

The Balance of Soft Power

The American and Chinese Quests to Win Hearts and Minds

By Maria Repnikova

In the post–Cold War era, few concepts have more profoundly shaped discussions of U.S. foreign policy than the idea of “soft power.” The term was coined by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead*, in which he defined it as “getting others to want what you want.” But Nye wasn’t just trying to illuminate an element of national power. He was also pushing back against arguments that the United States was facing an impending decline. To the contrary, Nye argued that alongside its military prowess and economic strength, the United States enjoyed a massive advantage over any potential rivals thanks to its abundant soft power, which rested on “intangible resources: culture, ideology, [and] the ability to use international institutions to determine the framework of debate.”

The idea of soft power gained traction in the 1990s but was tested in the United States in the years after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Following the disastrous U.S. war in Iraq and the steep rise in anti-American sentiment in the Middle East and beyond, Nye insisted that soft power was not merely complementary to hard power but indispensable to it. “When we discount the importance of our attractiveness to other countries, we pay the price,” he argued in his 2004 book, *Soft Power*, urging a more deliberate deployment of public diplomacy. Such arguments held little sway in the George W. Bush administration but were later embraced by the Obama administration; in 2013, an article in these pages described Obama’s first top diplomat, Hillary Clinton, as “the soft-power secretary of state.” The soft-power pendulum swung again under the more hawkish and less internationalist administration of President Donald Trump and once again when President Joe Biden took office, pledging to restore the country’s moral stature and to “lead not merely by the example of our power but by the power of our example.”

Amid these swings in policy over the past two decades, the concept of soft power only grew in prominence, popularized by a legion of pundits who used it as a shorthand for describing the cultural contours of Pax Americana. “America’s soft power isn’t just pop and schlock; its cultural clout is both high and low,” the German commentator Josef Joffe wrote in a characteristic invocation of the idea in 2006. “It is grunge and Google, Madonna and MoMA, Hollywood and Harvard.”

The concept’s fluidity and the idea that soft power gave the United States a leg up in its path to hegemony have also made the notion enticing to thinkers and leaders in many other countries and regions. And among the places where the concept of soft power has been most enthusiastically embraced is in China. Beginning around 2007, under then President Hu Jintao’s leadership, top-level Chinese officials started incorporating soft power into their speeches and publications. That year, at the Chinese Communist Party’s 17th National Congress, Hu urged the party’s cadres “to stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country.” In the years since, Chinese scholars have produced a rich corpus of writings on the topic, and the CCP has made massive investments in public diplomacy, including the global expansion of state-owned media outlets and the cultural and language centers known as Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, which it has established in 162 countries.

Meanwhile, the party has sought to internationalize the Chinese higher education system by recruiting foreign students and scholars.

As in the United States, soft power has been treated as a hopeful idea in China: an important additive to the country's rise, especially its economic expansion. In fact, Chinese experts and officials now embrace soft power with more urgency than do their American counterparts. There is an inherent understanding that China's status in the international system is limited and overshadowed by the West, and that to truly rival the United States, China needs more recognition from and more influence over global public opinion. External legitimation and respect, for the Chinese party-state, is also linked to its domestic legitimacy. The Chinese understanding of soft power is connected to ideas of "cultural confidence" and "cultural security" that President Xi Jinping has promoted, terms that signify social cohesion around and pride in Chinese culture, values, and history.

As the contest between the United States and China accelerates, it would be natural to see soft power as just another vector of competition, with Washington and Beijing vying to make themselves and their political and economic models more attractive to the rest of the world. Leaders and elites in both countries clearly see things that way, and some worry about their potential vulnerabilities. In the United States, the erosion of democratic norms could harm the country's image as a bastion of liberal values. In China, a slowing economy and a sense of isolation created by the country's "zero-COVID" approach to the pandemic could dim its reputation for pragmatic, results-oriented governance.

But the image of straightforward contest does not quite capture the way events are playing out. For one thing, the two countries interpret soft power quite differently and operationalize the concept in distinct ways. Whereas Washington places democratic values and ideals at the heart of its soft-power promotion, China focuses more on practical matters, seeking to fuse its cultural and commercial appeals. That approach has reaped limited rewards in the West but has resonated in the "global South." Even there, however, people often see the two forms of soft power as complementary rather than competitive. Simply put, people in many parts of the world are perfectly happy to have both the Americans and the Chinese try to seduce them with their respective visions and values. What Washington and Beijing see as zero-sum, much of the world often sees as win-win.

SOFT POWER IS HARD

The American conception of soft power has always had a distinctly ideological bent, as the United States presents itself as the chief defender of the liberal democratic order. Biden captured the essence of this view of American influence in his inaugural address. "We will lead not merely by the example of our power but by the power of our example," he declared, using a favorite formulation of his. In December 2021, the Biden administration hosted a virtual Summit for Democracy with the aim of democratic renewal and building alliances against authoritarian powers such as China and Russia. Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine has further elevated the goal of strengthening democratic solidarity against a shared authoritarian aggressor.

U.S. public diplomacy echoes these sentiments. On social media, American embassies celebrate gender, racial, and cultural diversity and hail examples of individual resilience and creativity, sometimes combining the two themes by publicizing the success stories of individual immigrants and inviting them to speak at events and forums. American soft power is also largely shaped by private-sector cultural exports, such as Hollywood films, hip-hop music and style, and

such globally recognizable brands as Coca-Cola and McDonald's. U.S. soft-power projection often brings the public and private sectors together. During the Cold War era, for instance, the State Department promoted American jazz musicians abroad, and the CIA covertly sponsored writers and publications. This tradition has persisted and expanded in the post-Cold War era, with the State Department sponsoring artists and musicians to act as something akin to cultural ambassadors.

In China, the understanding and practice of soft power focus more on pragmatism than on values. In engaging with Nye's idea, some Chinese analysts have argued that the separation between hard and soft power is artificial, noting that much of the United States' attractiveness depends on its military prowess and economic strength. As the scholar Zhao Kejin has pointed out, even one of the most celebrated symbols of American soft power, Coca-Cola, is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a commercial juggernaut. Reflecting this critique, the CCP's soft-power strategy involves promoting Chinese culture and values but also touts China's model of economic development, its governing competence, its technological advances, its growing military capabilities, and its ability to carry out political mobilization, as seen in its campaigns against poverty and corruption. Anything that might improve China's image is considered an element of soft power—even Chinese hard power. Whereas Washington sometimes relies on soft power to distract from its hard power, Beijing sometimes draws attention to its hard power to buttress its soft power.

China's more pragmatic and less ideological approach to soft power comes through in Xi's major international speeches, in which he tends to downplay ideology in favor of practical aspirations. "We should safeguard and improve people's livelihoods and protect and promote human rights through development, and make sure that development is for the people and by the people, and that its fruits are shared among the people," Xi proclaimed in an address at the UN in September 2021. Xi's formulation subtly undercuts the connection between rights and liberal democratic values, redefining "human rights" as access to economic opportunities. In communicating with global audiences, China's international media outlets, such as *China Daily* and CGTN, follow Xi's lead and emphasize China's economic breakthroughs. The CCP buttresses this kind of soft-power diplomacy with acts of material generosity. Earlier this year, for instance, Xi pledged \$500 million to support development objectives in Central Asian countries, including improvements in agriculture and public health.

China also tries to bolster its soft power through education. State-sponsored training programs that China offers officials in countries in the global South present the CCP as an inspiration for fast-paced development, especially when it comes to beating poverty. "They lifted 700 million out of poverty!" exclaimed an Ethiopian official I met in Addis Ababa in 2019 who has attended several Chinese trainings. He then ticked off a list of facts and figures that he had learned on his trip to China, including the country's GDP growth rate, the number of universities it hosts, and even its urbanization rate.

U.S. soft power benefits from an image of American educational institutions as elite and top tier; in contrast, Chinese universities use their relatively low tuition and the availability of state-funded scholarships as selling points when recruiting students from the global South. (Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 80,000 students from Africa were studying in China, making it the second most popular destination for African students, after France.) China also pegs its international education programs directly to state-funded economic opportunities. In promoting Confucius Institutes, Beijing emphasizes not only the scholarships that students can obtain but

also the potential for employment at Chinese companies that graduates enjoy. In Ethiopia, for instance, advertisements for Confucius Institutes list, among other practical benefits of studying Chinese, the possibility of getting a high-paying job at a Chinese company. (Enjoying Chinese culture appears near the bottom of the list.) My interviews with students and university officials in Ethiopia revealed that many institute graduates end up working as translators at Chinese enterprises, where they get paid double the average salary of an Ethiopian university professor.

From a Western perspective, China might appear to be making up for a lack of ideational power with material inducements. According to that view, China is not really exercising soft power at all but using its economic power to co-opt people. This critique misses the fact that although such economic inducements themselves are not exercises of soft power, they enhance China's soft power by bolstering the country's image as a bastion of generosity, opportunity, competence, and pragmatism. Economic engagement also has an affective dimension, encouraging an emotional connection to China, especially in places where other opportunities are scarce. What might look transactional to Western eyes in fact communicates a powerful message about what makes China attractive.

PRAGMATISM SELLS

In the United States and other Western industrialized democracies, Chinese soft power has had little impact, as evidenced by China's declining favorability in such places in recent years. This is in part a byproduct of preexisting negative associations of China with communism and authoritarianism. These negative views are also connected to China's increasingly assertive foreign policy under Xi, including the rise of what is known as "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, which involves officials' using antagonistic, even churlish rhetoric to attack China's critics, especially in the West.

In the global South, however, including in Africa and in Latin America, China's more pragmatic approach to soft power, layered on top of its expansive economic engagement, has had more success. The latest public opinion surveys in Africa found a largely positive sentiment toward China's economic and political influence on the continent; almost two-thirds of Africans surveyed across 34 countries regarded China's influence as "somewhat positive" or "very positive." And in a survey that the Pew Research Center conducted in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico in 2019, about half of respondents reported having a favorable image of China; only about a quarter expressed negative views.

In my research on Chinese soft power in Ethiopia as well as in my interviews with African elites studying and attending professional trainings in Beijing, I found a general appreciation for Chinese soft-power tools, such as educational opportunities. In contrast to the small number of highly competitive fellowship programs sponsored by the U.S. State Department, China offers thousands of scholarships to cover the cost of degrees and training programs for African elites and young people. In Ethiopia, almost every official one meets has already been to China, or plans to go, or knows someone who has gone. These are ambitious people, hungry for firsthand experience in major centers of global power, and although China might not be their top-choice destination, it is often the only feasible one. As one Ethiopian media professional in Addis Ababa told me during my visit in 2019, "It is better to see China than to stay at home and see nothing."

For the broader public in places such as Ethiopia, Chinese soft power tends to become visible through infrastructure projects, such as railways, bridges, and highways. Many of these

projects are controversial because of onerous loans, disputes over labor, and concerns over quality and safety. Nevertheless, they elevate China's standing. In Addis Ababa, ubiquitous construction sites funded by Chinese investment are covered with posters advertising Chinese companies. When I asked Ethiopians about the critiques from U.S. officials who warn of China's malign influence on Ethiopian politics and society, the response I often heard was, "And where are the Americans?"

While acknowledging China's relative appeal and advantages in the global South, it is important not to treat the U.S.-Chinese competition there, or elsewhere, as a zero-sum game. Many people find both China and the United States attractive and perceive their different models as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive. Even in regions such as Southeast Asia, where more overt suspicion and contestation of Chinese influence and soft power exist, surveys indicate a strong reluctance to side with either country.

In my interviews with Ethiopians in Addis Ababa and Beijing, I found that many embrace China's story of economic success and the idea of a shared developmental trajectory while also voicing support for values they associate with the United States, such as human rights and democratic freedoms. Elites in places such as Ethiopia seek opportunities to interact with individuals and institutions in both countries and sometimes find themselves negotiating between the two. Ethiopian journalists who attended training programs in China, for example, often inquire about similar opportunities in the United States.

In Ethiopia and elsewhere, officials often use China's engagement as a negotiating chip in getting the United States to contribute more. For instance, at a higher education workshop hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa in 2019, an Ethiopian education official highlighted China as an example of one of the countries that "take our students," implying that the United States should grant similar opportunities. The American officials present politely ignored this comment and stuck to emphasizing U.S. offerings, such as prestigious fellowships and university-to-university partnerships. Privately, however, one embassy official acknowledged that China is competing "at scale" when it comes to educational access for Africans and that for many African students, China is the most likely destination.

NO CONTEST

Looking ahead, the United States and China will face distinctive challenges in soft-power promotion. Washington's approach draws scrutiny because of the disconnect between the country's emphasis on democratic values and its inconsistent adherence to them. Democratic erosion, pervasive racial discrimination, and attacks on reproductive rights at home detract from the United States' image as an inspirational democracy. In workshops with U.S. State Department officials, I have sensed a growing awareness of the need to address these issues but also a sense of fear that doing so publicly would put the United States at a disadvantage vis-à-vis China. "Wouldn't it make us look weak?" asked one official when I suggested that U.S. public diplomacy could convey more candor and humility about the challenges facing American democracy.

Abroad, Washington's selective commitment to human rights encourages cynicism about its intentions. The failure of the United States and its allies to galvanize much of the global South, including major countries such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, in the confrontation with Russia reflects deep-seated distrust. In explaining their reluctance to condemn Russia, officials from such countries tend to accuse NATO of playing a role in creating the crisis in Ukraine and

downplay Russia's aggression by pointing to wars waged by the United States—rhetoric that precisely echoes that of Chinese diplomats and state media.

The United States also ties its own hands by limiting its investments in human capital through training and education opportunities. American diplomats often express interest in the idea of competing with China when it comes to scholarships and other means of attracting talent. But many also express a conviction that the best talent will find its way to the United States organically, a belief that creates inertia when it comes to fundamentally rethinking the conduct of public diplomacy.

For its part, by relying on practical inducements rather than ideological visions, China invites scrutiny over the quality of its offerings and risks a wholly transactional reciprocity on the ground. China's COVID-19 vaccine exports, for instance, were met with suspicion in many parts of the global South and were sidelined in favor of Western options when they became available; concerns about the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccines were later borne out. Similarly, in conversations I have had with students from a number of African countries, many have worried aloud about the quality of student-teacher interactions and the pedagogic approaches at some education programs in China. Studies of the impact of Chinese state media in Latin America and in Africa have noted limited public consumption, partly because people saw the content as unappealing. To bridge the quality gap, the CCP would have to shift its evaluation metrics from quantity to quality and allow for more creative freedom, especially in the media—two adjustments that appear unlikely to happen under Xi.

More broadly, China's pragmatic soft-power approach risks collapsing into mere transactionalism, with any benefit to China contingent on others' receiving material benefits. When I asked Ethiopian university officials what would happen to Confucius Institutes in the country if studying at them no longer led to jobs at Chinese companies, their response was clear and terse: "We would close them down." It remains to be seen how China's years of pandemic isolation, which have hindered people-to-people exchanges, will affect its image in the global South. In the absence of a larger ideational vision, however, China will need to keep doling out ever larger gifts—a task that will become harder if the Chinese economy continues to slow.

Officials in the United States have been thinking about, talking about, and consciously wielding soft power, although unevenly and often ambivalently, for decades. Their Chinese counterparts got a later start. This could be a disadvantage, but it could also work to China's benefit. Contradictions, internal tensions, and even hypocrisy have become deeply woven into U.S. soft power. Managed properly, China's less lofty vision of soft power might yet avoid that problem, so long as it can remain "soft" at all. Meanwhile, despite the belief in Washington and Beijing that the two countries are engaged in a soft-power competition, the reality looks more like soft-power coexistence. Their success in making themselves more attractive depends not so much on outmaneuvering each other as on overcoming their own internal frictions. As each country tries to refine its appeal and reduce the other's, much of the world is becoming less interested in the question of whether the American model or the Chinese one is the most attractive overall and more interested in what each one has to offer.

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