China’s need for soft power

There is no doubt that China is strong in economic and military terms. It is, however, better to get what one wants through the perceived legitimacy of one’s culture, ideals and policies than through force or payment. Such ‘soft power’ is one of the most effective ways for China to gain international acceptance, especially from Western industrialised countries.

Does China lack soft power?

While this may have been so in the past, it is not today. In May 2004, Time magazine’s foreign editor Joshua Cooper Ramo coined the term ‘Beijing Consensus’ to describe China’s reform and development model, the most widely-used term in international relations last year. He argued that China is offering hope to developing countries by providing a more equitable development paradigm.  

A quick search on the internet shows that the ‘Beijing Consensus’ has captured the excitement of a country where change, novelty and innovation feature regularly in journal articles, dinner table conversations and policy debates.

The Beijing Consensus is one example of China’s soft power. Some of China’s Southeast Asian neighbors seem to sense this strength. China was the first major power visited by President Arroyo of the Philippines, Premier Hun Sen of Cambodia and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia when they began new terms in office. In 2001, President Arroyo of the Philippines looked at Deng Xiaoping’s experience could help her lead the Philippines to become a ‘strong republic’. On the multilateral level, all ASEAN members, as well as Japan and Korea, agreed with China’s policy on regional cooperation.

Does this mean China has enough soft power? No it does not. Aside from its economy and military, there are serious concerns on issues such as democracy and the Communist Party’s (CCP) anti-corruption campaign. These two issues are odd to China’s image abroad, are key components of soft power. A better image would make it easier for China to develop peacefully, while a bad image makes cooperation with other countries more difficult. America and Europe say democracy can lead to cooperation and peace, a ‘democratic China’ or ‘clean China’ may be preferable to a ‘strong China’. Democracy and transparency could also enhance the Communist Party’s future legitimacy as a ruling party, though this may sound strange to Westerners.

As General Secretary Hu Jintao recently stated, the CCP is transforming from a revolutionary into a ruling party, and today the Chinese people look to the party with different demands. In the past they needed survival and development, now they need more rights and freedoms. The party must recognize these changes and adjust its strategy accordingly.

Towards democracy

Few countries believe China to be democratic. The American media often use the phrase ‘Communist China’ to set the country apart from western countries. They also criticize the Communist Party for refusing to grant more freedoms and rights, key indicators for developed countries. During a speech at Beijing’s Tsinghua University in February 2002, President Bush presented a view of what America-style democracy would bring to China’s future elites. Greater democracy in other Asian countries also adds to pressure on China. India, the Philippines and Malaysia all held general elections last year, but the largest impact came in September 2004 with the first ever direct presidential elections in Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia with the world’s largest Muslim population. Large Asian countries including Japan, India, and Indonesia are either democratic or on the path to democracy. Will this leave China, with its ‘socialist democracy’, isolated in Asia?

It is worth bearing in mind that the preamble of China’s Constitution states that ‘the Chinese people waged many successive heroic struggles for national independence and liberation, and for democracy and freedom’. Hu Jintao reiterated in a speech in Australia’s parliament that democracy is the common good of all human beings, and that all countries should guarantee the democratic rights of its citizens. This said, China may have to create a new way to implement democracy, step by step, just as it forged its own path to economic development. China has experimented with elections in the countryside for some years now; however, with the world’s largest population, holding direct elections for the top leadership would be a huge project requiring complex social transitions.

China needs more rights and freedoms. The party must recognize these changes and adjust its strategy accordingly. Liberal democracies do not define democracy with the term ‘Beijing Consensus’ to set the country apart from other countries. The question is how can China’s soft power lead to cooperation and peace; a strong China is more likely to lead. Yet supervising the Communist Party and the government is like being both player and referee in a soccer match. China should reinforce the rights of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and especially the rights of the mass media to monitor the CCP.

What will China be like in twenty years? Will world leaders regard China as a democratic and clean power? For the Chinese government and the CCP, there is a long road ahead to translate its hard into soft power.

Note

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Connecting Civil Society of Asia and Europe: The Barcelona Report

The recently published Barcelona Report is the result of an informal consultation among civil society groups on Asia-Europe relations. It is the fruit of the ‘Connecting Civil Society of Asia and Europe - An Informal Consultation’ conference held in Barcelona, 16-18 June 2004, jointly organised by the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF), Casa Asia, IIAS and the Japan Center for International Exchange (JICE).

Featuring an introductory message from J.E. Salarich, General Director of Foreign Policy for Asia and the Pacific (Spanish Ministry for Foreign Affairs) and keynote speeches by S. Pitawaran, former Foreign Minister of Thailand and J.P. Dirkske, Director General of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, The Barcelona Report consists of concrete recommendations formulated by more than 180 representatives of leading civil society organisations from Asia and Europe over three days of intense debate and brainstorming.

The issues of mutual concern include human rights and governance, environment and urbanisation, labour and social issues, regionalisation and security issues, trade and development co-operation, migration, education, cultural and inter-cultural dialogue.

The Barcelona Report was sent to all ASEM heads of states and governments prior to the 5th ASEM Summit in Hanoi in October 2004. It is downloadable at www.civildialogue.asef.org.

To order this book, please contact IIAS.