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The hard evidence that China's soft power policy is working

By Gideon Rachman

Flicking on the television at midnight in Beijing recently, I came across a football match. It was Manchester United versus Charlton Athletic – broadcast live from Old Trafford with commentary in Chinese.

My first thought was not, “What’s the score?” but – “Soft power”. Doubtless my reaction reflected an excessive intake of books on international relations. But soft power is a fashionable notion in Beijing these days as China seeks to manage its “peaceful rise”.

The idea of soft power – invented by Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor – is that countries can often best achieve their objectives by persuasion rather than force. While the instruments of “hard” power are military and economic, the instruments of soft power are cultural and ideological.

I found it encouraging that the Chinese seem to have developed a passion for English football; a positive image that might displace some old grudges about the opium war.

Now the Chinese themselves are increasingly interested in developing soft power. The government in Beijing knows that many countries are anxious about a rising China. But if China looks like an attractive and friendly place, foreigners might be more relaxed about its growing power.

The thought that China could be a “soft superpower” sounds improbable. The Chinese government’s most iconic act of recent years was to murder large numbers of its citizens. It was American soft power that was displayed in Tiananmen Square in 1989, as students brandished a model of the Statue of Liberty. Chinese economic growth, while undeniably impressive, is widely associated in the west with pollution, cheap labour and a threat to jobs.

For a rich, free and culturally powerful country such as the US to lose a soft power contest with China seems all but impossible. It would be like losing a boxing match with a one-armed man. But in the global battle for hearts and minds, China does have one distinct advantage. It has not started any wars lately.

The catastrophic decline in the international image of the US since the Iraq war is increasingly evident. An international opinion survey for the BBC this month showed that 52 per cent of the 26,000 surveyed now have a “mainly negative” view of the US, up

from 47 per cent last year. Even in Europe, America's image is barely better than that of China. A survey of 12 European nations for the German Marshall Fund last year showed that America had a popularity rating of 48 out of 100; China got 45.

But it is in the developing world that China may have the best opportunity to project its soft power. Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean intellectual, argues that China's extraordinary rise from poverty to prosperity can serve as an inspiration for other countries that are "in despair".

China has more than an uplifting story to offer. **It also promotes an alternative theory of development and international relations.** Joshua Cooper Ramo, a consultant, christened this the "Beijing consensus" in 2004. He argued that developing nations were increasingly fed up with the doctrinaire "Washington consensus" – and increasingly impressed by a **Chinese model that emphasised pragmatism, innovation, social cohesion and self-determination.**

Joshua Kurzlantzick, an American analyst, warns that Chinese "soft power" in southeast Asia is now so potent that for the first time since 1945, the US is "facing a situation in which another country's appeal outstrips its own in an important region". **China's aid to the Philippines is now four times as generous as that offered by America; twice as many Indonesians are now studying in China as are studying in the US. China is promoting a free-trade area with southeast Asia.**

In the past month, China has been able to point to a couple of successes for its charm offensive. A tour of Africa by Hu Jintao, the Chinese president, underlined his country's growing influence there. And the negotiation of a nuclear deal with North Korea looks like a vindication for China's emphasis on behind-the-scenes negotiation with "rogue states", rather than America's hitherto more confrontational approach.

But just as the idea of a "Beijing consensus" is gaining ground, Mr Cooper Ramo has returned to the fray with some dissonant data. In a new pamphlet called Brand China, he takes a much less optimistic view of China's image. Using global opinion research conducted by Young & Rubicam, Mr Ramo now concludes that "China's brand is weak. The country is not trusted overseas."

Even some of the more vaunted examples of Chinese "soft power" can easily be turned on their heads. The Chinese may get on famously with the governments of Sudan and Zimbabwe, but such relationships are only likely to confirm the damaging impression that **China is a country that will always put profits above human rights. Seen in this light, China's growing influence in Africa and even southeast Asia has little to do with a new "Beijing consensus" – it is simply old-fashioned power politics.**

Mr Nye, the original theorist of soft power, sees obvious limitations to China's charm offensive. The Chinese model, he argues, is only likely to work in "places where an authoritarian model of rapid development is attractive". What is more, the US is better placed to polish up its image than China. Surveys regularly suggest that American society

retains much of its international appeal; it is US foreign policy that has provoked a backlash. By contrast, Chinese foreign policy excites little hostility – outside Japan and Taiwan. It is the Chinese political and social system that worries foreigners. It is much easier to change your policies than to change your political system.

Does image matter? It is gratifying if foreigners like your films or your football. But Manchester had more impact on the world when it was the centre of the industrial revolution than the headquarters of a soccer team. Chinese and American hawks would probably agree that, when it comes to the crunch, hard power matters much more than soft stuff.

But the crunch – fortunately – may never come. In the meantime, if China and the US clash, it will be over issues such as Sudan, Iran or climate change – and the struggle is likely to be played out at the United Nations, or in a battle for world opinion. In that struggle, soft power – mushy and difficult to define as it is – really does matter.