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China's Global Role: Need for Soft Power?

By Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

With the West struggling with economic problems, China is expected to assume an increased role in global leadership. To do so, it needs to improve its "soft power".

Commentary

THE ROLE of China in global politics is one of the most highly-discussed topics among academics and policy makers these days. No big international conference goes by without some mention of China's political-economic situation and regional or global role. Likewise, "China-talk" often feature in private discussions among top government leaders and academic circles – an indication of the country's growing stature and influence in international affairs.

As the global economic crisis shows little signs of abating, calls for increased Asian intervention have also gained momentum. In particular, struggling European economies are looking to cash-rich China as their key rescuer, a fact that was clearly not lost on China's Premier Wen Jiabao while attending the World Economic Forum last September. In his speech, Premier Wen emphasised that while Beijing was willing to offer assistance, countries must also "first put their house in order" – a clear reference to the sovereign debt crisis in Europe.

Peaceful Rise?

The question concerning Beijing's leadership is: Can China lead the world, and if so, what is the direction – and destination – China's leadership is heading towards? On current evidence, it is hard to say. Over the years, the phrase *heping jueqi* or peaceful rise (sometimes referred to as peaceful development), has become a staple in the vocabulary of Chinese leaders. What this means, according to Premier Wen, is that China would threaten no nation, even as it becomes a global power. Global events since then have altered the dynamic of this strategy.

The United States' preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the financial turmoil of recent years, has somewhat diluted the expectations of the West as a force for shaping the international political landscape. Terms such as "post-American world", "Asian century" and "multi-polar world order" are being mentioned with increasing regularity -- an indication of the paradigm shifts of global politics.

In a recent Foreign Policy article, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted the importance of the Asia-

Pacific region as a key driver of global politics while emphasising the importance of maintaining ongoing American leadership role within the region. Noting that the open and rules-based system established by the US had allowed China to prosper, Mrs Clinton added that greater transparency and reform – political, economically and legal – was needed for China, not only to achieve its own goals, but in contributing to global objectives.

While Chinese leaders have generally eschewed explicit mention of China's global leadership role, they have nonetheless asserted Beijing's right to influence matters of global concerns. From protests in the Middle East to issues of nuclear energy, China has not shied away from articulating its preferences – if not prescriptions – where its national interests are concerned. This active posturing is a double-edged sword in Beijing's foreign policy while it enables China to speak its mind, it also imposes certain responsibilities that China has to undertake.

Soft Power

In recent years, the notion of soft power has gained rhetorical traction among Beijing's policy makers. A 2009 study by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies mentioned that China's use of soft power was largely for "defensive and reactive purposes...intended to allay fears in other states of a China threat". Noting China's growing economy as a major driver of its increasing appeal in the developing world, the report added that "wealth and the potential to be wealthy are attractive and money confers normative power and provides the means to disseminate culture and ideas".

Indeed a Beijing Review article showed that between 2008 and 2010, Beijing's cultural industries recorded a growth rate of 24.2 per cent per annum, with a value of 1.1 trillion yuan (US\$172 billion) added in 2010 alone. Since July 2009, China's cultural industries have also been accorded the same strategic status as other key industries such as steelmaking, petrochemicals and textiles. In October 2011, the Chinese Communist Party also convened a plenum in which guidelines for cultural industries were set down by the top party leaders.

Moving forward, Beijing is expected to go on the "charm offensive" in attempting to widen and deepen its relationships with all regions of the world, particularly those who possess the natural resources on which Beijing's burgeoning economic might is dependent. What is less clear however is to what extent this Chinese charm will succeed in winning the trust of its neighbours.

China would need to first remedy its approach to the projection of soft power. In Chinese policy circles, there is a tacit view that "keeping a low profile" (taoguangyanghui) is necessary for China to retain the autonomy to act under terms favorable to its own national interests. Such a posture may be interpreted by Western observers as an expression of Chinese power in which China's true intentions are hidden from view (yincangzhenshimudi). This would run counter to Beijing's promise of peaceful development.

Need to forge greater trust

To forge greater trust between China and the rest of the world, Chinese leaders would have to step out of their existing policy-making paradigm, one which is heavily predisposed towards economic growth and maintaining social stability at all costs. More would have to be done, especially in the area of personal freedoms and the right to voice one's conscience – even if it runs against the ideology of the Communist party. As David Pilling argued in a recent Financial Times essay, the Chinese Communist Party's suppression of dissent imposes limits on Beijing's promotion of its brand of soft power.

In view of the rapid diffusion of ideas - as a result of globalisation – a centralised state-based approach to governance may be untenable and potentially very expensive – in the long run. The recent entry of the United States and Russia into the East Asia Summit suggests that the future configuration of the Asia-Pacific regional architecture would see the preponderance of big power relations at play. With the West still floundering from its economic problems, this will be a good opportunity for China to demonstrate a different face of its leadership potential. How will Beijing respond?

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