

China's need for soft power

Comment >
International relations

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.



Zhai Kun

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.¹ 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 Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi of Malaysia when they began new terms in office. In 2001, President Arroyo told *Asia Week* that looking 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, vital 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 said, 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 American-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 goal 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.

Clean hands and coffins

The CCP is also making great efforts to address corruption, which is not only a threat to the regime but a challenge to the party's legitimacy. Top party leaders are aware of how the former president of the Philippines was overthrown by the second 'People Power' revolution, how Indonesia and the Suharto family collapsed during the Asian financial crisis, and how difficult it is for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to fight corruption in Malaysia.

In CCTV (Chinese national state television)'s recent poll of the top ten people of the year in the field of economics, first place went to

the head of the country's National Audit Office, who launched the anti-corruption campaign. As anti-corruption becomes an ever more popular theme, CCTV is airing more prime-time series on the subject. Ordinary people are watching shows like *Hail The Judge*, about a righteous judge in ancient China who kills corrupt ministers, or the more contemporary *Black Hole* and *Absolute Power*.

The Party has declared it has taken measures to fight corruption - former Premier Zhu Rongji memorably said in a speech: 'I prepared 100 coffins, 99 for corrupt officials, 1 for myself' to express his determination. But this is not enough. The Party is leading China's rise, and a deeply corrupt Party is sure to lose the authority 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

1. Cooper Ramo, Joshua. 2004. *The Beijing Consensus*. London: The Foreign Policy Center.

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Shifting Paradigms in Asia-Europe Relations: translating common challenges into opportunities

The 8th Asia-Europe Young Leaders Symposium (AEYLS 8) was held in Scheveningen, the Netherlands from 29 November to 3 December 2004. Organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Institute for Asian Studies, hosting the event in the Netherlands was particularly timely as it was the holder of the EU Presidency and had co-hosted the Fifth ASEM Summit in Hanoi, October 2004.

The theme, 'Shifting Paradigms in Asia-Europe Relations: Translating Common Challenges into Common Opportunities' underlined the importance of current developments within the ASEM process. The main goal set for the young leaders was to gain new perspectives on Asia-Europe relations and put forward recommendations based on the plenary lectures and separate working groups.

The symposium approached the complex academic, social and cultural relationships between the two regions in an interdisciplinary manner, bringing together the diversity of local histories, ideas, and agencies in both Europe and Asia. The symposium also aimed to move beyond dialogue, towards deeper and more practical knowledge on areas such as social welfare, financial architecture, elections and interfaith discourse. As we all know, dialogue is the basis of successful relations; sometimes, however, the process itself is discussed more than what the process should deliver. Hence the young leaders were invited not only to debate issues of importance to Asia and Europe, but to pinpoint crucial elements within the themes to enable future symposia to produce concrete steps towards a closer Asian-European partnership.

In total some 90 academics, politicians, journalists, businessmen and artists from 26 countries, including the new member states Cambodia, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic, took part in the event, comprised of plenary discussion and working group sessions. The keynote speakers were: Sastrohandoyo Wiryo (Fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Relations in Indonesia), Frank Majoor (Secretary General of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Wim van Gelder (Commissioner to the Queen of the Province of Zeeland).

For more information on AEYLS please see www.asef.org and www.ias.nl

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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 (JCIE).

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. Pitsuwan, former Foreign Minister of Thailand and J.P. Dirske, 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, inter-cultural and interfaith 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.civdialogue.asef.org

To order this book, please contact IIAS.

Connecting Civil Society The Barcelona Report

An Informal Consultation Featuring Recommendations from Civil Society on Asia-Europe Relations Addressed to the ASEM Leaders
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