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CHINA'S CHARM OFFENSIVE: CHARM OR OFFENSIVE?

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Exercise Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

China's influence in the world, riding on three decades of unprecedented economic growth has risen remarkably. China in turn has invested immense efforts and resources to consolidate and further enhance the gains. The impact of China's rise on the global world order is a highly contested topic in the field of international relations. Realists predict that China will be a revisionist power posing threats to the status quo. However some scholars' counters argue that of late China has prioritised its strategy of soft power and downplayed hard power.¹ Instead of belligerent rhetoric and posture, China has consciously promoted its accommodating image. The focus of its policies has been more on creating 'win-win' politico-economic alliances than military coalitions. Therefore strengthening of China's soft power has been pivotal in expanding its influence.

China is probably the first country in the world to have officially endorsed soft power strategy as a component of the statecraft. Hu Jintao's emphasis and evocation of the need to cultivate soft power, in his address to the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) in 2007 was the final stamp of approval.² China's attempts at cultivating and operationalising soft power should have been normally welcomed and

¹ Xin Li and Vernier Worm, "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise", *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, DOI 10.1007/s11366-010-9130-2, (2011), 70-89, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/850433976?pq-origsite=summon>

² Barthelemy Courmont, "What Implications for Chinese Soft Power : Charm Offensive or New hegemony", *Pacific focus*, Vol. XXXVIII, No 3(December 2013), 343-364, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=88646b44-0394-4350-882d-4a854eee37dd%40sessionmgr4003&vid=1&hid=4113>

appreciated all across the world. It should have assuaged concerns about China's non-peaceful rise and the expected revisionist policy orientations.³ The approach has definitely been warmly welcomed, but primarily only in the 'Global South'. A number of experts and policy makers in western world are skeptical of China's soft power. China's soft power strategy, for them is not its means to peaceful rise but merely an adjunct to hard power eventually aimed at maximising its power in global power politics. The perception that it is challenging or will eventually challenge the Western world order has gained traction.⁴

Notwithstanding the differing perceptions, the bulk of scholars contend that the strategy has been effective in terms of the rapid increase of Chinese influence and assertiveness in global and regional economic development and political affairs.⁵ But simultaneously there is an intense debate raging inside and outside China whether China's soft power has an aura of charm or an offensive feel?

This paper will argue that China's soft power (popularly known as the Charm Offensive) is charming to the developing/underdeveloped countries but it is clearly perceived as offensive by the Western world. The paper builds upon the theoretical construct of soft power as espoused by Nye and discusses other differing works on the subject. It then analyzes the evolution of the concept in Chinese discourse and its

³ Sheng Ding, "Analyzing Rising Power from the Perspective of Soft Power : A New Look at China's Rise to the Status Quo Power", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(64), (March 2010), 255-272, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560903444207>

⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm, Implications of Chinese Soft Power", Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 47, (2006), 1-5, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf

⁵ Wanfa Zhang, "Has Beijing Started to Bare its Teeth? China's Tapping of Soft Power Revisited", *Asian Perspective*, No. 36, (2012), 615-639, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010996?pq-origsite=summon>

interpretation in China's policy circles. The next section discusses the articulation and operationalization of the 'Soft Power' strategy of China. Thereafter the paper tackles the complex question of measuring the effectiveness of China's soft power strategy. The perception of China's Charm Offensive in Western countries forms the final argument.

SOFT POWER: WESTERN VS CHINESE LENS

The concept of 'Soft Power' was coined and defined by Joseph S. Nye in 1990. He theorised conceptual differences between hard and soft power. Simplistically speaking soft power entails cooption rather than coercion, the ability to skilfully shape the preferences of others.⁶ Nye argued that soft power has three components: culture, political values and its foreign policies.⁷ Nye was criticised for the narrow categorisation the components. Certain scholars advocated broadening the scope of soft power to include anything outside the military and security realm.⁸ Instruments of investment, trade, aid, hard power resources hitherto fore can be considered as soft power under this extended definition. Nye has been receptive to the criticisms and has in later works conditionally accepted economic resources being part of soft power.⁹ Contextualisation

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Bound to Lead : The Changing Nature of American Power*, (New York, Basic Books, 1990),⁸

⁷ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "Hard Decisions on Soft Power : Opportunities and Difficulties for Chinese Soft Power", *Harvard International Review*, Summer, (2009), 18-22, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/58831975?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=9867>

⁸ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive : How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007),⁶

⁹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "China and Soft Power", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No 2, (August 2012), 151-155, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889>

and application of soft power is another moot point. Nye had originally argued that soft power works on the basis of ‘pull’ factor. It cannot be deliberately applied by a state. In that case, it is a passive component; it is also a normative rather than descriptive concept. The notion has been challenged by scholars like Geun Lee. Lee conceptualises soft power attraction on a linear scale, ranging from passive to active.¹⁰ Passive attraction generates ‘pull’ but for active attraction, the policy of ‘push’ has to be pursued. Lee further advocates that soft power is a tool of statecraft. It can be deliberately applied by a state. As a tool, soft power has to be understood as a descriptive concept and contextualised in terms of form, target and context. A broad consensus exists that regardless of pull or push, effectiveness of soft power depends on the credibility.¹¹ Quantification of effectiveness is however disputable. In the case of the ‘pull’ model, effectiveness can be accepted in relative terms. For the ‘push’ approach, since it is orchestrated by the state, arguably the quantification should be in absolute terms. The other major issues of debate concern the target audience. It can be ‘high’ targeted at elites or ‘low’ targeted at broader public.¹² For Nye, soft power is meant only for external audience, but some scholars argue that it may be intended even for domestic audience. The differences impact the message themes, resources committed, strategies employed and expected outcomes. The

¹⁰ Simona Vasilevskyte, “Discussing Soft Power Theory After Nye: The Case Of Geun Lee’s Theoretical Approach”, ISSN 2029-2074 (December 2013), 150, http://vddb.library.lt/fedora/get/LT-eLABa-0001:J.04~2013~ISSN_2029-2074.N_7.PG_145-157/DS.002.1.01.ARTIC,

¹¹ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Fujia Lu, “Thinking Hard About Soft Power : A Review of the Literature on China and Soft Power”, *Asian Perspective*, No 36(2012), 565-589, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010571?pq-origsite=summon>

¹² Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Charm, Implications of Chinese Soft Power”, Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 47, (2006), 1, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf

debate amongst scholars on exact contours of soft power is still on, but it would be interesting to analyse their impact on the Chinese discourse of soft power.

Initially, Nye's work was viewed skeptically in China and accused of a distinct American bias.¹³ Later on, in spite of the suspicions; the term soft power prominently entered the Chinese discourse. China has developed its own notion of soft power: (*ruanshili*, *ruanquanli*, *ruanliliang* and *ruanguoli* are the most commonly used terms in China).¹⁴ In fact China's academic circles claim that soft power may be a nascent concept, but its ideas of attraction and agenda setting have been part of their cultural discourse for thousands of years.¹⁵ Whereas Nye's view is centred on attraction, historical Chinese views consider morality as intrinsic to soft power.¹⁶ Chinese understanding of soft power is arguably much more historical, broader and deeper than Nye's but both seem aligned. Therefore apparently, the nuances of both models should have been similar. However there are certain prominent differences.

Out of Nye's three components of soft power, the contours of his foreign policy component are almost congruent with the Chinese discourse. In culture, Nye emphasises

¹³ Barthelemy Courmont, "What Implications for Chinese Soft Power : Charm Offensive or New hegemony", *Pacific focus*, Vol. XXXVIII, No 3(December 2013), 343-364, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=88646b44-0394-4350-882d-4a854eee37dd%40sessionmgr4003&vid=1&hid=4113>

¹⁴ Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, "China's Soft Power : Discussion Resources and Prospects", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLVIII, No 3, (May/June 2008), 453-472, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224229253?pq-origsite=summon>

¹⁵ Sheng Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings : How china Rises with its Soft Power*, (Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2008),24

¹⁶ Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative study of China and Taiwan", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56), (August 2008), 425-447, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560802000191>

on the contemporary culture but Chinese treat the ancient culture as their strength. The Chinese notion of values is perhaps the most different with Nye's. Nye explicitly focusses on liberal political values of democracy, freedom, equality etc., but such terminologies probably do not exist in Chinese lexicon. Some scholars and few Chinese view their unique development model coupled with their political system, characterised as 'Beijing Consensus'¹⁷ as their unique value.¹⁸ 'Beijing Consensus' is though a highly debatable and dubious construct. It will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections. The economic tools of aid and investment, considered initially by Nye as hard power have always been considered as a soft power tool in the Chinese discourse.¹⁹ In fact the clamour to include economic resources as soft power components in later debates can be traced to Chinese discourses. The economic resources have been considered as soft power components in this paper.

Unlike in the Western world, soft power discourse was never restricted to academic and scholarly discourse in China. Soft power was considered indispensable to the evolving concept of Comprehensive National Power (*Zonghe Guoli*) and grand

¹⁷ The **Beijing Consensus** (also sometimes called the "China Model" or "Chinese Economic Model" is a term that refers to the political and especially economic policies of China. The phrase "Beijing Consensus" was coined by Joshua Cooper Ramo to pose China's economic development model as an alternative — especially for developing countries — to the Washington Consensus of market-friendly policies promoted by the IMF, World Bank and U.S. Treasury. Ramo bases it on three theorems : the pragmatic use of innovation and experimentation in the service of "equitable, peaceful high-quality growth", defense of national borders ,interests and self-determination in foreign policy , the use of stable,(even if repressive) politics and high-speed economic growth.

Joshua Cooper Ramo, *Beijing Consensus*, (London, foreign Policy Centre, 2004),3-4

¹⁸ Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative study of China and Taiwan", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56), (August 2008), 425-447, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560802000191>

¹⁹ Sheng Ding, " To Build a Harmonious World : China's Soft Power Wielding in Global South", *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2008), 193-213, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11366-008-9023-9>

strategy (*Dazhanlue*).²⁰ After the ascent of the Hu Jintao- Wen Xiabao duo to power, the term gained official traction. The ‘push’ approach of Chinese discourse has been increasingly endorsed as an acceptable strategy by the new scholars but it was clearly at variance with Nye’s original ‘pull’ approach. Though ‘push’ has been the dominant theme of Chinese discourse, it would be naïve to suggest that the ‘pull’ has been totally missing. Nye’s foot soldiers of ‘pull’ approach: NGOs, civil society, students, artists, academia have also been active in China, but the influence of government is too hard to miss. It is therefore prudent to examine the driving factors responsible for adoption of soft power as an official strategy by an authoritarian one party state like China.

The opinion on this vital question is divided. Some scholars attribute it to the cultural values of China: preference of persuasion by virtue over hegemony.²¹ The argument sounds rhetorical and falls short of explaining the ‘push’ strategy. There is a view that China is aware of the anxiety towards its rising power status.²² In the past, ascendancy of rising states based on hard power strategy has inevitably invited backlash. Projection of soft power would help China negate a possible ‘China Threat’²³ narrative.

²⁰ Sheng Ding, *The Dragon’s Hidden Wings : How china Rises with its Soft Power*, (Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2008), 28

²¹ Xin Li and Vernier Worm, “Building China’s Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, DOI 10.1007/s11366-010-9130-2 , (2011), 70-72, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/850433976?pq-origsite=summon>

²² Sheng Ding, “Analyzing Rising Power from the Perspective of Soft Power : A New Look at China’s Rise to the Status Quo Power”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(64), (March 2010), 266, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560903444207>

²³ The China threat theory was first proposed in a policy report by the Heritage Foundation (1992) authored by Robert Ross. The report aimed to alert the US policy circle that as a result of a great value divide between China and the US, China’s increasing capability may lead to an inevitable clash between the two powers.

Herbert Yee and Ian Storey (eds.), *The China Threat: Perception, Myths and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2

In fact Wang Huning, President Ziang Zemin's policy advisor, had as early as in 1993 argued that power in international politics is shifting away from violence and urged China to work strategies to develop soft power.²⁴ For certain scholars, employment of soft power by China is merely an adjunct to hard power in realising the dream of becoming a global power.²⁵ The argument is too generic and broad. But specifically, it can be argued that China's soft power will enable it to build networks of allies and project itself as the leader of developing world. Such a coalition and stature would also ensure resource guarantees to pursue its economic growth. Cultivation and employment of soft power is also probably a historic lesson for China to avoid the pitfall of Soviet Union, a global superpower with immense hard power but arguably less soft power. Overall, soft power is a launch pad for China in its quest for global power. It helps it to avoid confrontation and may ensure longevity to its status. There is clearly no obvious answer, but the factors discussed above are reflective of Chinese debates on the subject. An analysis of China's articulation and operationalization of its soft power strategy can shed some light on the real motives.

²⁴ Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(78), (November 2012), 899-914, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2012.701031>

²⁵ Alan Hunter, "Soft Power : China on the Global Stage", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, (2009), 373-398, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=56a45fa8-54c9-4363-96c8-3247d4639487%40sessionmgr115&vid=1&hid=127>

ARTICULATION AND OPERATIONALISATION OF CHARM OFFENSIVE

In order to achieve the goals discussed in the previous section, China has enunciated a doctrine of ‘win-win’ relations.²⁶ Invariably economics is at the forefront of China’s effort but strict advocacy of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs have been another strand of the strategy. Premier Wen Jiabao’s words are reflective of the sentiment, “We believe that people in different regions in countries...have their right and ability to handle their own issues.”²⁷ The emphasis is to establish mutually beneficial relations, further its benign image and peaceful development without making demands. China has reversed its traditional isolationist attitude and disdain for multilateral organizations.²⁸ Another noticeable feature of China’s strategy has been careful selection of the targets. Though globally aimed, the emphasis seems to be on Global South.²⁹ Gaining leadership of the developing world is another strategic priority. China has invested immense resources in public diplomacy to successfully execute its strategy. The scale of the strategy has rattled some observers in the West. There is a view that the explicit focus on Global South especially on states with

²⁶ James H. Hoey, “The Global Reach Of Chinese Soft Power :China’s Rise And America’s Decline?”, Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School , California (September 2007), 15, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/10270/07Sep%255FHoey.pdf?sequence=1>

²⁷ “Speech by Hu Jintao at the APEC CEO Summit,” Beijing, China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China release, 19 November 2005.

²⁸ James H. Hoey, “The Global Reach Of Chinese Soft Power :China’s Rise And America’s Decline?”, Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School , California (September 2007), 15, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/10270/07Sep%255FHoey.pdf?sequence=1>

²⁹ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive : How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007),37-60

faltering relations with US is a threat.³⁰ Chinese dismiss this view as paranoia. They justify it as an attempt at illustrating China's ability as a major but responsible power and international player. The debate is fairly polarised and contentious; an analysis in the light of application strategies can shed further light on the issue.

China's official rhetoric echoes Nye's emphasis on culture as the first and foremost source of soft power. High ranking officials including Hu Jintao have categorically pronounced the centrality of culture to soft power.^{31 32} The confidence in culture emanates from China's history as a civilizational nation. The strategy has dual emphasis of 'inviting in' (attracting foreign students, government scholarships) and 'going out' (establishment of Confucian Institutes all over the world, cultural exchanges etc.)³³ It is essentially based on 'high culture'³⁴ and aimed at shaping two specific narratives. Firstly China's past as a peaceful and altruistic global power and secondly creating a notion of alternate Asian value system. The former is in sync with the 'peaceful rise' notion. The latter is an attempt at creating an alternate world view (at least

³⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm, Implications of Chinese Soft Power", Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 47, (2006), 4, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf

³¹ Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(78), (November 2012), 899-914, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2012.701031>

³² Weihong Zhang, "China's Cultural Future: From Soft Power To Comprehensive National Power", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (November 2010), 383-402, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286630903134300>

³³ Wanfa Zhang, "Has Beijing Started to Bare its Teeth? China's Tapping of Soft Power Revisited", *Asian Perspective*, No. 36, (2012), 615-639, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010996?pq-origsite=summon>,

³⁴ Sheng Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings : How china Rises with its Soft Power*, (Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2008), 62

in Asia). The latter argument lacks documentary evidence. However attempts at revival of Confucianism, flaunting of Buddhist linkages, 600th anniversary celebrations of Admiral Zeng He's journey are a few pointers in the direction. Few scholars lament that China lacks any popular contemporary culture and therefore a promotion strategy.^{35 36} The criticism is partially true. Attempts at promotion of Chinese movies, music, and literature are being done now. Aggressive bidding for and organising major world events like the Olympics and the Shanghai Expo are efforts at branding contemporary China. Expansion of Chinese media especially Xinhua and CCTV are messaging attempts for modern China. In spite of these attempts, quite clearly China's soft power strategy is over dependent on traditional culture.

Foreign policy is the second component of soft power. Adoption of soft power strategy in the conduct of foreign relation was a natural choice under the looming shadow of 'China threat' theory.³⁷ The term 'Peaceful rise' (*Zhongguo de heping jueqi*) was China's first counter to the threat theory.³⁸ In fact at the first hint of the word 'rise' being offensive in tone, it was replaced by 'development'. The enunciation of the doctrine of "harmonious world view" and "good neighbour policy" are further attempts at projection

³⁵ Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(78), (November 2012), 899-914, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2012.701031>

³⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "China and Soft Power", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No 2, (August 2012), 151-155, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889>,

³⁷ Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Tung-Chieh-Tsai, "Swords into Ploughshares? China's Soft Power Strategy in South East Asia and its Challenges", *Rev. Bras. Polit Int*, 57(Special Edition), (2014), 28-48, <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbpi/v57nspe/0034-7329-rbpi-57-spe-00028.pdf>

³⁸ Sheng Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings : How china Rises with its Soft Power*, (Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2008), 35

of a benign image.³⁹ China had for long acted as an isolationist power with siege mentality. Its new strategy is based on multilateralism and active participation. The change is evident: active involvement in ASEAN, accession to WTO to name a few. China has also displayed confidence of a major power. The erstwhile emphasis on bilateral relations has been replaced by multilateral initiatives. A white paper on global geographical regions, establishment of a multilateral engagement forums, engagements in Arctic council, SAARC, OAS, GCC etc. as a permanent observer are the new norms.⁴⁰ China has also initiated attempts at gaining a leadership role. Critics accuse China of projecting itself as leader of entire Global South. The Chinese approach is however nuanced. Rather than an all-out attempt, gaining leadership of emerging countries has been the focus. China's calibrated strategy is accused of cherry-picking engagements with singular aim of maximising influence. It seems like a hard power strategy through backdoor. But it can be counter argued that China has increasingly started assuming stewardship roles too. Creation and steering of SCO and Six party talks on N Korea and participation in UN mission are definitely sophisticated commitments.⁴¹

Political values are the third component of soft power. But as per Nye's conceptualisation of political values, it is a missing link in China's strategy. Even the

³⁹ Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Tung-Chieh-Tsai , “ Swords into Ploughshares ? China's Soft Power Strategy in South East Asia and its Challenges”, *Rev. Bras. Polit Int*, 57(Special Edition), (2014), 28-48, <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbpi/v57nspe/0034-7329-rbpi-57-spe-00028.pdf>

⁴⁰ Szcudilk-Tatar and Justyna, “ Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy”, *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 19.3, (2010), 45-68, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/875954331?pq-origsite=summon>

⁴¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, “Hard Decisions on Soft Power : Opportunities and Difficulties for Chinese Soft Power”, *Harvard International Review*, Summer, (2009), 18-22, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/58831975?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:summon&accountid=9867>

official strategy avoids mention of political values.⁴² It seems a clear lacuna. However, in recent years, a lot of interest has been generated in China's model of development.⁴³ Of late, few Chinese government officials have begun to speak of this development model as a unique Chinese political and economic value.⁴⁴ Popularised and theorised in terms of the 'Beijing Consensus' by Ramo, it is seen as a challenger to the 'Washington Consensus'.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the term is not part of official Chinese lexicon. In fact it is shunned because of its provocative undertones.⁴⁶ The model has however caught imagination of global south and emerging economies. The point has not been missed by China. Though the usage of the term per se is avoided, China has not been shy in popularising the different trail of development it has blazed. It has even gone a step further.

Economic aid and investment have been interwoven with the development model.⁴⁷ The about turn in China's impression (hostile neighbour to benign economic

⁴² Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(78), (November 2012), 899-914, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2012.701031>

⁴³ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive : How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007), 51, 133

⁴⁴ Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative study of China and Taiwan", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56), (August 2008), 425-447, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560802000191>

⁴⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive : How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007), 51, 134-136

⁴⁶ Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative study of China and Taiwan", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56), (August 2008), 425-447, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560802000191>

⁴⁷ Sheng Ding, "To Build a Harmonious World : China's Soft Power Wielding in Global South", *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2008), 193-213, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11366-008-9023-9>

powerhouse) in South East Asia during Asian Financial Crisis⁴⁸ was the starting point of this strategy. It has further evolved. The aids and investments are “no strings attached”⁴⁹ for the recipient country with strong consideration of optics (in targeting elites as well as common populace). The lead to establish the Asian Infrastructure Bank and the New Development Bank of the BRICS recently also deserves a mention.⁵⁰ The initial success at creating an alternative to the Bretton Woods’ institutions is being viewed by many analysts as China’s influence having grown beyond the point of no return. Arguably ‘Beijing Consensus’, aid without strings and an alternate to Bretton Woods have opened a fault line between China and the West, so such strategy cannot be considered as soft power. Though a logical argument overall; in terms of a specific target (Global South) and context (image projection), the strategy may qualify as soft power. Notwithstanding the offensive undertone of this strand of the strategy (discussed in detail in subsequent sections), there is no denying the fact that economic growth, unique development model and aid have practically been the primary drivers of enhanced reputation and image of China.

Overall it is evident that China seems to have a clear, coherent, well-articulated, thoughtful and focussed soft power strategy. The strands of the strategy seem to be

⁴⁸ Tony Tai-Ting Liu and Tung-Chieh-Tsai, “Swords into Ploughshares? China’s Soft Power Strategy in South East Asia and its Challenges”, *Rev. Bras. Polit Int*, 57(Special Edition), (2014), 28-48, <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbpi/v57nspe/0034-7329-rbpi-57-spe-00028.pdf>

⁴⁹ Sheng Ding, “To Build a Harmonious World : China’s Soft Power Wielding in Global South”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (2008), 193-213, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11366-008-9023-9>

⁵⁰ Daniel Mc Dowell, “New Order: China’s Challenge to the Global Financial System”, *World Politics Review*, 14 April 2015, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15531/new-order-china-s-challenge-to-the-global-financial-system>

interlinked and leading to some common tangible aims. However, howsoever cleverly crafted a strategy is, it is only as good as its results. Therefore it is prudent to analyse China's soft power strategy in terms of its intended outcomes.

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHARM OFFENSIVE

The measurement of soft power, its components being intangibles is quite challenging. There exists no consensus on this issue; the debate of relative vs absolute scale has been touched upon in the first section of this paper. China's employment of soft power as a statecraft tool further complicates the measurement problem. Perception about a country (though it is highly relative) can be considered as one of the best possible measure of its soft power.⁵¹ Opinions polls are a good tool for measuring this. In spite of issues with their statistical rigour; if coupled with other allied indicators (tourist flow, student exchange etc.), they offer a pretty reasonable estimate of a countries image. Accomplishment of policy objectives can be another measurement parameter. For Nye's 'pull' approach, even incremental achievements are success. But for the 'push' approach of China; it is prudent to measure success in terms of officially intended outcomes (as discussed in the previous sections). Wanfa Zhang has proposed a two level construct for soft power measurement: high level strategic goals (intended outcomes) and low level tactical objectives (image, reputation)⁵². The paper uses it as a framework.

⁵¹ Ingrid D Hooghe, "The Limits of China's Soft Power in Europe : Beijing's Public Diplomacy Puzzle", Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael Diplomacy Paper No. 25, (January 2010), 11, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20100100_cdsp_paper_dhooghe_china.pdf

Discussing tactical objectives first, there is a growing appeal for study of Chinese language and cultural studies. China has become one of the top study destinations for international students. Statistical data confirm the trend.⁵³ It suggests that China's strategy is effective. Critics however argue that increase in study of Chinese language and number of foreign students is driven by its booming economy. The fact that bulk of international students in China are from developing countries (44 %) but the increased study of Chinese is pervasive all across the globe buttresses the argument. But the dramatic increase in total enrolments cannot be justified merely by economic factors. It is reflective of China's emergence as a cultural magnet and increased attractiveness. China's likely emergence as the second largest travel and tourism economy by 2015 substantiates its increased attractiveness.⁵⁴ It is evident that there is increased attractiveness of China. But the question whether attractiveness has translated into an enhanced image requires a deeper analysis.

In the opinion poll conducted by Pew Research Center in 2014, global views of China were generally positive. Across 43 nations, a median of 49% express a favourable

⁵² Wanfa Zhang, "Has Beijing Started to Bare its Teeth? China's Tapping of Soft Power Revisited", *Asian Perspective*, No. 36, (2012), 615-639, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010996?pq-origsite=summon>

⁵³ The number of international students in China in 2014 was over 3.7 million compared to 1.1 million in 2004. Approximately 100 million people were studying Chinese as a foreign language in 2010.

Institute of International Education, "Project Atlas China", Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.iie.org/en/Services/Project-Atlas/China>

⁵⁴ World Watch Institute, "China to Become Second Largest Tourism Economy within the Decade", *China Watch*, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/3920>

opinion of China, while 32% offer an unfavourable rating.⁵⁵ This implies that increased attractiveness has resulted in good image. But critics dismiss it as a simplistic argument. If the data is broken down in terms of geographical regions and country blocks, some complexities emerge. China has a net favourable opinion in Asia (Muslim countries), African and Latin America. But the image in India, Philippines, Vietnam and South Africa is negative. The image in Japan is negative. Though it is positive in S Korea, the gap is narrow. In the West China has a positive image only in UK, with a narrow margin. The data shows that though there is definitely a net positive image of China, it is not uniform. It fares poorly in liberal democracies. Another two surveys centred on East Asia and South East Asia and Europe (Germany, France, and U.K.) highlight that though China's economic model and cultural heritage have high ratings; its overall image is affected by poor ratings of its contemporary culture, political practices and human capital.^{56 57} How the poll results should be interpreted in terms of China's strategy: success or failure?

The answer lies somewhere in between. The findings resonate with theories that predict that China would be more attractive in less-developed countries and in regions that do not possess as much relative international power.⁵⁸ If the notion of China's

⁵⁵ Pew Research Centre, "China's Image", 14 July 2014, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>

⁵⁶ Gregory G. Holyk, "Paper Tiger ?, Chinese Soft Power in East Asia", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126, No. 2, (2011), 223-254, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/874654133?pq-origsite=summon>

⁵⁷ Ingrid D Hooghe, "The Limits of China's Soft Power in Europe : Beijing's Public Diplomacy Puzzle", *Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael Diplomacy Paper No. 29*, (January 2010), 10-25, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20100100_cdsp_paper_dhooghe_china.pdf

strategy being targeted specifically at global south is accepted, then it can be termed as success. China's soft power has definitely charmed the global south. But then it has come at the cost of a decline in charm of the Western world especially US influence.⁵⁹ And in the West China suffers from very negative views of its political system, diplomatic efforts, and the ramifications of its economic rise in the Western world.⁶⁰ West is the epicentre of current world order. The negative image coupled with mistrust of China's growing influence in Global South pitch it as an adversary which is in contradiction with China's attempts at projecting a peaceful rise.

In terms of strategic level objectives four intended outcomes of China's policy : Ensuring stability for peaceful rise, resources to feed economy, build network of allies and leadership in developing world and developing into a great power can be considered as metrics of measurement.

China, as discussed in the previous section, with its newfound zeal for multilateralism has actively courted its neighbours.⁶¹ The strategy seems to work as it has resolved land disputes with all countries other than India. In its immediate backyard of

⁵⁸ Gregory G. Holyk, "Paper Tiger ?, Chinese Soft Power in East Asia", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126, No. 2, (2011), 223-254, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/874654133?pq-origsite=summon>

⁵⁹ Barthelemy Courmont, "What Implications for Chinese Soft Power : Charm Offensive or New hegemony", *Pacific focus*, Vol. XXXVIII, No 3(December 2013), 343-364, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=88646b44-0394-4350-882d-4a854eee37dd%40sessionmgr4003&vid=1&hid=4113>

⁶⁰ Gregory G. Holyk, "Paper Tiger ?, Chinese Soft Power in East Asia", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126, No. 2, (2011), 223-254, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/874654133?pq-origsite=summon>

⁶¹ Szczudilk-Tatar and Justyna, "Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 19.3, (2010), 45-68, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/875954331?pq-origsite=summon>

ASEAN, from a suspicious neighbour, its stature has risen to an indispensable member. It can be argued that the China threat theme still intermittently raises its head. Countries with legacy land and sea disputes with China have been critical of its unilateral behaviour especially since 2011.⁶² But it needs to be borne in mind that all such countries have also resisted any attempts at ganging up any anti-China coalition. Major countries like Japan and India have refrained from openly endorsing the US ‘Asia Pivot’⁶³ strategy. In fact the new regime in India has categorically debunked ‘China threat’ and favoured deeper engagements with China.⁶⁴ It is evident that China has been successful in containing the China threat theory (in its neighbourhood) and sustaining a peaceful environment for its rise.

China’s strategy of combining its development model, investments and economic aid seems to be working with its target audience. It has made great strides in its influence in Africa, Latin America and South East Asia.⁶⁵ In fact the idea of a powerful China challenging the dominant status of USA has gained traction in these geographical

⁶² Wanfa Zhang, “Has Beijing Started to Bare its Teeth? China’s Tapping of Soft Power Revisited”, *Asian Perspective*, No. 36, (2012), 615-639, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010996?pq-origsite=summon>

⁶³ Asia Pivot strategy generally refers to rebalancing of US strategic efforts from Europe and Middle East to Asia-Pacific. The term came into popular usage during Hilary Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State for External Affairs. The strategy is very broad in scope and advocates deeper relations of US with East Asia, South East Asia, India, Australia and even China. In China, the strategy is seen as an attempt by USA to contain China through an alliance of US, Australia, Japan and India.

⁶⁴ Press Trust of India, “India China Have ‘Learnt From History’: Modi To Time Magazine”, *Focus News*, 07 May 2015, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://focusnews.com/world/india-china-have-learnt-from-history-says-modi-on-border-issue/30458/>

⁶⁵ Szczudilk-Tatar and Justyna, “Soft Power in China’s Foreign Policy”, *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 19.3, (2010), 45-68, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/875954331?pq-origsite=summon>.

regions.⁶⁶ The bulk of the Global South is replicating its development model. Even countries like India and Brazil have endorsed few aspects of the new model. These factors coupled with some good public diplomacy has enabled China achieve multiple objectives. Firstly, it's 'no strings attached' aid and investment all across the Global South has ensured resource security for its rising economy. Secondly, it has been able to cultivate a vast network of allies. Though never explicitly stated, Global South now looks up to China as the de facto leader.⁶⁷ Concurrently, its economy has pitched it to leadership role of emerging economies. The fact that India, its closest rival economically and politically has endorsed its stewardship of Asian Infrastructure Bank and New Development Bank leaves it virtually unchallenged in developing countries.

It is evident that China's soft power play has largely been successful at the strategic level. The targets of strategic efforts have been exclusively either neighbouring countries or the Global South. The success with its target audience has definitely propelled China into the leadership position of the developing world. The success is an opportunity for China to leverage it in its quest for a global power status. Similar to the tactical level success, strategic success is happening at the expense of West and primarily US. It can be argued that China has not made any attempts whatsoever to deliberately position itself as an alternate to west. But it has definitely moved to capitalise on voids created/left by West. The resultant increase in Chinese power/influence has had

⁶⁶ Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding, "Dragon's Underbelly : An Analysis of China's Soft Power", *East Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (Winter 2006), 22-44, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-3179-6_58

⁶⁷ Sarah E. Kreps and Gustavo A. Flores-Macías, "No Strings Attached? Evaluating China's Trade Relations Abroad", *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2013, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/05/no-strings-attached-evaluating-chinas-trade-relations-abroad/>

reverberations in the Western academic and policy circles. There is suspicion of China's intentions. The lacklustre impact of cultural efforts on Western audience has not helped to calm tempers. The rising suspicion, even if only a matter of perception has implication for China's future (peaceful) rise. Since, the rise of China will likely be the most contentiously debated topic for coming decades, it is pertinent to examine what is so offensive about Charm offensive in the Western perception?

WESTERN WORLD: PERCEPTION OF CHARM OFFENSIVE

The results of the 2014 Pew survey clearly indicate a negative image of China in the West. Certain surveys indicate that almost 52% people in US see China as a threat more so economically than militarily.⁶⁸ This is a bit surprising considering the fact that China has committed vast resources on its image building and public diplomacy efforts. It is also surprising that it is China's soft power strengths: economy and development model rather than hard power (military) which are perceived as threatening. The perception of threat needs to be gauged at two levels: public and elites to get a correct picture.

At the public level, a normative bias of Western population seems the most plausible explanation of threat perception regarding China. There is a clear gap between the Western and Chinese ideals and values.⁶⁹ Liberal values of democracy, human rights,

⁶⁸ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "US China Security Perceptions : Findings and Implications", Survey, 2013, 25-28
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/us_china_security_perceptions_report.pdf

civil liberties, press freedom etc. are an intrinsic part of western psyche. The absence/lack of these values is the single biggest contributor to China's negative image. The results of the Pew survey corroborate this.⁷⁰ It can be counter argued that, the Chinese way of life is different from the West and West should respect this alternate view. In fact, China has attempted communicating this alternate view to the Western audience. But the fact that the message emanates not from citizenry/ civil society but Chinese government dents the credibility of the message. The strong disapproval of the authoritarian nature of China's regime further damages the credentials. This lack of Nye's political ideals is the major liability for China. The suspicion of China's domestic political structure and ideology gets automatically transferred to economic/foreign policy and diplomacy. Chinese policy of aid without strings is intertwined with strict notions of respecting state sovereignty and adherence to non-interference in a state's internal affairs.⁷¹ This point of view is at variance with the western notions of morality and need for humanitarian intervention. The negative perception of unconditional assistance to dictatorial/authoritarian regimes and its own track record is an Achilles heel for China.

The perception of elites, though influenced by the popular opinion is a bit different. Arguably, states operate under realist notion of power politics and not liberal discourse. Ideally speaking China's soft power strategy, a change from hard power

⁶⁹ Ingrid D Hooghe, "The Limits of China's Soft Power in Europe : Beijing's Public Diplomacy Puzzle", Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael Diplomacy Paper No. 29, (January 2010), 11, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20100100_cdsp_paper_dhooghe_china.pdf

⁷⁰ Pew Research Centre, "China's Image", 14 July 2014, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>

⁷¹ Sheng Ding, "Is Human rights the Achilles' Heel of Chinese Soft Power? A New Perspective on its Appeal", *Asian Perspective*, No. 36, (2012), 641-665, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366010925?pq-origsite=summon>

strategy of erstwhile rising powers should have been welcomed. There are many takers of this theory of China's (peaceful) rise.⁷² They see bulk of Chinese initiatives as attempts at accommodation in Western liberal order than challenging it. The argument though debatable, is nuanced. The nuance is manifested as guarded suspicion of elites compared to vociferous version of people. But things have changed over the last decade. The fears articulated by Ramo in the form of 'Beijing Consensus' best captures this guarded but deep suspicion. Western elites are not that concerned by the moral and ethical issues of the 'Beijing Consensus'. It is the growing popularity of the model at the cost of 'Washington Consensus' and the resultant surge in China's power and influence which is a cause for concern. The influence is visible in some states under China's umbrella of aid and investment as far as Africa. Zambia is a case in point. China, capitalising on its image (created by its economic aid and investment) was able to mould perceptions and ensure defeat of the presidential candidate with anti-china views.⁷³ Such influences were a Western monopoly since the post-cold war era. Therefore change of landscape is expected to create jitters. Certain seasoned diplomats and policy elites feel the debate as unnecessary and over hyped.⁷⁴ They argue that there are certain legitimate interests which will be created as China rises. The West should not unnecessarily be paranoid about such issues. Certain scholars attribute the paranoia to myopia and fantasy of a

⁷² Heng Shao, "China Threat? Former French Diplomat Says No", Forbes, 29 July 2013, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hengshao/2013/07/29/china-threat-former-french-diplomat-says-no/>

⁷³ John Reed, "Beijing Flexes its Muscles in Zambian Election", Financial Times, 05 September 2006, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d6d5d176-3d0a-11db-8239-0000779e2340.html#axzz3ZnqSiYJS>

⁷⁴ Heng Shao, "China Threat? Former French Diplomat Says No", Forbes, 29 July 2013, Last modified [or accessed] on 11 May 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hengshao/2013/07/29/china-threat-former-french-diplomat-says-no/>

section of Western elites always on lookout for enemies.⁷⁵ Their arguments seem to have merit and many are convinced with them. But the recent establishment of certain financial institutions as alternative to the Bretton Woods order has reignited the entire debate. More than any other soft power tool/strategy, the attempt of an alternate global monetary order has far reaching implications. Even if it is argued that it is not propelled by any *mala fide* intentions on the part of China, there is no denying the massive power shift it will lead to. It is this notion of the shift of power balance which makes Western elite feel offense about the Charm offensive.

CONCLUSION

The analysis in the paper demonstrates that China's soft power strategy i.e. 'Charm Offensive' has been charming to countries in the Global South. Simultaneously the analysis demonstrates the perception of the strategy being offensive to the West. Soft power is a fairly nascent concept. Inevitably, certain differences exist between the global (read Western) and Chinese discourses. Notwithstanding all that, China's official endorsement of the concept as a tool of statecraft has been established in the paper.

Since China's soft power is primarily state driven, any worthwhile analysis requires the consideration of form, target and context as variables. China's application of the culture and foreign policy components is along established scholarly norms. In spite of a great civilizational history, the lack of a contemporary cultural narrative stands out as

⁷⁵ Shogo Suzuki, "Chinese Soft Power, Insecurity Studies, Myopia and Fantasy", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, (2009), 770-793, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436590902867300>

a shortcoming of China's policy. The Chinese strategy has invariably been successful in increased attractiveness all across the globe but that has not translated to a corresponding enhancement of China's image uniformly. China's foreign policy centered on multilateralism and active participation has evolved and matured. Nuanced foreign policy with a robust public diplomacy effort emerges as the carrier of China's strategy.

Economic resources emerge as the driving force of China's strategy. The triumvirate of the development model, investments and economic aid are a potent mix. The charm of this component in the Global South indisputably emerges in the paper. The countries swayed by the charm have enhanced the overall power of China. The increase in China's charm has been viewed in the West at the cost of Western charm. The increase in China's charm and simultaneous emergence as leader of developing /underdeveloped countries perceptibly alters the power balance. The shift in the power balance is the core reason for suspicion of elites.

The lack of traditional Western liberal values emerges as the Achilles heel of China's strategy in the West. The message of a Chinese world view has not resonated with the Western audience due to a lack of credibility. The convergence of the mistrust of people and suspicion of elites in the West lies at the heart of 'Charm Offensive' being perceived as offensive.

PONDERING OVER THE FUTURE

The contrasts of 'Charm Offensive': charming to the Global South (target) and offensive to the West (epicentre of world order) throws up some interesting challenges.

China needs to bridge the perception gap with the West otherwise the notion of a 'peaceful rise' risks being disrupted. The differences with the Western elites are power politics. But the image deficit with the Western population is structural. It would be foolish to imagine China shelving its authoritarian regime for image building. However it would be pragmatic for China to invest in certain low hanging fruits: enhanced space to civil society, NGOs, academia and improvement of domestic human rights record. A slightly more conditional engagement with authoritarian regimes is also realistic. The incremental improvements can help China potentially build soft power with the Western population. The same can be leveraged to temper the realpolitik of elites.

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