and poses a transnational threat to the PIC region. Referring to PIF's Outlook Report, Rising sea levels, temperatures, and deforestation will affect the PICs (Pacific Islands Forum, 2022). Environmental threats—particularly forms of “climate change” or “global warming”—are viewed as the “greatest threat to…existence [to] our very hopes and dreams of prosperity (Brock, 2022). This environmental security overlaps with the region's economic security because it relies on tourism, fishing, and agriculture as its leading income generators. Drastic environmental changes could cause the loss of land both for agriculture and infrastructure as the sea level rises or disasters occur. For example, Fiji has many crops near flood plains, and in 2004, there was severe flooding which damaged 50-70% of the crops (Barnett, 2020). The threat to these islands due to rising sea levels will cause islands to increasingly submerge and disappear into the ocean. Some of these islands are pure coastal zones with minimal elevation above sea level. The fishing industry is perhaps the most impacted—with receding coral reefs and Chinese encroachment of territorial waters. Overall, these few examples and factors expose insecurities across the PIC—leading communities to fear losing their livelihoods and economy while dependent on outside aid.

If aid is not provided to these countries in their times of greatest need, there will be a long-term reliance on malign aid and predatory loans from countries like China. In order to combat China, PIC leaders must subvert Chinese intersectional power and overtly portray self-reliance. Information and cyber-connected infrastructures are increasingly vulnerable. Current leaders stand to lose in elections if media is corrupted and key human security threats are not met. Domestic information technology infrastructure often relies heavily on Chinese-sourced and managed entities prone to state-directed influence. Through their belt and road initiative, China plans to create a digital silk road via exported Information and Communications Technology (ICT) that is cheap and easy to proliferate at scale. Some of the PICs have signed Memorandums of Understanding with Chinese state-owned and private enterprises along with receiving loans to pay for ICT projects (Patil and Gupta, 2024). These include submarine cables, broadband networks, and mobile communi-

cation towers that are being built—the physical layer from which informational power (or control) may be exercised.

The use of Chinese companies also enables the co-opting and monitoring of national communications (Mansour and Mukora, 2024). This further serves to weaken the cyber security posture of many PICs. The cyber networks in these countries—many of which have rudimentary or outsourced cyber security—can easily be compromised by relatively unsophisticated bugs or malware. As the Internet of Things (IoT) economy expands, a network of potential sensors also presents challenges which many PICs are unprepared to address. Combined with their predatory economics, Chinese proliferation of state-sources or controlled ICT can and is being used as levers of intersectional power.

Information networks are also affected by China's domination of projects within the region. Online—particularly through Chinese supplied infrastructure, applications and ecommerce sites—the Chinese Communist Party's cyber-intelligence networks can monitor communications and transactions. China's influence is especially broadening in the PICs through media deals, partnerships, and acquisitions with local networks. Often these deals involve Chinese political officers and ambassadors reserving rights to publish opinion pieces promoted by the local organizations (Ahearn, 2022). These few examples reflect not only the situation within the PIC but the relevance of cyber and information operations in targeting and exploiting human security—a natural evolution that can and should be both logically and strategically assessed (See Figure 3).

Conclusion: Application of Intersectional Power in the Pacific Island Chain

Soft, Hard, and Informational Power have been established as notions and ways in which to wield power. However, little attention has been given to the interplay of Soft and Informational Power. This Intersectional Power engages multiple domains to help control and exercise informational and soft power. The Pacific Island Countries highlight the criticality and misuse of intersectional power between competing nations, particularly China and the United States. Human Security can be used as a useful and practical lens to frame the problem across strategically important geographic terrain, identifying what the insecurities are, why, who, and how they could either be exploited or mitigated. Combining the nascent concept of Intersectional Power with the evolving theory and scope of Human Security (to especially include the cyber-connected domain), presents a novel opportunity to rethink U.S. strategy in the Pacific in order to counter Chinese malign influence.

Dimension	HS Issues in Pacific Island Countries	Examples	Cyber Issues
Freedom from Fear	>Environmentally-induced displacement >Illegal trafficking >Increased Crime Rates	>Displacement due to natural disasters and rising sea levels >Illegal trafficking >Increased crime rates due to rapid urbanization	>Violation of citizen's human rights by governments (freedom of expression) >Unchecked cyber crime and financial loss
Freedom from Want	>Food insecurity >Limited healthcare infrastructure >Environmental degradation	>80% of Pacific Islanders rely on subsistence farming. >COVID-19 and other diseases highlighted a limited health and communications infrastructure. >Illegal fishing	>Access to online external markets for goods and services
Freedom from Vulnerability	>Rising sea levels impact land availability	>Plant/Crop loss and adaptions. >Reduced accountability from weak governance, coupled with illegal fishing	>Critical Infrastructure Technologies that are vulnerable to misinformation. Misinformation
Freedom from Exploitation	>Unsafe labor migration	>Displaced migrants work in unsafe conditions, which is coupled with human trafficking	>Online Exploitation Malinformation Leakage of personal data

Figure 3: Human Security and Cyber Issues (Reference: Mr. Ethan Mansour and Figure 3 References)

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