



# Washington's Retrenchment and Beijing's Soft Power Push

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### SYNOPSIS

*As US soft power wanes – reflected in a 2025 Pew survey showing a decline in global favourability to 49% – China's image has modestly improved to 37%. This shift stems less from any newfound appeal of China than from Washington's retreat in public diplomacy and Beijing's adaptive soft power recalibration. The key question is: Can China sustain global influence through soft power, despite its inherent contradictions?*

### COMMENTARY

The [latest Pew Research Centre survey](#) results released on 15 July 2025 revealed that among respondents from 24 countries, the share holding a favourable opinion of the United States has slipped to 49%, while positive views of China have risen to 37%. According to the survey, China's favourability ratings have increased in [15 of 25 countries \(including the United States\) since 2024](#), indicating a shift in global perceptions of the country. Positive views of China have increased in countries like the United States (+5%), France (+13%) and Canada (+13%). Global South countries tended to hold more favourable views towards China. In Mexico, South Africa and Indonesia, Beijing now outpolls Washington outright.

The shift is less a story of sudden Chinese appeal, and more about two converging trends: America's deliberate downgrading of its own public-diplomacy machinery – from broadcasting, cultural exchanges, and development partnerships – and Beijing's systematic retooling of the institutions that shape its narrative.

With Washington in retreat, as signalled by its "America First" policy, has the United States left a soft power vacuum that China is now poised to fill?

**America's Soft Power Retrenchment, Beijing's Growing Appeal**

Since the start of President Donald Trump's second term, the United States has steadily hollowed out its soft-power infrastructure: from slashing budgets, to cutting or freezing of [foreign aid contracts](#), [international peacekeeping](#), and [educational or cultural exchanges](#). As Benjamin Ho [recently observed](#), Trump has eschewed soft power in favour of a more muscular and transactional foreign policy. Within a year of his return to office, President Trump's visa freezes, sweeping tariffs on allies, and highly partisan rhetoric have made the United States appear less predictable and welcoming, undermining the qualities that once anchored its soft-power appeal.

China's foreign policy messaging presents itself as a stabilising, inclusive alternative to Washington's unpredictable "America First" posture. At a [March 2025 press conference](#), Foreign Minister Wang Yi described Beijing's diplomacy as "a just and righteous force for world peace and stability", pledged to "stand firm on the right side of history", and promised to expand "global partnerships featuring equality, openness and cooperation". These goals were linked to tangible initiatives: [visa-free entry for 75 countries](#) to "share China's opportunities", Belt-and-Road projects that "bring high-standard opening-up", and an upgraded China–Global South agenda that "gives fresh momentum to common development". By framing China as guardian of multilateralism and supplier of public goods, green finance, digital connectivity, and vaccine production, Beijing merges hard interests with soft-power appeal. In doing so, it positions its model of state-steered, market-enabled engagement as the credible path to a "shared future for mankind" at a time when US retrenchment has left many partners searching for reliable leadership.

### **Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics**

Chinese President Xi Jinping has [emphasised soft power](#) as the apex of China's comprehensive strength, arguing that cultural cohesion and values sustain economic and military power. Enhancing [soft power](#) is portrayed as crucial to achieving the "great rejuvenation" and the "Two Centenaries" goals. This requires a distinctive "discourse system" that steers global debate onto Chinese terms and "[telling China's story well](#)" through compelling narratives. The global narrative arena is framed as a continuous "struggle" that demands vigilant defence against hostile propaganda and justifies Beijing's strict guardianship of cultural security.

Universities and research institutes are expected not merely to analyse, but to translate domestic practice into globally exportable concepts. Policy adviser and Dean of the School of Public Policy of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Zheng Yongnian, [recently referred](#) to Chinese think tanks as the "core and soul of Chinese soft power". Zheng urged these institutions to root their analyses in indigenous intellectual traditions instead of measuring themselves against Western benchmarks.

### **The Sharp Edge of China's Soft Power**

At a time of heightened geopolitical tensions, Beijing has sought to bolster its international appeal. Its expanded visa-free policy has [boosted tourist numbers](#) in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing, as well as in rising cities such as Chengdu, Chongqing, Hangzhou and Xi'an.

Social media influencers and apps like TikTok also broadcast favourable, viral images of China around the world. American YouTuber [IShowSpeed's](#) livestreams in China, featuring Beijing *hutongs* and Chongqing night markets, have drawn tens of millions of views. Comments praise China's clean streets and fast Wi-Fi. China's embassy in Washington [reposted](#) the clips as part of its official messaging, praising the influencer for "bridging cultural gaps and creating alternative channels for foreign audiences to understand a vibrant China". TikTok, Bilibili and other China-linked platforms algorithmically promote similar feel-good content – night-market tours, high-speed-train shorts – especially to Southeast Asian audiences, [one of TikTok's largest, youth-heavy user bases](#), amplifying China's soft-power image worldwide.

China's soft power also manifests in its quiet but potent drive for global leadership through technological self-reliance. In June, MagicLab president Wu Changzheng [unveiled](#) a humanoid robot built with 90% domestic parts. Recently, while attending the China International Supply Chain Expo in Beijing, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang, whose company is based in Silicon Valley, hailed China's open-source AI scene as a "[catalyst for global progress](#)".

### **The Weak Edge of China's Soft Power**

Despite high-profile initiatives and globally popular apps, China's soft power appeal remains uneven, nowhere more so than in Southeast Asia. While China enjoys higher favourability ratings in parts of the Global South, it remains less trusted than the United States across Southeast Asia. According to [The State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report](#), ASEAN countries' confidence in China increased by 11.8% in 2025, reaching 36.6% from 24.8% in 2024. Trust in the United States among ASEAN respondents also grew, reaching 47.2% in 2025 from 42.4% in 2024, while distrust decreased from 37.6% to 33%. The Philippines (66.5%), Laos (60.9%) and Vietnam (60.6%) reported high levels of confidence in the United States. Notably, Laos saw a significant 30% increase in trust towards the United States. However, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore exhibit higher distrust levels than trust towards the United States.



TikTok and other China-linked platforms algorithmically promote feel-good content about China. However, despite viral social media content and high-profile initiatives, China's soft power appeal remains uneven. *Image source: Unsplash.*

China's military assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, and the use of economic coercion continue to erode trust. Distrust of China by Southeast Asian countries mainly stems from concerns that China's economic and military power could be used to threaten their country's interests and sovereignty. These tools of military

and economic statecraft blur the line between persuasion and intimidation – arguably not that distinct from a more transactional diplomacy. As both Xi Jinping and Donald Trump lean into strongman politics, a transactional and confrontational dynamic is likely to intensify.

More Southeast Asian states are gravitating toward Beijing – not out of ideological alignment or endorsement of the China model, but out of pragmatic calculation. As Khong Yuen Foong and Joseph Liow [noted in \*Foreign Affairs\*](#), this is a drift rooted in the hardheaded logic of hedging, not of moral or ideological conviction. Both Washington and Beijing, despite competing soft power appeals, face a substantial trust deficit in the region.

## Conclusion

The narrowing gap between global perceptions of the United States and China reflects not a handover of soft power dominance, but a volatile contest shaped by US retreat and China's recalibration.

China's soft power strategy projects an alternative vision to Western liberalism. Still, its appeal is blunted by coercive tendencies: tariffs, wolf warrior rhetoric, and maritime assertiveness continue to generate mistrust, especially in Southeast Asia.

In the contest for influence, both powers now face a credibility deficit, leaving no clear winner. In an era of multipolar flux, the contest for influence hinges less on admiration than on resilience, consistency, and strategic trust-building. In the short term, great powers can amplify their influence by filling vacuums left by their peer competitors. But long-term soft power endurance is less about distance, or how far it travels, than about substance and one's ability to prevail.

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