

Soft power on the rise

China boosts its influence across Asia amid perception as a friendly, generous and responsible nation

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Soft power is the ability of a country to shape other countries' views, attitudes, perceptions and actions without force or coercion. Exercising soft power, a state can attract supporters and partners toward its policies, views and actions. Its importance has been known for centuries, but the term was coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s.

The soft power of a country is dependent on many factors, including its economic performance, global image and international reputation.

It is often erroneously believed that China is a relative latecomer to soft power. But China has exercised soft power in different ways to the West, ways that have often been missed by Western experts, despite China historically having influenced large parts of Asia with its culture, knowledge and trade.

In contrast to the strident "America First" diplomacy of US President Donald Trump, China projects itself as a friendly, cooperative, generous and responsible country, enhancing its soft power.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping said: "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world."

Xi followed this up with a powerful speech during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October last year. In it, he proposed "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" and the "realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation".

This, Xi proclaimed, will offer "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems of mankind."

Among the 2020-35 goals to be attained, Xi outlined steps to be taken to enhance China's soft power and the greater appeal of its culture. "We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multidimensional and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's soft power."

China has accumulated considerable soft power through its long history, culture and philosophy. These have been complemented by its phenomenal economic growth over the past three decades.

In 1980, its per capita GDP in purchasing power parity terms was \$310. In 2017, this is expected to



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be \$16,624, an increase of 53.6 times in only 37 years.

During this period, it has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty. The world's millennium development goals would not have been met without China's performance.

China has also remarkably improved its infrastructure. In 2002, it had no high-speed rail network. By 2016, the network was 22,000 kilometers, accounting for 60 percent of global high-speed railways.

In 2020, this network will cover 30,000 km. It will connect 80 percent of all cities of more than 1 million people. By 2030, the network is expected to increase to 45,000 km.

Its unprecedented economic growth has given China enormous soft power. Politicians all over the world would like to replicate China's economic growth and acquire its soft power.

China is playing major roles in other areas. Consider research and development (R&D). According to UNESCO, the R&D expenditure of high-income countries fell from 88 percent of the global total to 69.3 percent from 1996 to 2013. China alone filled this gap, increasing its share from a paltry 2.5 percent to 19.6 percent in 17 years.

Recently, China's average annual R&D expenditure growth has been 18.3 percent, compared to the anemic growth rate in upper- and middle-income countries of 1.4 percent.

Increased educational and research activities have ensured that the number of foreign students in China are increasing rapidly. In 2016, China had 442,431 international students, a 35 percent increase over 2012. China now ranks third in attracting foreign students after the United States and the United Kingdom, with 11 percent growth in 2016 over 2015.

With Chinese universities climbing up the global rankings, their rapid internationalization, policies encouraging foreign students to study in China, and affordability of study and living costs compared to the West, China will soon become the top destination for international students.

Of 5 million international students pursuing higher education courses outside their home countries, nearly 25 percent are Chinese. In 2016, American universities attracted 330,000 Chinese students, followed by 166,000 from India. The increasing numbers of Chinese

students abroad and foreign students in China will further enhance its soft power.

In terms of culture, Italy, with 53, has the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites, China comes next with 52. Some 138 million tourists visited China in 2016, a growth of 3.5 percent over 2015.

Similarly, 122 million Chinese visitors went abroad in 2016, a growth of 4.3 percent over the number in 2015.

China's economic success, massive infrastructural development, academic and research progress, cultural heritage and success in sports will continue to increase its soft power in the future.

In contrast, the US' soft power is now in retreat with its "America first" policy, anti-globalization, anti-immigration, isolationism, anti-trade and anti-environmental policies. The policy differences between the two economic superpowers are now stark.

China will further increase its soft power through forward-looking actions and investments under its Belt and Road Initiative, the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, as well as through the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Invest-

ment Bank and New Development Bank.

Xi's message to the world is a new approach is needed which can facilitate "state-to-state relations with communication, not confrontation, with partnership and not alliances." Through the Belt and Road Initiative and other major development initiatives, China expects "to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development".

During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders' Meeting in Vietnam in November, Trump reconfirmed his "America first" policy, stating the US will pursue only bilateral trade agreements that are "fair" and "reciprocal". He did not address who will define what is fair.

For a transactional, zero-sum, and "America first" president, multilateral trade agreements do not work, nor does the World Trade Organization. These will further decrease the soft power of the US, and China is stepping in to fill the gap.

In Vietnam, Xi became the new champion of globalization and free trade. He noted globalization is an "irreversible historical trend," and championed multilateral trading regimes. "We should uphold multilateralism, pursue shared growth through consultation and collaboration, forge and build a shared future for mankind."

Xi spoke of the digital economy, artificial intelligence and quantum science. He presented a vision of the future that is interconnected, comprehensive and win-win for all countries. He noted that development is a journey with no end, and invited "more countries to ride the fast train of Chinese development".

Xi has become the champion of globalization, free trade and international cooperation.

China's soft power is likely to increase significantly during the coming decades. However, it will depend on many imponderables, including how China handles the South China Sea disputes, the border issues with its neighbors, and its extensive environmental problems, among other things.

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