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China's Tryst with Soft Power Diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Abstract: China is attempting to harness the soft power of its country by adopting various foreign policies especially since the Hu Jintao period and later on under the incumbent President Xi Jinping. Therefore, an attempt has been made in the research paper to study the various policies adopted by China under the Presidentship of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping and their impact on the world community. The research paper has also explored the multiple dimensions of foreign policy initiatives in light of the soft power of China in a detailed manner. The alleged criticism of the West against China by dubbing its policies under the categorisation of "Sharp Power" has also been delved deeper for the further discussion. The controversial decisions taken by the United States under the Donald Trump administration and its impact on China's global soft power image has also been explored. Moreover, all the obstacles which are hindering the soft power prospects of China have been evaluated in a detailed manner. The study would help in understanding the intricacies of Chinese soft power policies and its repercussions on the world community.
Keywords: China, Foreign Policy, Leadership, Sharp Power, Soft Power.

1 Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the world is witnessing an unprecedented interconnectedness due to the ever-increasing pace of globalisation. States are increasingly getting interconnected complexly that waves of an event in one country can be felt in the other countries as happened during the Arab Spring due to the impact of social media. The emergence of non-state actors and their active involvement in influencing the decision-making ability of states has led to the formation of the complex web. It poses daunting challenges to the states to adapt themselves according to the new scenario. In such a scenario, the foreign policy of the state plays a very crucial role to sustain as well as thrive itself in the increasingly competitive world. The foreign policy of the state can adopt various means to achieve its interests. One of the means is to increase the power of the state. In the discipline of International Relations, broadly power can be categorised into two forms- the hard power (militaristic and coercive approach) and the soft power (cultural and non-coercive approach). The term "soft power" was coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead* where he argued that hard power is no more capable of wielding influence comprehensively as it lacks some elements through which it can achieve the desired outcomes from the other side without coercion. He further states that "soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (27). Soft power provides an alternative path to states to achieve their national interest by using their reputation in the international arena. In the world where the importance of non-state actors has already been recognised, the soft power of a state can help to increase the legitimacy of its foreign policy which can eventually be translated to achieve the tangible outcomes.

Just like any other state, China has also strived to sustain as well as thrive in the international arena. Interestingly, China has achieved success up to a large extent when it comes to achieving the status of the major global player in world politics. It has used various ways to attain significant stature at the international level. In the twenty-first century, China has assigned itself a new role to attain a significant global player status and provide an alternative global order in contrast to the western global

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order which is widely prevalent in the present times.

The research paper would attempt to address following research questions:

- What are the policies adopted by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping for boosting China's soft power?
- What is the new discourse of China's "Sharp Power" and its impact on China's image globally?
- What are the institutional and structural obstacles to China in leveraging its soft power?
- Up to what extent China has succeeded in leveraging its Soft Power?

2 China's Foreign Policy and Soft Power

According to the *Portland Soft Power 30 Report*, China is continuously progressing in terms of soft power except for a small decline in 2018. China secured 30th position in 2015 and marched upwards in 2016 holding 28th rank and then reached the 25th position in the year 2017. However, it has seen a slight decline with 27th position in 2018 (31). Similarly, *Emerging Soft Power Index Report 2017* finds a strong correlation between GDP per capita and soft power. China scores remarkable 37.0 with 8,113.26 USD GDP per Capita. China is using its growth rate efficiently to translate into the soft power. The report states that:

> Countries with higher levels of GDP per capita, for instance, are more likely to attract immigration, export media products, and have students studying English and graduating from secondary schools. Even the number of Olympic medals earned tracks closely with GDP per capita, perhaps because governments and citizens, having met basic material needs, have more flexibility to develop athletic talent (3).

According to the World Bank data, 55.664 million foreigners visited China (excluding Hong Kong and Macao) in 2010 and the figure increased with 59.270 million inbound foreigners in 2016 for tourism purposes (41). It shows the increasing attractiveness of China. The number of inbound students to China for education or research is increasing every year. According to the Institute of International Education, 328330 in 2013; 356499 in 2014; 377054 in 2015; 397635 in 2016 and 442773 international students came to China in 2017 (15). The increasing strength of inbound students entering China shows the increasing charm of the country.

These reports indicate the rise of soft power of China through various means. However, there is a need to explore the changing contours of soft power under the previous President Hu Jintao and incumbent President Xi Jinping to understand the similarities and differences amongst the policies of both the presidents to project the soft power image of China which has been discussed below.

2.1 China under Hu Jintao

The White Paper published in 2005 titled "China's Peaceful Development Road" maintained that China wants to avoid unnecessary confrontations with other countries and believes in the promotion of harmonious world order (5). After that, the soft power has been increasingly focused upon in the Chinese strategy to leverage multiple aspects associated with it. China recognised the vital importance of soft power in enhancing the national strength of the state which was pretty evident in the Hu Jintao's report declared at the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in October 2007. The report mentions that there is a need to "stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests" (9). It marked a shift in strategy which was being used for the past several decades. China understood that achieving the major power status with an alternative voice will require global legitimacy. Soft power is one of the useful instruments to achieve global legitimacy in a shorter period with durable features. Therefore, many initiatives were taken on behalf of the government to enhance the soft power of the state through various means.

The then President Hu Jintao expressed his views on the soft power at the Eighteenth CPC National Congress in 2012 to direct the future of country through stimulation of socialist values for furthering of soft power:

> "We should promote prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony, uphold freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law and advocate patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship, so as to cultivate and observe core socialist values" (7).

China's quest for soft power is being fulfilled by the various type of diplomacy. "The people-to-people diplomacy is carried out mainly by four organizations: trade unions, Youth League, Women's Federation, and the Chinese People to Defend

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World Peace Commission" (48). Confucius Institutes can be categorised into the category of semi-official diplomacy or public diplomacy of China (48). David Shambaugh states that the Confucius Institutes have been established to "promote and popularize Chinese language and culture by offering Chinese language and culture classes, mounting exhibitions, staging theater and concerts and so on—all intended to promote China's cultural image and soft power" (32). However, despite these efforts, China did not succeed in Africa where 48 institutes have been already established to take over the place of the United States which still possesses remarkable outreach and positive image comparatively (31).

Under the Presidentship of Hu Jintao, the overall atmosphere for the cultural stimulation was established in China which subsequently led to the emergence and flourishing of the discourse of Chinese soft power throughout the world.

2.2 Chinese Soft Power under President Xi Jinping

Chinese incumbent President Xi Jinping mentioned the name of Lao Tzu, an ancient Chinese philosopher in his speech at Berlin in 2014 by quoting his words that "a big country should be like the lower reaches of a river." He further elaborated it by saying that "a big country should be as inclusive as the lower reaches of a river that admit numerous tributaries. China is eager to strengthen dialogue and exchange of views with the rest of the world and listen to the voices of other countries with an open and inclusive mind." Moreover, he hoped that "the world will view China in an objective, historical and multi-dimensional light, and see the true and full picture of a dynamic China" (25). President Xi stressed the need to increase the soft power of China by providing the "good Chinese narrative" (42). It depicts China's attempt to present itself favourably and dispel the allegations charged by the West. China is trying to harness its rich history by providing accounts of its cultural ethics. It also shows that China is ready to take on the more significant responsibilities which had been the domain of the United States and western countries till now. It is an indirect reference to the United States that its efforts are not benign and inclusive as many smaller countries could not gain enough prosperity with its unilateral approach.

The Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the nineteenth Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress proposed a new path with the responsible leadership of China:

> "China offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind" (17).

The cited quotation subtly indicates that West-led institutions are infringing on the independence of the states in the name of the development. Structural Adjustment Programmes by the Bretton Woods institutions can be cited as one example of it. President Xi is trying to show the alternate path with Chinese characteristics. Moreover, this statement indicates that President Xi is thinking to march on from the domestic concerns to take on the global issues which need to be tackled for raising the stature of China at international forums.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the World Economic Forum in January 2017 at Davos was widely acknowledged. His views on economic globalisation in a positive manner provided an alternative way to deal with the negative impacts of it rather than blaming the phenomenon itself. He suggested that "we should adapt to and guide economic globalisation, cushion its negative impact, and deliver its benefits to all countries and all nations". He also argued that all the states need to "remain committed to developing global free trade and investment, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation through opening-up and say no to protectionism" (43). Unlike President Trump, President Xi Jinping's approach towards the global issues was acknowledged as well as appreciated by the international community. In addition to this, China's poverty alleviation program is also widely being appreciated as it has "lifted over 700 million people out of poverty" and can be considered as a landmark victory against the poverty (43). It shows the immense potential prospects for China's soft power strategy which can be emulated in many developing countries which are facing the major brunt of poverty. It raises the soft power prospects of China if it shares the strategy and mechanisms for poverty alleviation programmes with developing countries. It provides the platform for China to not only emerge as a leader of the third world countries but also become a major player in global decision making by providing an alternative and just global order.

However, many policies adopted under the Presidentship of Xi Jinping indicate that he is focusing more on building up of the Comprehensive National Power (CNP), unlike former President Hu Jintao who emphasized more on soft power and peaceful development. According to Hu and Men, CNP includes hard factors as well as soft factors which is a key to China's grand strategy for the twenty-first century. They suggest that there is a need to give importance to "international institutions, international prestige and cultural influence" to strengthen the CNP of China (14). President Xi seems to be more assertive in his approach to the foreign policy by seeking its "rightful" place in the international order.

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3 Assessment of Soft Power Charm of China

Soft power of China is increasingly being recognized in the world sphere through traditional medicines, classic literary works, calligraphy and porcelain to the modern symbols like nuclear power stations and high-speed trains. Alipay (Chinese third-party online platform established in 2004 by Jack Ma) is being used to pay for services and commodities in several markets around the world including Britain, the Republic of Korea and the United States (22). These aspects show the progressive aspect of China and are of immense significance as they boost the soft power of the country at the international level. China's outreach to the world is increasing with attractive cultural symbols of progress. Zheng and Zhang argue that "people have increasingly acknowledged the Chinese model due to its capability and effectiveness in coping with crises such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the latest global financial crisis. Some developing countries may find that some aspects of China's experience of development, such as political stability, economic development and the improvement of people's livelihoods, worth learning" (49).

Moreover, China has taken many steps which provides it the global recognition. China's diplomatic initiatives to improve relations with ASEAN member states; establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 and the crucial role played in the six-party talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear issues have certainly shown the signs of a stronger China (35). On similar lines, Clayton Dube argues that "China's role in providing peacekeepers for the United Nations, in providing anti-piracy security services off the coast of Africa, in developing the capacity for providing disaster relief" has contributed in boosting its soft power. He further states that China's active participation in old international organisations and its willingness to create new IOs can be considered as an effective way of accumulation of soft power (23).

For providing an alternative model in contrast to the western model, China has taken many initiatives which raises its soft power prospects. Martin Davidson asserts that China is attempting to challenge the core western concept of universal human rights and values by replacing it with socialist values including equality, economic development and harmony (30). Similarly, Lee Ka Kit opines that old Chinese principles like "duties over rights, groups over individuals, and harmony over conflict are more spiritually relevant today than Western values" and therefore these elements need to be promoted. He further elaborates that "green credentials, economic success and traditional values" are contributing to the national strength of the country and can be helpful to enhance the soft power (46).

Moreover, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which serves as a major multilateral institution. It is helping China to make progress in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (3). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a "combination of roads, strategies, economics and soft power" which has become "an umbrella for all Chinese investments outside the country and the perfect vehicle to propagate the China's soft power strategy" (4). BRI of China can gain the interest as well as the trust of other states by showcasing its image of a generous and responsible state (2). Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be considered as "a vehicle for soft power as it will promote economic integration between Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe" (12). China's BRI and its progress towards adopting multilateralism are apt examples of effective usage of soft power to align other states to fulfil the ambition of a rising power (3). Dave argues that China is attempting to promote the "image of Beijing as a reliable and pragmatic economic alternative to the West and Russia" to leverage its soft power at the global arena (38). Moreover, China is widely being appreciated for its scientific and technological advancement. Majority of people in Africa and Latin America have positive perception towards science and technology of China than its movies or music (29).

In the *Foreign Policy* Magazine, Jerden and others provide insightful arguments about China's stature as quasi-superpower:

> "In areas such as manufacturing, international trade, foreign currency reserve, energy consumption and pollutant emission, China is already a quasi-superpower. Much of this comes from globalisation. Due to China's low wages and willingness to suffer pollution over the past three decades, it has successfully attracted a large volume of foreign investment and technology transfers, and has built itself into a world-class economic engine" (16).

These above-mentioned factors indicate that the China is being appreciated in various parts of the world because of these advancements in various fields and its willingness to share its expertise which ultimately raises the prospects of soft power in the coming years.

4 Emerging Discourse on China's "Sharp Power"

China's approach is being termed as "sharp power" in some academic circles. This term has been coined by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which is a Washington based private, non-profit foundation. NED report titled *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* argues that Chinese approach "stems from an ideological model that privileges state

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power over individual liberty and is fundamentally hostile to free expression, open debate, and independent thought" (6). The sharp power attempts to projects such values outwards like "monopoly on power, top-down control, censorship, and coerced or purchased loyalty" which are values widely found in authoritarian systems (6). "Sharp power stops well short of the hard power, wielded through military force or economic muscle; but it is distinct from the soft attraction of culture and values, and more malign. It works by manipulation and pressure. It has three striking characteristics- it is pervasive, it breeds self-censorship and it is hard to nail down proof that it is the work of the Chinese state" (36). One of the aims of China's sharp power is "to prevent foreign-based Chinese from undermining the party at home. Its other aim seems to make the world more congenial to its interests" (36). Kalathil argues that the "sharp power" of China can be witnessed by the increasing number of Confucius institutes which have been in controversy over the lack of mechanism over transparency and not abiding by the key principles of academic independence (18). It is a matter of further research and debate regarding the West led criticism against China which would become clear with passage of time.

5 Rising of National Security State

However, some of China's foreign policy decisions demand critical scrutiny for inherent lack of clarity in the proposal and implementation. In December 2015, China enacted its first counter-terrorism law allowing the armed forces to engage in counter-terrorism operations abroad (44) and in July 2017, Chinese People's Liberation Army has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti to "assist China's contribution to peace and stability both in Africa and worldwide" (45). "China has built military infrastructure on disputed artificial islands in the South China Sea, sent naval vessels on exercises with Russia as far afield as the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea" (36). Shi argues that "China's accelerating pace of building up its military might, emerging competition with the US, continuous Beijing- Tokyo confrontation and a tough stance on the South China Sea and East China Sea issues" have increased the complexities of the scenario as well as decreased the prospects of Beijing's soft power (47). China's activities in the South China Sea and interference in the trade with other states in political disputes are being criticised at international forums. These issues are hindering the positive development of China's soft power (3). These above stances under the tenure of President Xi provide the indication towards the rising of the national security state which is clearly against the "peaceful development" doctrine initiated under the previous President Hu Jintao. Holslag argues that growing complexities in territorial disputes like the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan and border issue with India makes it harder to believe in China's idea of peaceful growth and development (10). These events show an attempt towards the militarisation of its foreign policy which can reduce the potential prospects of its soft power shortly. China needs to take caution over the fact that US military operations abroad led to the decline of its soft power and therefore similar decisions taken by Beijing to enter into the counterterrorist operations abroad needs to be pondered carefully as it raises more question than it answers and raises several doubts over the real intentions.

On the contrary, President Xi claims that misinformation is being spread against China. As China is marching towards a path of becoming a strong stakeholder in the world economy, it is facing lots of criticisms from various countries. In this regard, President Xi Jinping finds the western discourse on China as a biased one which depicts it incorrectly. Therefore, he proposed that initiatives would be taken to present China in an unbiased manner and cultural strength of China would be showcased as mentioned below:

> "We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power" (17).

6 Is Time Ripe for the Emergence of China?

President Trump's decisions like withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and pulling America out of the Paris Climate Accord and recognising the Jerusalem city as the capital of Israel in December 2017 has not received a good response from the international community. To counter the US decision, the United Nations General Assembly recorded 128 votes in favour of the UN resolution "Status of Jerusalem" which declared that any changes in the position of Jerusalem would be considered as "null and void" and cited the reason that such changes might ignite a religious war across the Middle East region (13). Just after the major defeat in the UN voting on Jerusalem issue, Nikki Haley (the then United States Ambassador to the United Nations) announced the "$285 million cut to the UN's annual budget for 2018-19" by saying that "we will no longer let the generosity of the American people be taken advantage of or remain unchecked" (39). Such decisions of the United States clearly lack approval from global community on several grounds which opens ground for the erosion of its soft power image. On the other hand, China is playing a major role to fulfil the demands of many sectors like "renewable energy, fintech, artificial intelligence, and electric cars" and financial aid has been announced for the infrastructure purposes in the Middle East (21). China is moving ahead from building roads, railways and ports to the

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investment in Africa's aviation and transportation industries. For education and technology transfer, "more than 20 Chinese-run agriculture training centers" and "over 40 Chinese language schools, Confucius centers" have already been established to leverage the soft power of China in African continent (19). President Xi said in the Foreign Policy meeting of 2014 that China is adopting "sincerity, real results, affinity and good faith" with regard to Africa (42). These steps by China can be considered as productive due to its tangible outcome by reaching to the common masses which would eventually turn the wave in the favour of China.

7 Obstacles to Soft Power

"Rising nationalism, assertiveness vis-à-vis territorial disputes, crackdowns on nongovernmental organizations, censorship of domestic and international media, limits to the entry of foreign deals, and political repression constrain China's soft power" (1). Similarly, author of the book "Charm Offensive", Joshua Kurlantzick opines that Beijing has not succeeded in boosting its soft power. He argues that China's rising hard power is constraining its soft power which is evident as states like Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore are becoming increasingly fearful due to Chinese claim regarding disputed waters (26). Similarly, Shambaugh is of the view that China does not possess the moral standing because of its human-rights record and political system which can only inspire other autocrats. It needs to develop those values which can increase its appeal universally (33). Moreover, China's victim mentality seems to be the "starting point of President Xi Jinping's dream that imagines a glorious revival of the country's ancient place of pre-eminence" (5). Such attempts by China to gain the overall power to claim the "rightful" place in the world sphere are also proving to be amongst the inhibiting factors to leverage the soft power.

A norm goes through a three-stage lifecycle to achieve its maturity. It starts with *norm emergence* (first stage) to reach the second stage which is *norm acceptance* to the final stage termed as *norm internalisation* (37). This process can be used to assess the internal perception of the Chinese population towards the government's decision on different matters. Pew Research Center report finds that "a majority of Chinese (56%) want Beijing to focus on China's problems. Just 22% voice the view that their government should help other nations". Official corruption, Inequality, consumer and environmental safety have been considered as major internal problems which need to be dealt (40). It shows that most of the Chinese population wants the Chinese government to first focus on domestic issues and after then it can march on to resolve issues regarding the other states. It is evident that in this sense, norm (whether the state should step outward) has just crossed the first stage and would take some time to cross the second stage and thereby to reach the third stage. On similar lines, Yinhong argues that China first needs to develop its strength and capability by focusing on deepening of reforms, acceleration of structural adjustments and sustaining of economic growth before marching outwards (47).

China needs to address these issues if it wants to gain legitimacy for its actions. There are various reports on the suppression of ideas in Confucian Institutes which needs to be addressed as this can create a popular backlash against China and its diaspora in a longer term. Similarly, Davidson argues that China's unwelcoming attitude towards the soft power of others is one of the main reasons which reveal the drawback of Chinese policies to create a significant impact at par with its spending (30). However, China has embarked on the path of marching abroad to tackle the challenges posed to the world. It is yet to be seen how much efforts it put on to bring prosperity to the world.

8 Conclusions

China seems to have made a tryst with soft power in the twenty-first century. Its constant progress and ascendance in the global reports on soft power indicate the same. Moreover, there is a remarkable change in the foreign policy approach of the incumbent president Xi Jinping than former president Hu Jintao in terms of the foreign policy approach through the means of leveraging soft power. However, China needs to provide the space to non-state actors in propagating the soft power image of the country. The Chinese government is just trying hard by investing much money to boost its image in the international arena. As Joseph Nye has also suggested that "if China is to boost its soft power, its control over culture, media and public opinion should be relinquished". He has further argued that "the soft power of a country should mainly be from the civil society, rather than from the government. The fact that the Chinese government is not willing to develop the civil society has limited the development of China's soft power" (48). As China is progressing and challenging the western discourse in international platforms under the Presidentship of Xi Jinping, it would have to face challenges like the newly emerged debate of "sharp power" which is being labelled against it by the west to malign its international image. Therefore, Beijing needs to be more cautious in its initiatives launched abroad and need to bring the more substantial amount of transparency so that the international community can increase its trust on Chinese policies which can eventually be transformed to leverage its soft power constructively.

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