

Panda Power? Chinese Soft Power in the Era of COVID-19

By Amit Gupta

Much like competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union, the rivalry between the United States and China is not only one of military-strategic and economic challenges but also one of ideas. The West, particularly the United States, has had the advantage of presenting the more compelling image to the rest of the world in the form of what Joseph Nye, Jr., dubbed *soft power*. The argument goes that while China makes propaganda efforts, the United States enjoys soft power—the attractiveness of its culture, political ideas, and policies—and this gives America an international advantage. As the Australian security analyst Hugh White put it, “Everybody admires China, but no one wants to be China.”¹

While this was true in the early years of the post-Cold War era, the Chinese have since used their newfound wealth to create a more friendly image for themselves. If they are able to successfully distribute their version of the COVID-19 vaccine around the world, we may see Beijing benefiting from a boost in its image—despite the abrasive “wolf warrior diplomacy” of the past few years, its military forays in the East and South China seas, and the fact that the Chinese government was initially less than forthcoming in sharing data on the pandemic.² With a recent analysis suggesting that China’s economy will overtake that of the United States in 2028, China’s attempts to rebrand its image will not only have more resources but also find an increasingly eager international audience that seeks to engage the newly emerging number one global economy.³ Soft power, after all, means little without an economic and a military capability to back it up, and China has both. To discuss the Chinese challenge, this article makes its argument in three parts: first, it argues that Nye’s definition of soft power has limitations, and in fact, the Chinese can influence global public opinion with a mixture of propaganda and soft power. Second, it describes China’s attempts to influence global public opinion and the extent to which it may succeed. Finally, it examines the possible future of the Chinese soft power challenge and what the United States can do to counter it.

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The Fallacy of Soft Power

In recent times, Nye's description of soft power is the one that has gained the maximum usage in the analysis of international relations, but the idea itself has been around at least since the 1930s when Edward Hallett Carr wrote his seminal book on international politics, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. Nye's description of soft power argued that it is the attributes of a society that cause it to be liked by other nations and that, therefore, allow a country to better prosecute its foreign policy:

Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. When you can get others to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Hard power, the ability to coerce, grows out of a country's military and economic might. Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.⁴

Nye's formulation of soft power emerged in the 1990s, in the early phases of globalization, and it was based on a description mainly of American society (although other Western nations were included), whose economic prowess and cultural power had been so influential in winning the Cold War. It was America's economic strength that allowed it to create a global market and, therefore, shape the consumer culture of the world. For example, American consumer goods such as Nike sneakers and Levi's jeans were sought internationally after the 1992 Olympics when the U.S. basketball "dream team" captivated the world. Michael Jordan shirts and sneakers were global bestsellers and Hollywood movies had conquered the global film market.

Writing about the impact of American

consumerism, Benjamin Barber described the emergence of "McWorld," and in an expansion of his original *Atlantic Monthly* article into a book, he showed how American movies and culture have monopolized the global market.⁵ It was for this reason that sociologists had started using the terms *globalization* and *Americanization* interchangeably. American military and economic superiority led to the formulation by Charles Krauthammer of the "unipolar moment," when the United States, because of its military strength and the fact that it had created a single global market, could successfully enforce a liberal international order.⁶ Francis Fukuyama similarly suggested that we had reached the end of the history of ideas since liberal democracy had won the debate of ideas for structuring the international system as well as national societies.⁷

Nye's definition of soft power was based on American military and economic might and the fact that authoritarian and totalitarian regimes had bankrupted themselves in trying to create an alternative version of political order. This definition of soft power, however, is increasingly under challenge. Not only has American economic power been contested by the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, but its moral authority, which was the basis of the attractiveness of Western societies, has also been adversely impacted. Liberal democratic societies have re-entertained formerly taboo right-wing ideas, and their own economies are beginning to slow down. In such a situation, the Western model is viewed with some skepticism around the world. Furthermore, Nye's discussion of soft power only tangentially accepted that non-liberal democratic states could have soft power—although he did initially point out that the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s had been able to exert a similar soft power due to its high levels of productivity.⁸ For this discussion, therefore, E.H. Carr's version of soft power is a more useful tool for the current analysis.

Carr wrote about the power of opinion and

saw it as being as important as the military and economic instruments of power in the realm of international relations. While discussing the power of propaganda, Carr highlighted the power over international opinion enjoyed by organizations such as the Catholic Church, as well as the influence the Bolsheviks had over international revolutionary and workers groups across both Europe and the colonized world.⁹ A similar type of admiration existed for Adolf Hitler's Germany, and the Nazi dictator was able to use the 1936 Olympics to create a positive international image of his country. Carr's use of the phrase *to shape opinion* is more value neutral than that of Nye's, whose version of soft power has liberal democratic values and society as its foundation. If, however, we view Chinese soft power through the lens of Carr's work, it becomes clear that Beijing

has been able to create its own version of a positive global image.

The Elements of Chinese Soft Power

China's soft power rests on overt propaganda efforts such as its government-funded global expansion of Chinese media and Confucius Institutes, and more subtle attempts through funding of Hollywood productions and the growth of a large foreign student body in China.

China's Global Media Expansion. In the aftermath of World War II, Western nations had the monopoly on the flow of information around the world. The United States built up a state-sponsored media service that included the Voice of America (set up after Pearl Harbor) but more importantly, perhaps, established Radio Free Europe/Radio



China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters
October 3, 2012
By 杨志强 Zhiqiang

Liberty to broadcast to the communist nations of Eastern Europe. In postcolonial settings, traditional mediums of broadcasting, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and its Dutch and French counterparts, were broadcasting to their former colonies because of a lingering sense of responsibility toward these nations that lacked the resources to build up a healthy fourth estate.¹⁰ While the latter argument sounds noble, there was also the rational interest to retain influence and shape affairs in these nations. Thus, the Western nations' media, which, as the Cold War developed, also included Radio Moscow, had a monopoly on the transmission and flow of global information. Yet by the early 2000s, competitors with deep pockets began to emerge around the world. Al Jazeera was established in 1996 and by 2006 had started its English language service. The channel's Arabic and English services were seen as challenging the Western narrative on the Middle East and hurting American war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Chinese were not far behind. In 2000, their television network, China Central Television (CCTV), began an English language service, and by 2010, it was estimated that the Chinese channel had a budget of \$6.6 billion to send its message around the world.¹¹ China has lavishly funded these efforts at getting its message out and reducing the influence of Western nations in creating an objective media flow around the world. According to one estimate, Xi Jinping has given China Global Television Network (the international division of CCTV) \$10 billion to spread China's message. In comparison, the Broadcasting Board of Governors—which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Asia, and broadcasts to Cuba and Iran—had a budget of \$637 million for fiscal year 2021.¹² The Chinese media have sought not only to project the Chinese perspective on international affairs but also to buy off dissenting voices in the countries where they operate.

Moreover, China is seizing an opportunity: as the budgets of Western mainstream media organizations shrink, China has set up offices around the world and hired journalists who are desperate for jobs. In the case of a London office of a Chinese media organization, over 6,000 people applied for 90 jobs, and this is a trend seen increasingly around the world as journalists scramble for a shrinking pool of jobs.¹³ The Chinese have also assiduously wooed journalists around the world, giving them all-expense-paid trips to China to return and write positive stories about the Chinese economic miracle.¹⁴ China has also adopted the strategy of “borrowing boats,” which is to use the media of another country to push its own message globally and gain the appearance of objectivity in reporting. Media in the United States, Finland, and Australia have Chinese investors and are used to disseminate such news content.¹⁵

Along with the global charm offensive, the Chinese government has sought to build up the infrastructure that transmits news around the world, thereby giving them some element of control over the broadcast product. As Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin note:

Beijing has also been patiently increasing its control over the global digital infrastructure through private Chinese companies, which are dominating the switchover from analogue to digital television in parts of Africa, launching television satellites and building networks of fibre-optic cables and data centres—a “digital silk road”—to carry information around the world. In this way, Beijing is increasing its grip, not only over news producers and the means of production of the news, but also over the means of transmission.¹⁶

While the enormous Chinese advantage in resources may seem worrying, its impact is lessened

by both the nature of Chinese broadcasting as well as the multiple platforms, both public and private, that the United States uses to get its message across the world. In addition, Chinese media is viewed with some suspicion since it is seen as promoting the interests of the Chinese Communist Party and Beijing. And thanks to Chinese media muzzling of social media, it does not have the type of outlets that the United States has used to allow for the free flow of information globally. Facebook may have allowed fake news into the United States, but it has also facilitated the transmission of information to countries with less developed media capabilities.

On the other hand, a global media presence, even a flawed one such as China's, is a powerful tool because it permits Beijing not only to send its message around the world (where it will find willing

listeners), but to also allow China to challenge the West's positions on issues where America and its allies may be on the defensive. These issues include climate change, the invasion of Iraq, America's immigration policies, and the fact that Western nations bought up most of the personal protective equipment reserves after COVID-19 erupted and cornered the stock of emerging vaccines designed to mitigate illness from COVID-19.¹⁷ Such an attack would find a global audience much in the same way that Al Jazeera found a global audience (and more important, a Middle Eastern audience) during the Iraq War and its aftermath.

Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institutes were founded in 2004, and by mid-2021, they had become a global phenomenon. By one estimate they were enrolling over 9 million students in over



As Confucius said in around 500 BC, "When it is obvious that the goal cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals, adjust the action steps."

By Soft Power 30

Table 1

Movie	Total Revenue (\$USD billion)	Domestic (\$USD million)	%	International (\$USD)	%
Avengers Endgame	\$2.79	\$858	30.7	\$1.93 billion	69.3
Lion King	\$1.65	\$543	32.8	\$1.11 billion	67.2
Frozen II	\$1.45	\$477	32.9	\$ 972 million	67.1
Spider Man: Far from Home	\$1.13	\$390	34.5	\$741 million	65.5
Captain Marvel	\$1.12	\$426	37.8	\$701 million	62.2

Table 2

Movie	Approx. Revenue in China (\$USD million)
Avengers Endgame	\$629
Lion King	\$120
Frozen 2	\$122
Spiderman: Far from Home	\$198
Captain Marvel	\$154

Source: Box Office Mojo: International Box Office 2019.

160 countries and were set up to provide “Chinese language instruction . . . [and] . . . designed to help improve China’s international image or reduce what [People’s Republic of China] officials view as misconceptions about China.”¹⁸ Unlike most countries that seek to put their cultural and educational centers in major cities or at the most prestigious universities, the Chinese government took a more broad-based approach and sought to saturate countries with these institutions by including smaller cities and less-prestigious universities.

The creation of Confucius Institutes in the United States began in 2005 with an agreement between the governments of China and the United States, and initially over 100 such institutes were set up on college campuses. The institutes were welcomed because they brought in not only sorely needed expertise on Chinese history, culture, politics, and language but also attractive financial

investments. As of June 2022, however, only 18 institutes remain on college campuses in the United States.¹⁹ The reason universities shut down such centers lay in four major concerns that were brought out in a report by the National Association of Scholars (NAS):

- 1. *Intellectual freedom.* Official Hanban [the organization that funds and directs the institutes] policy requires Confucius Institutes to adhere to Chinese law, including speech codes. Chinese teachers hired, paid by, and accountable to the Chinese government face pressures to avoid sensitive topics, and American professors report pressure to self-censor.
- 2. *Transparency.* Contracts between American universities and the Hanban, funding arrangements, and hiring policies for Confucius Institute staff are rarely publicly available. Some universities went to extraordinary efforts to avoid

scrutiny, cancelling meetings and forbidding NAS from visiting campus.

- 3. *Entanglement. Confucius Institutes are central nodes in a complex system of relationships with China. Confucius Institutes attract full-tuition-paying Chinese students, fund scholarships for American students to study abroad, and offer other resources. Universities with financial incentives to please China find it more difficult to criticize Chinese policies.*
- 4. *Soft Power. Confucius Institutes tend to present China in a positive light and to focus on anodyne aspects of Chinese culture. They avoid Chinese political history and human rights abuses, present Taiwan and Tibet as undisputed territories of China, and develop a generation of American students with selective knowledge of a major country.*²⁰

The report goes on to state that the institutes had a list of topics that were off-limits for discussion that included, the “status of Tibet and Taiwan, the Dalai Lama, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and criticism of the Communist Party’s legitimacy.”²¹ The Chinese government was laying down an ambitious plan globally to influence how the academic world shaped its discussion of China and this was, as the report points out, to move students away from controversial issues to ones that portrayed China in a positive light.

Moreover, the bulk of the Confucius Institutes are in the Western nations, giving credence to the argument that this is a Chinese charm offensive in economically important countries to soften the image of China in these societies. Not surprising, citing the violation of academic freedom, many American universities shut down their Confucius Institutes or terminated their collaborative arrangements with Hanban. A less-flattering reason admittedly lay in the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act of 2018 that prohibited Defense

Department money being used to fund Chinese language programs at universities that hosted Confucius Institutes. As one critic pointed out, “We are now in a pick-your-poison, lose-lose situation, with the inevitable effect of compromising the academic integrity of the university, either by keeping the Confucius Institutes or allowing the United States government to intervene in the curriculum.”²²

China and Hollywood. The third part of Chinese soft power comes from China’s efforts to rebrand its image through its links and investments in Hollywood since the American movie industry is one of the most globalized parts of the national economy. Table 1 shows the high level of Hollywood’s dependency on the international market, particularly China, where Hollywood took in about \$2.6 billion in revenues. China’s market significance can be seen in more detail if one delves deeper into the international box office figures (see table 2).

This huge international demand for American films has played into China’s investment plans as the Dalian Wanda corporation not only purchased the AMC theater group but also invested in a film production company. Other Chinese corporations followed suit, and as John Pomfret wrote, the results were predictable—in the last two decades neither the Chinese authorities nor China itself have been portrayed in a negative light in a Hollywood movie.²³ As a well-researched report on China’s influence in Hollywood argues, the strength of the Chinese market, coupled with investments in both the United States and China, have led to a situation in which Hollywood production companies are engaging in self-censorship to secure one of the coveted annual release slots for Hollywood movies in China (currently the Chinese allow 34 Hollywood movies to be released annually).²⁴ As a consequence, Hollywood has removed content that is offensive to China, reshaped characters such as the Ancient One in *Dr. Strange* from being Tibetan to Celtic, and worked, as

the Chinese censors demand:

not merely to censor content or themes that it [Beijing] finds threatening, but rather to also proactively work to shape film narratives so that they portray a specific vision of China: one that is thriving, harmonious, powerful, and—perhaps most importantly—unified under the unchallenged and benign leadership of the Party.²⁵

This influence, while none too subtle, is not generally noticed by the average American filmgoer and is likely to continue since the Chinese authorities realized that they can “borrow the boat” by reshaping Hollywood’s output. Given that most

Hollywood companies are in fact multinational corporations with assets and interests in China (Disney, for example, has theme parks in Shanghai and Hong Kong, while Universal has also invested in a theme park), we can only expect this attempt at influence to grow.

The fact is that the Chinese have begun to invest in specific Hollywood productions. Movies such as *Skyscraper* and *Green Book* were partly funded by Chinese investment, and such investments may continue in the future. At the same time, China is building up its own film industry to ostensibly compete with Hollywood, though such efforts have yet to bear fruit. The Chinese blockbuster *Ne Zha* made approximately \$719 million in China but a mere \$3.6



While a \$125M opening weekend (\$142M including Thursday) in China is excellent in itself, that was only the start of the story. *Wolf Warriors 2* went on to earn over 200M RMB (~\$30M) a day for 8 straight days, bringing its total as of August 7, 2017 to \$345M.

August 7, 2017

By Chris from Shenzhen, China

million in the United States, demonstrating that the appeal of Chinese movies is still confined largely within its borders and in the Chinese diaspora.²⁶

China's incursions into Hollywood bring out both the weaknesses and strengths of its soft power. China is a long way from creating a cultural product that sells globally in the way that Hollywood movies and television do, but China's growing economic clout, and the fact that America's film and television industries are now truly globalized, make it possible for Beijing to reshape the international perception of China. Despite the downturn in U.S.-China relations, the film and television industry will only continue to develop global networks as movies and television shows flow across all continents, thus giving China, with its growing economic power, the opportunity to continue to shape the narrative about Chinese society and politics.

As a part of the attempt to influence the entertainment sector, Xi Jinping also has ambitious plans to build up a \$813 billion domestic sports industry that would rival the sporting industries of the United States and Europe.²⁷ These sports include basketball and soccer, where Beijing believes it can create an international sporting brand. The Chinese adopted the model of U.S. Major League Soccer and initially brought in aging soccer players to play for them who could no longer hold a spot on a major European or South American team roster.

Now, however, the Chinese are getting national team players and World Cup-winning coaches such as the Italian Marcello Lippi and the Brazilian Luiz Felipe Scolari. It will be difficult for China to become an attractive alternative venue for soccer since the traditional powerhouses with the best marketing of the sport are the European and South American countries. Similarly, with basketball, it would take a major investment, by perhaps offering even more lucrative salaries than the American National Basketball Association, to shift the global center of basketball from the United States to China.

These efforts show that China's ambition, vision, and resources are considerable. It hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics, and Xi's ambition is to host and win the World Cup.

Education. Perhaps one of the strongest bases of Western, particularly American, soft power has been the prestige of its educational systems that have provided quality education to students from countries around the world. Since colonial times, the patterns of international student flows have been established, in which students from the non-Western nations have come to the West to obtain an education. Until the 1960s, this flow was primarily toward the Western European countries, whose ties with their former colonies created a natural talent pool to draw from. Thus, universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, Erasmus Rotterdam, and Coimbra were able to bring in students from the former colonies and send them back with not only an education but also a cultural grounding in the host country. Many of these students became politicians, technocrats, and bureaucrats in many nations, thus reinforcing the links between the former colonizers and the formerly colonized.

The situation changed dramatically in the 1960s as American universities became the leaders in global education and the change in U.S. immigration policies permitted naturalizing and employing students from the entire world. Furthermore, the United States, from the time of the Manhattan Project, became adept at bringing global intellectual labor into the country to make the next great scientific and technological advance. For example, Europeans such as Leo Szilard, Albert Einstein, and Enrico Fermi were in part responsible for the success of America's nuclear program; the German Werner von Braun headed the Apollo program; and Indian-American immigrants such as Satya Nadella, Vinod Khosla, and Sundar Pichai have headed, or head, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, and Google (Nadella was educated at the University of

Table 3. World's Top 20 Universities, 2020

Rank	University	Country
1	Harvard	United States
2	Stanford	United States
3	Cambridge	United Kingdom
4	MIT	United States
5	U California, Berkeley	United States
6	Princeton	United States
7	Columbia	United States
8	Caltech	United States
9	Oxford	United Kingdom
10	Chicago	United States
11	Yale	United States
12	Cornell	United States
13	UCLA	United States
14	Paris-Saclay	France
15	Johns Hopkins	United States
16	University College London	United Kingdom
16	University of Washington	United States
18	California San Diego	United States
19	University of Pennsylvania	United States
20	ETH Zurich	Switzerland

Source: *Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2020*. A report by Shanghai Jiao Tang University.

Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Khosla at Carnegie Mellon, and Pichai at Stanford and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania).

The United States, therefore, not only set up and funded world class institutions but also attracted world-class academic talent by providing the pathway to citizenship. At the same time, the Europeans were cutting academic budgets and legislating

restrictive citizenship laws. By being an open society, the United States won the battle for global intellectual labor as can be seen by the global rankings of universities around the world and the obvious U.S. academic hegemony.

Table 3 makes the point that the United States and Western nations still dominate international academia: 15 of the top 20 universities in the world are American and only two are non-English speaking (although ETH Zurich does conduct classes in English). China, however, is catching up quite rapidly in the realm of higher education. While the United States has 206 universities in the top 1,000, China, which in 2003 had 9 universities in the top 500, now has 168 in the top 1,000. The Chinese accomplished this by pumping money into higher education and seeking to attract international student and faculty talent. As seen in tables 4 and 5, in 2001 China was not a global force in education, but by 2017 it was rapidly catching up.

How does this buildup of education affect Chinese soft power and global influence? The answer is that these students will be part of China's global network, work for Chinese corporations around the world as well as in China and, perhaps, take Chinese culture and values home with them. Thus, while China may still be behind the West in the education sector, it is catching up. And given that it gives a considerable number of degrees in the sciences and the professional fields, the advantage for China is that the value system of an open society is not a disadvantage that works against its educational soft power efforts. Instead, students will be looking at the economic benefits they get from Chinese diplomas. As China's economic global reach expands, these students may find China's corporations more willing to hire them because they are acculturated in Chinese operational and cultural practices. The delivery of an affordable education coupled with future employment may be the clincher that makes the Chinese model more

attractive in the future. While for the Chinese to win this academic war they will have to attract the best academic talent, that may not be as big of a hurdle in the post-COVID-19 world.

COVID-19 and Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy

China may be one of the few countries in world history that has created an international problem and then, possibly, could gain credit for solving it. China's initial reaction to the outbreak of COVID-19 was less than forthcoming, leading to large-scale international criticism. Worse, because of their successful attempts to internationally isolate Taiwan, Taipei's warnings about the lethality of COVID-19 and the dangers of a pandemic were ignored by international authorities.

Once the pandemic spread globally, the Chinese were blamed, but the ineptness of organizations such as the European Union gave Beijing a reprieve. The beleaguered Italians asked the European Union for help, but little was sent. However, by March 2020, China sent healthcare workers and medicines to Italy²⁸ and to countries ranging from Serbia and the Czech Republic to the Philippines.²⁹ Initially, a potential game changer for China may well have been the distribution of vaccines to developing nations around the world when the Trump administration decided not to join the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovations' COVAX alliance. China and 182 other countries did, and their goal was to provide vaccines globally with a substantial number of countries in Asia and Africa getting vaccines at subsidized rates.³⁰

In this context, Xi announced that China would make its vaccines available around the world as a global public good, thus distributing the vaccine equitably at subsidized rates. It was expected that internationally China would first supply vaccines to the countries where it was tested—Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico signed up to test the vaccines

Table 4. Distribution of International Students by percentage, 2001

Country	Percentage of International Students
USA	28
United Kingdom	11
Germany	9
France	7
Australia	4
Japan	3
Spain	2
Belgium	2
All other countries	34

Source: Project Atlas, 2019

Table 5. Distribution of International Students, 2017

Country	Percentage
USA	24
United Kingdom	11
China	10
Australia	7
France	7
Canada	7
Russia	6
Germany	6
All other countries	23

Source: Project Atlas, 2019

by different Chinese companies.³¹ Subsequently, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates approved the Sinopharm vaccine for delivery in their countries. The advantage for China's vaccine diplomacy is that its large pharmaceutical industry could produce billions of vaccines at reduced costs for international distribution,³² while those in the West have been commandeered for the domestic public only (at the time of this writing wealthy countries with

14 percent of the world's population had acquired 53 percent of the most promising vaccines).³³ Nevertheless, on January 21, 2021, the Joe Biden administration announced that “the United States would join COVAX and play an active role globally on COVID-19.”³⁴ In a show of its own successful vaccine diplomacy and soft power efforts, the United States pledged to donate more than 1 billion doses of coronavirus vaccine,³⁵ and, as of September 2021, the United States was the world's largest donor of vaccines, supplying more doses globally than China, Japan, India, the United Kingdom, and France combined, and delivering more than three times the 34 million doses donated by China alone.³⁶

The Value of Chinese Soft Power

Hugh White's point about China cited above—that everyone admires China, but no one wants to be China—is seen as the strongest factor in favor of China's attempts to project a preferred image abroad. That the Chinese model has lifted millions out of poverty and created a technologically advanced society is viewed with admiration in different parts of the world—much in the same way that the Soviet Union was admired in the 1950s for its economic and technological progress. Furthermore, Chinese soft power is what John Wong described as economic soft power, where Chinese investments and the Belt and Road Initiative bring potential prosperity to different parts of the world.³⁷ The fact that the West has not come up with a comprehensive plan to counter the Belt and Road Initiative only strengthens the Chinese assertion that their developmental model, which is a central part of their soft power, offers more to the rest of the world's developmental efforts.

In contrast, Nye has written that China's soft power is limited by its nationalism, which has recently been described as wolf warrior diplomacy, and by the limits of a closed and nontransparent society.³⁸ Nye's argument about nationalism and

aggressive behavior in the international system, however, applies not only to China but also to the United States. In 2005, at the height of the Iraq insurgency, Australia's Lowy Institute released its annual foreign policy poll that showed Australian public opinion was quite critical of the United States, even though 72 percent of Australians agreed that the Australia, New Zealand, and United States Security Treaty was important for Australia's security interests. Instead, only 58 percent of Australians had a positive opinion of the United States while 69 percent had a positive opinion of China. Most Australians did not support the country's involvement in a potential future U.S.-China war over Taiwan, and 51 percent wanted a free trade agreement with China while only 34 percent were in favor of a trade agreement with the United States.³⁹ Thus, despite the strength and desirability of American soft power, foreign policy actions and economic self-interest were driving Australian opinion.

By 2021, the Lowy Poll showed that while 76 percent of Australians had a positive opinion of the Chinese people they had met, 93 percent were worried about Chinese military activities in the region. Fifty percent of Australians had negative views of China's economic growth, while 79 percent of those polled believed that Chinese investment in Australia had a negative impact. When asked about the United States, 76 percent of Australians polled thought that Americans and Australians shared common values, but 58 percent held that Donald Trump had weakened the alliance between the two countries.⁴⁰ Again, foreign policy and economic interests were driving Australian public opinion about the public standing of the two great powers.

The nationalism argument that Nye makes cuts both ways since nations react badly to extreme nationalism in any country regardless of its domestic political system and the level of transparency in its society.

Moreover, the level of transparency, or lack of it,

can be overcome by broader economic and political commonalities between China and the countries where it practices soft economic power. Shanthi Kalathil, for instance, pointed out that China was successfully able to use its soft power to get African nations to obstruct progress in the World Trade Organization, while in the United Nations there was broad support for the Chinese position on human rights.⁴¹

China's influence in the United Nations (UN) is now quite strong because of its foreign policy, its economic interests, and its relationship with African nations. To take the latter first, Jeremy Feltman argues that:

*China's influence in the Security Council is . . . linked to its relationship with Africa. Especially with South Africa currently on the Council, China can usually count on the "A3"—the three rotating African seats on the council (three of the "E10")—taking China's positions seriously. China's commercial and financial relations with Africa play an important part, but it is more than the alleged "economic blackmail" that gets China respect from the African member states represented on the Council: Unlike the P3 (with their own colonial baggage), China studiously avoids taking positions on Africa-related peace and security issues that differ from those of the African states themselves.*⁴²

While in terms of institutional leadership, Chinese nationals now head four of the 15 UN specialized agencies.⁴³

The effectiveness of Chinese economic soft power is not restricted to developing nations. In Europe, Greece, which has benefited from large-scale Chinese investments, blocked a European Union statement on Chinese violation of human rights in the UN.⁴⁴ Similarly, since Italy has joined the Belt and Road Initiative, agreements have been

signed between Italian state media and Chinese media groups, which have led to concerns that the Italian media is now giving a less critical view of China (although despite such efforts public opinion has not moved to have a more positive impression of China).⁴⁵

There are two implications from this discussion. First, soft power efforts in themselves cannot compensate for bad foreign policy moves, and this applies to both democracies and authoritarian governments, though certainly with less impact for the former. Second, the international opinion of China is based in part of Beijing's actions, and if that country were to mellow its approach, it may well see a rise in its soft power. Suggesting, therefore, that Chinese soft power has severe limitations is not a useful way of looking at the influence that China has in the international system. Instead, one should remember that perhaps three to four dozen of the 190-odd members of the UN fall within the definition of being a liberal democracy, and for the rest, the liberal-democratic concerns about China fall on audiences that are less receptive.

A U.S. Response

As this article demonstrates, China, despite lacking the advantages of an open society, is using its considerable economic resources and a coherent strategy to gain greater global influence and paint a more positive picture of itself around the world. Thus, despite the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, the mass imprisonment of the Uighurs, and the general bellicosity in Asia, China continues to grow its global influence. This influence can only increase as China's international reach expands through trade arrangements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which has brought together 2.2 billion people in a free-trade arrangement; the Belt and Road Initiative that will bring investment to countries where others are unwilling to invest (although the reported advantages of the



Group Photograph of Leaders at Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit in Manila, Philippines
November 14, 2017
By SHIVRAJ

Belt and Road Initiative to recipient nations have been exaggerated); and the possible signing of a Comprehensive Arrangement on Investment that allows the European Union and China to invest in each other. These deals can only build up China's economic might and with that facilitate its attempts at shaping the narrative and boosting its international image. In light of these facts, what should the United States be doing to counter China? The answer lies in both immediate and long-term steps to maintain the strength of the American brand.

First, there has to be a concerted plan from the United States to provide global leadership to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan would include emergency funds for subsidizing effective vaccines to the rest of the world. In the medium to long term, it also requires the United States to propose the creation of an international health order that works to create health security around the world. America has the resources and the expertise not only to develop such a plan but to implement it. The first Bush administration's efforts to control HIV/AIDS is a case in point and may well be the most significant long-term achievement of that administration.

Second, the U.S. Government should be proactively working to make the American soft power

brand increasingly attractive to the rest of the world. One way is to devote governmental resources to make American education more accessible to the rest of the world. Considerable progress has been made in this context with the development of Massive Open Online Courses, where the best American universities have done a sterling job of offering technology, humanities, and social science courses around the world through the internet. The American government, at very little cost, can help these courses become part of college curriculums around the world—especially in countries with poor education systems.

Also, the United States needs to stop penny-pinching on public broadcasting and use public funds to spread the American brand and values globally. While China spends \$10 billion on its international broadcasting, the United States begrudges its agencies a real budget and instead complains about allocating \$637 million—less than one-tenth of what the Chinese spend—on such efforts. A robust broadcasting budget, working in tandem with American private news and entertainment channels, would go a long way to counter the Chinese and Russian narratives and have a real impact in the Middle East, where the United States

has suffered from a negative image for decades.

Third, America's greatest soft power advantage is its open society, and this means educational access and the continued ability to attract the best minds from around the world. Immigration policies that support such efforts would not only boost the country's technological edge but also continue to make the United States attractive to the rest of the world. The Chinese have a well-thought-out strategy backed by money, but they still face constraints because of their societal and political structures. The United States, on the other hand, must take bold and innovative steps to maintain its global brand name and soft power advantage. **PRISM**

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