

From Seduction to Security: The Role of Reputation in International Politics According to Nicholas J. Cull

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Abstract

This essay review examines Nicholas J. Cull's *Reputational Security: Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World* (2024), focusing on the shift from “soft power” as a tool of attraction to “reputational security” as an existential defensive necessity. In today's landscape of hybrid warfare and hyper-connectivity, Cull argues that a state's international image is a vital component of national security, essential for mobilizing support during crises. The review explores this paradigm through current geopolitical tensions, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the reputational crises of Israel and the European Union, and the transactional turn in U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump. By putting Cull's thesis into dialogue with John Mearsheimer's realism, the analysis questions whether communication facilitates geopolitical strategy or merely legitimizes power-based decisions. Finally, it highlights Cull's innovative concept of “information disarmament,” pondering the viability of universal values and “cultural reflexivity” in an increasingly fragmented and polarized global order.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questo saggio critico analizza l'opera di Nicholas J. Cull *Reputational Security: Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World* (2024), focalizzandosi sulla transizione dal “soft power” inteso come strumento di attrazione alla “sicurezza reputazionale” concepita come necessità difensiva esistenziale. Nell'attuale scenario caratterizzato da guerre ibride e iperconnettività, Cull sostiene che l'immagine internazionale di uno Stato sia diventata una componente vitale della sicurezza nazionale, indispensabile per mobilitare sostegno esterno durante i momenti di crisi. La recensione esplora tale paradigma alla luce delle odierne tensioni geopolitiche, prendendo in esame il conflitto in Ucraina, le crisi reputazionali di Israele e dell'Unione Europea e la svolta transazionale della politica estera statunitense sotto Donald Trump. Ponendo la tesi di Cull in dialogo con il realismo di John Mearsheimer, l'analisi interroga il ruolo della comunicazione:

essa facilita la strategia geopolitica o si limita a legittimare *a posteriori* decisioni basate su puri rapporti di forza? In conclusione, l'articolo mette in rilievo l'innovativo concetto di "disarmo informativo", riflettendo sulla tenuta dei valori universali e sulle prospettive della "riflessività culturale" in un ordine globale sempre più frammentato e polarizzato.

Keywords: *reputational security, public diplomacy, soft power, realism, reflexivity*

Introduction

"What is said about people, whether true or false, often plays as large a part in their lives, and especially in their destiny, as what they actually do." These are Victor Hugo's words, taken from the opening pages of *Les Misérables* (2013). While the French writer was referring to the importance of reputation in an individual's life, the same logic appears to hold true for collective life. In both cases, we are dealing with the perceptions and stereotypes held by others, which can significantly influence our actions, for better or worse. This conviction is shared by Nicholas J. Cull, Professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. In his latest book, *Reputational Security: Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World* (2024), he emphasizes how a state's reputation can profoundly impact its geopolitical trajectory. This seems even more pertinent in today's communicative ecosystem, characterized by uninterrupted information flows that represent both an opportunity and a vulnerability for nations; hence, the need to enhance and invest in one's image, a requirement that has become vital against a backdrop of increasing geopolitical instability. In the contemporary era, the author explains, reputation is a constituent element of state security.

1. Book Structure and Main Arguments

Reputation's role in international politics is no novelty. Realists like Morgenthau (1948) argued that perceived strength is as vital as material power: armed forces require the visible willingness to deploy them. Cull's reputation, however, isn't the "reputation of the lion,"

grounded in force. Rather, it stems from being perceived as “good” (Cull, 2024: 27) – promoting cultural heritage and aligning with human rights standards. Cull notes that states have a vested interest here, since a positive image increases the likelihood of receiving foreign assistance during crises. Reputational security thus

is the idea that if and when a country is well thought of and seen as relevant by international audiences, it fares better in moments of crisis than states that are unknown. It is more likely to find allies and to have its suggestions on the international stage seen as transparent [...] Once established, it means that when a challenge comes – whether from a neighbor contesting sovereignty, internal secession, or rising sea levels – the world cares (Cull, 2024: 19).

Conversely, low reputational security leaves states vulnerable: like Hugo’s Jean Valjean, they remain haunted by past shadows without finding a safe haven.

As emerges from these preliminary considerations, Cull focuses on changes in the global imagination and state strategies to promote image—a territory previously explored through Joseph Nye’s (1990) “soft power”. Nye argued that a state’s attractive values, culture and policies constitute a geopolitical lever, allowing actors to multiply power by drawing others into their orbit. Nye’s theorization, which Cull reconstructs at the beginning of the book, had the US as its explicit referent. And this wasn’t its only limitation: soft power was the perfect idea for the post-Cold War world. It succeeded because it fitted an international system looking to understand how the West had done so well and the Soviet Union so poorly” (Cull, 2024: 11). Since then, however, the world has changed: guiding Public Diplomacy now requires the new concept of “reputational security”. Two reasons support this.

First, while all states seek to promote their image, not all do so similarly. Small and medium powers seek to enhance their reputation not to attract, but to gain support (political, economic, military) in need. This is security, not seduction: being known abroad serves to better defend oneself. Kazakhstan, to use an example dear to Cull, seeks reputational security over soft power. From this perspective, Cull’s critique of Nye—recalling Thomas Kuhn (1962)—highlights

the “anomalies” the soft power paradigm cannot explain, such as the specific needs of countries like Kazakhstan and Ukraine, whereas the reputational security one succeeds, by accounting for the image concerns of great and small powers alike. Second, in today’s great-power rivalry, even major powers, starting with the US, must prioritize reputation against rivals’ information attacks. Russia, China and increasingly other states in the “Global South” appear ever more impervious to Western influence: the idea of seducing them as in the past now seems outdated. Furthermore, Russia and China, eager to preserve their own informational and cultural space, are simultaneously interested in undermining the West’s reputation to erode trust in Washington and European capitals, and so that Westerners themselves lose faith in their own developmental model. Rather than on soft power, the focus must specifically be on reputational security: preserving one’s image against geopolitical adversaries.

Perhaps even more so than the US, Ukraine is the essay’s true protagonist. Indeed, it is Kyiv’s trajectory that best allows us to understand the geopolitical significance of the concept of reputational security and, in a sense, to operationalize it. According to Cull, much of the country’s recent history can be interpreted through the prism of reputation. In 2014, during the Crimea annexation, Ukraine was largely unknown, explaining the lack of international mobilization. By 2022, following the Russian invasion, effective communication and cultural campaigns had changed its standing. This variable partly explains the greater Western support obtained. Cull defends his hypothesis: states with robust reputational security are safer. It follows that promoting a positive image is strictly related to security. “In an era of renewed great power competition when accepted borders are under threat, it is time to see the cultivation of Soft Power as security and effective Public Diplomacy as an extension of defense” (Cull, 2024: 27). These words echo Dmytro Kuleba’s 2021 statement – as reported in the essay – that “in times of hybrid war and misinformation, the reputation of Ukraine is a matter of national security” (Cull, 2024: 161).

After justifying his conceptual innovation, Cull proceeds to review all the ways in which reputation can be improved through twentieth-century cases. Public diplomacy tools are manifold, but communication campaigns lacking corresponding actions are

counterproductive. Constructing human rights narrative while acting otherwise weakens reputational security. This is also because such a gap between rhetoric and reality ends up playing into the hands of adversaries' media operations, which become all the more credible the more they leverage evident double standards and inconsistencies. No campaign replaces concrete domestic or international policy. The reference here is clearly to US public diplomacy, whose message was arguably weakened during and in the aftermath of the Middle East wars. Yet even concrete human rights commitments aren't sufficient. One must dodge adversaries' blows through counter-propaganda. Engaging with recent literature on the matter, Cull briefly retraces the evolution of Chinese and, even more so, Russian doctrines, which attribute great importance – in addition to the cultural and political promotion of Russia and China abroad—to the demolition of Washington and its allies' reputation, including and especially within Western countries themselves, in order to collapse trust in US hegemony. From the preventive inoculation of public opinion to fact-checking and content removal, measures to counter disinformation are constantly evolving. The debate on this matter, in the EU and beyond, continues to be marked by the tension between security and free expression.

Counter-propaganda, in any case, doesn't exhaust the range of actions that can be undertaken to stem information attacks. Here we enter a fundamental chapter of the essay, perhaps the most original and stimulating, dedicated to the concept of "information disarmament." Cull presents it as a further way to guarantee one's reputational security. The idea is that a state can defend its reputation not only through information campaigns, platform architecture, or judicial measures, but through agreements and negotiations with other powers regarding stereotypes and media attacks. If information can be conceived as a weapon, and is indeed used as such, then its limitation and control—and thus a negotiation around its use—must be thinkable. A historian by profession, Cull places the concept of information disarmament into historical reality, recounting the little-known story of the 1980s US-Soviet information negotiations. From his reconstruction, a highly interesting cross-section of the culture and politics of the time emerges: while, at the high levels of politics, negotiations continued between Gorbachev and Reagan

on disinformation and the need to move beyond mutual demonization, bottom-up initiatives multiplied between the Esalen Institute in California and the Moscow of artists and scientists. These were carried out by activists who saw dialogue as the only way out of the war spiral, and who didn't hesitate to experiment with new satellite technologies to connect Soviet and American citizens. Cull deserves great credit for bringing the concept and practice of information disarmament back to the center of the debate on disinformation—a possibility that is almost never mentioned in the literature on the subject. Elaborating on some of Cull's considerations, one could conclude that disarmament represents not only an additional tool for preserving a state's reputation internationally, but a tool for creating, despite all the inherent difficulties, a more collaborative and less conflictual international scene in general. As the UNESCO Constitution, cited by Cull at the opening of the chapter, states: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed" (Cull, 2024: 88). These are words that seem more necessary than ever to reflect upon today.

The final chapters suggest how the US can strengthen its reputational security. Cull emphasizes once more how reputational security no longer represents a luxury, as it did in the era of "soft power"—a luxury that some states could afford and others couldn't—but a first-order defensive resource, without which all states end up being less secure and, in the long run, eroding their power base. Once again, the author's thoughts turn to Ukraine at war with Russia. Here, in the final pages, it is highlighted how, on the one hand, Ukrainian reputational security guaranteed Kyiv greater Western support compared to 2014 but wasn't sufficient to prevent the conflict or to spare the country from the dramatic situation in which it has found itself for several years now. A tragic situation, the end of which remains difficult to foresee.

2. Prompts for Broadening the Debate

The essay is rich in case studies. The author's perspective reflects an eclectic gaze, ranging across modern and contemporary history, taking into account the public and cultural diplomacy not only of

great powers but also of countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, Japan, Taiwan, Armenia and Mali. To further scrutinize Cull's paradigm, it's useful to project his categories onto the latest international developments, treating them as critical stress tests for his proposal. During the writing and following the publication of his work, international news has indeed undergone a dramatic acceleration, bringing the issue of reputation in world politics back to the forefront. Among these, a primary role belongs to the US under Donald Trump, China, Israel, and the EU. As we shall see, not only can Cull's theoretical coordinates help interpret each of these cases, but such interpretation, in turn, will prove useful for further problematizing the reputational security concept.

Let us begin with the US. While Washington's soft power was already questioned by the Middle East interventions and the 2008 crisis, the increasingly stark American polarization seems to have weakened it further. From this perspective, Trump's return has only exacerbated the situation, particularly after the Venezuela intervention and the declared intention to annex Greenland. Defying Cull's advice, the Trump administration moves oppositely, convinced that soft power and reputational security don't matter, or are luxuries that American power can no longer afford. As US hegemony is contested, the shift toward hard power seems an attempt to intimidate adversaries and secure resources before it's too late. Consistently, the Trump administration slashed the budget for US public diplomacy. These cuts hit the very institutions that Cull, throughout the book, urges to protect and strengthen—from the United States Agency for International Development to the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. What will the implications be? Based on the essay, declining reputational security will correspond to a geopolitical decline the US will have to address in the coming years. The question is only apparently contingent, as it raises the classic political and historiographical debate on American power and the reasons for its success. This debate involves not only Cull but also another British-born American historian, Niall Ferguson, who is cited in the book as a critic of the concept of soft power—an element he considers less important than hard power in explaining the rise of the US (2004).

This long-distance debate between the two historians will continue, spurred by current developments.

The picture is, however, more complex, as the US trajectory will be influenced by other international actors, starting with China. The reference to Beijing is pertinent not only to understanding today's geopolitical balances but also for testing a hypothesis worthy of investigation: that a country's reputational security can be increased not by concrete measures or effective communication campaigns by that state, but by virtue of the wrong choices made by its adversaries. In other words, is reputational security a zero-sum game? Indeed, recently, Beijing hasn't only benefited from its own initiatives around the world, but it's now perceived as more reliable compared to an unpredictable US. The hypothesis is that Chinese reputational security is increasing by contrast: a result Beijing will consolidate via propaganda, posing further problems for US public diplomacy.

Another interesting case study is that of Israel which, following the Gaza offensive against Hamas, has been accused by a large section of international public opinion, as well as by states and international bodies, of perpetrating genocide against the Palestinians. There's little doubt that Israel has annihilated the reputational security built in the decades following WWII. That symbolic capital, although it still survives at the institutional peaks of many states—primarily Western ones, linked to Israel by economic and political ties—, has received a perhaps definitive blow within formerly supportive countries. The “only democracy in the Middle East” rhetoric seems less convincing, and antisemitism accusations against critics have lost rhetorical effectiveness. Will the collapse of Israeli reputational security, even in the face of more or less significant territorial gains, translate into long-term political defeat? Once again, based on Cull's essay, the answer is a resounding yes.

The EU, too, is in a delicate phase from a reputational point of view. While Cull views the EU positively, its rhetoric shifted following the Ukraine invasion and Trump's re-election. Until a few years ago, the European countries, and even more so the EU itself, promoted a “civilian power” image oriented toward dialogue and cooperation. The European dream was that of a continent that had left power politics behind after the devastation of WWI and WWII. Following Russia's invasion, however, official rhetoric shifted toward

the necessity of rearmament: rather than focusing on diplomacy and *détente*, the Union seems to have embraced a line of intransigence toward Russia, and European leadership appears interested (with questionable results) in renewing the martial spirit of their citizens. From a realist point of view, it could be said that the EU is trying to rebuild its reputation as a geopolitical actor capable of using force. But what are the consequences of this new course from the point of view of the reputational security theorized by Cull? The reference goes above all to the public opinion of the European countries themselves, even before the perception that other international actors have of the EU. Will the European shift succeed in gaining followers, or will it further erode internal backing for the European project?

3. Engaging with the Book: Perspectives and Future Trajectories

Having presented the work's structure and content, broadening the perspective to include new case studies, it may be stimulating to enrich the debate on *Reputational Security* by problematizing some of Cull's central theses.

The first is historical and geopolitical. The author argues Western support for Ukraine post-2022 resulted partly from Kyiv reaching a sufficient reputational security threshold between 2014 and 2022. In other words, Kyiv's manifold initiatives in public and cultural diplomacy bore fruit, shaping European and American perceptions. While Cull doesn't consider this variable to be the sole one, he nonetheless emphasizes its importance in explaining Atlantic support. This interpretation is difficult to reconcile with John Mearsheimer's realist view (2014; 2022), according to whom political and military support for Ukraine was actually part of a long-standing US geopolitical strategy. From this viewpoint, the interpretation of recent Ukrainian history is nearly inverted, and the dynamics considered relevant by the two authors differ fundamentally. According to Mearsheimer, the decisive factor wasn't the lack of support for Ukraine following the 2014 annexation of Crimea due to a lack of reputational security, but rather the Western-backed overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich's government in an effort to extend the American sphere of influence to the borders of the Russian Federation. This long-term interest

in Ukraine, reasoning from Mearsheimer's perspective, might suggest the hypothesis that, if communication indeed played a role in Western involvement following the 2022 invasion, it was largely an *ex post facto* role – that is, one of legitimizing decisions already made. In this interpretative framework, the increased reputational security achieved by Ukraine wouldn't constitute one of the causal factors underlying Western involvement. Rather, that renewed image served—as it indeed has—to justify to Western public opinion a gradual involvement in the conflict against the Russian Federation. An involvement that responded, however, to the logic of interests and power relations. Cull might counter that the investment in reputation was nonetheless vital for the Kyiv government: if not to push Western governments to support Ukraine initially, then at least to convince public opinion to accept support for Zelensky subsequently, and thus, ultimately, to obtain greater security in the following months and years. Clearly, the confrontation between Cull's and Mearsheimer's theses on the actual importance of communications offers a fertile path for further research.

A second knot concerns the question of cultural reflexivity. According to Cull, a country that undergoes a process of self-criticism, admits its historical (e.g., colonial) responsibilities, and takes concrete steps to redress its wrong contributes to its reputational security, as it's perceived as a responsible actor on the international stage. But can a state evolve this way while maintaining hegemony? Or is there a bifurcation between reputational security and geopolitical power? In the West, and particularly in the US, self-criticism and admission of historical responsibility seem to be advocated primarily by cultural and political movements that believe Western states—having exercised violent hegemony in the past—should now accept their geopolitical decline. Indeed, this historical and cultural trend can also be explained in psychological terms. Just as confronting one's own "shadow"—to use Carl G. Jung's terminology (2002)—might make a human subject less aggressive toward the outside world, one wonders whether a collectivity that recognizes its own shadows might likewise become less aggressive. This evidently represents a positive goal in terms of peaceful coexistence, but what can be said from a geopolitical and strategic standpoint? Could a state seeking to maintain its power still rely on its citizens' willingness to

sacrifice once a process of self-criticism has been internalized? These are questions Cull doesn't pose in these terms, yet they call into question the nexus of reputational security and defense. In this sense, it's worth remembering how colonial legacies are precisely the themes upon which foreign information campaigns take root, as if Western self-criticism—however just and necessary—were being weaponized from the outside. Despite this apparent impasse, Cull might argue that one must act well and be perceived well, even if this is accompanied by a decline in geopolitical influence, because a strategic decline might correspond to greater collaboration and better coexistence with other states. However, these theoretical and political scenarios remain entirely to be explored.

A third aspect requiring attention concerns information disarmament. Cull writes that such a process, broadly modeled on what occurred during the Cold War, is easier to conceive regarding relations between China and the US, whereas it's more difficult to imagine something analogous with Russia. Although this point isn't explored in depth, the reasons are quite clear: Russia's media ecosystem, both internal and external, doesn't seem to be moving toward information disarmament at all (Moore and Colley, 2025); thus, it's hard to see why Americans and Europeans should initiate such a process unilaterally. However, one could argue that someone must eventually start to avoid entrenched hostility. In the chapter on information disarmament, Cull explains that certain conditions can favor or hinder an information agreement and progressive political-cultural *détente*, such as the realization by both sides that the ongoing geopolitical confrontation has reached a stalemate. On the other hand, it's also true that cultural debate can stimulate political forces in a certain direction—that of *détente* and diplomacy—even if political conditions don't seem propitious yet. This would essentially involve starting a path, seeking to involve the counterpart in a gradual process of reconciliation. But is there a will for this in Europe? This question evidently raises divergences in sensitivity within European countries, some of which—traditionally those in Eastern Europe—might view a weakening of anti-Russian rhetoric as an unacceptable sign of weakness. These appear to be new problems, but, as Cull's pages reveal, they are the very objections that proponents of disarmament have always had to confront.

The fourth and final point concerns the question of the universality of values. Cull speaks of reputation and the importance of being considered “good” as if there were values largely shared by all states, and especially by the public opinion of various countries. However, it could be argued that today’s world sees international bodies weakening as countries proudly rediscover cultural alterity, sometimes opposing “universal” values. In this context, what does it mean to improve one’s reputation? Perhaps not so much behaving according to universally accepted values, but to the values dear to the power from which one expects political, economic, and military support. In yet another direction, one could hypothesize that in the present conjuncture, what matters—contrary to Cull’s assertion—is not being appreciated for one’s values, but being useful to other powers in a purely transactional sense. Considering the policies of President Trump, indifferent to the values of individual countries, and those of China, which seems uninterested in interfering with the internal cultural and political choices of the countries with which it signs agreements, the hypothesis gains plausibility. Cull might respond that, despite the differences from the past, there still exist aspects of a “minimal morality” that find favor with all and contribute to a good reputation—such as investment in education and healthcare. Alternatively, he might argue that, despite recent developments, large segments of international public opinion remain tied to the values of fundamental charters, and that one must fight politically today precisely to affirm those values that are in crisis. At this point, however, the discourse would shift from descriptive to normative. In any case, the debate remains open.

Conclusions

Cull’s essay provides an excellent introduction to the theme of reputation in international politics. Furthermore, by convincingly arguing that the information sphere has acquired unprecedented centrality for geopolitical actors due to digital hyperconnectivity, the book serves as a prism through which to view contemporary politics *tout court*. The author deserves credit for emphasizing the role of communication in International Relations (IR), a discipline that

often undervalues it. In this regard, his outlook bridges realism and constructivism. Indeed, Cull highlights the role of actors (such as cultural foundations and NGOs) and processes that generally don't receive in-depth attention from realist scholars as much as they do from constructivists. However, in his view, reputation and image policies significantly impact security and power dynamics, offering a fruitful hermeneutic perspective.

As we have noted, the essay is both instructive and stimulating from a theoretical standpoint, particularly in its critical examination of "soft power" and the proposed concept of "reputational security". It's equally compelling from a historical perspective, not only because it sheds light on often little-known developments and figures of contemporary history—such as the story of information disarmament in the 1980s—, but insofar as the reconstruction of the past, however noble in itself, is put by Cull at the service of the present. The attempt is, in fact, to expand today's political imagination, in the conviction that the past constitutes an inexhaustible archive of solutions. In public debate, it sometimes seems as though disinformation is an almost unprecedented problem: by reminding us that it's not, the author also reminds us that there are more ways to address it than we might imagine.

Finally, the essay may prove useful precisely due to the irreducible tension perceived between its pages and current events, particularly following Trump's return to the White House. To what extent will the erosion of US reputational capital translate into geopolitical decline? Where he writes that

the best source of the good image on which Reputational Security rests is to actually be good, and to work with others to address the challenges of our time – climate, pandemic, and extremism – and to advance the collective cause of human rights, justice, and peace (Cull, 2024: 172)

What role will those values mentioned in Cull's closing remarks play in the future? If this essay is the culmination of forty years of reflection on the theme of images and representations in international politics, it also represents a much-needed invitation to reflect on the world emerging on the horizon.

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