

SRTC Report: China's Soft Power Projection Across the Oceans

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Speaker: Ms. Antara Ghosal Singh, Research Associate, NMF

Chair: Prof. Madhu Bhalla, Former Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, Delhi University

External Discussant: Cdr. MH Rajesh, Research Fellow, USI

Internal Discussant: Ms. Shereen Sherif, Research Associate, NMF

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The National Maritime Foundation (NMF) hosted a Scholar Round Table Conference (SRTC) on 'China's Soft Power Projection Across the Oceans' on 18 November 2015. The talk was led by Ms. Antara Ghosal Singh. The event was attended by representatives from the Indian Navy, the Coast Guard and the strategic community.

The Chair began with laying the groundwork for the discussions. She said that though a lot is being talked about China's 'soft power', but the fundamental question that one needs to ask is, does 'soft power' matter? Does it matter in inter-state relations? She observed an interchangeability between 'hard power' and 'soft power'. If one looks at the history of 'soft power'- specially its use by the Americans- it can be seen that the rise of states' 'soft power' comes in a wake of a global crisis. Therefore, it can be said that we might be looking at another 'world changing' crisis that is leading to another country resorting to soft power. In the post Cold War period, when pluralities are so prevalent, would the international community be willing to accept the dominance of a rising great power, which uses hard and 'soft power' interchangeably? Lastly, is Chinese 'soft power' capable of winning hearts and minds?

Against this backdrop, the speaker began with the presentation by stating that any reference to China's 'soft power' leads one to think of the delivery of such power to the developing world including Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia and other countries. But in recent times, this trend is undergoing a change as China's 'soft power' now goes beyond the Afro-Asian developing world to the developed North Atlantic littorals.

China's view of 'soft power' differs from Joseph Nye's definition of 'soft power'. Though the Chinese approach to 'soft power' did improve its image in the first decade of the new millennium. However, since the beginning of the second decade, China's 'charm offensive' image has been fading. This is largely due to its increasing assertiveness in maritime territorial disputes, its high handed policies at home and abroad, and its rising nationalism.

The first prominent manifestation of China's soft power was seen in the Southeast Asian region during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. It has also made a successful foray in the Central Asian Region (CAR) through the initiation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China's charm offensive also spread across the Indian Ocean Region in South Asia, West Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well. Its soft power tactic was most successful in Africa.

The recent One Road One Belt (OBOR) initiative is the new manifestation of China's soft power projection. It has made the Afro-Asian countries a part of this initiative. The aim of the OBOR project is not only infrastructure development in developing countries, but also to tap the developed markets of continental Europe, and develop greater ties with the countries across the Atlantic.

Though traditionally, Europe-China relations were not so cordial, this is now changing. China's investment in Europe has increased substantially from January to May 2015. The Western world and China are working together and supporting Chinese initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the OBOR. The scholarly world is pondering over the question as to what is leading the Western bloc to tilt towards China. Ostensibly, the Western countries are looking to benefit from the Chinese investments to offset the slowing down of the European economy. Their recovery from the 2008 financial crisis has been sluggish. The migrant crisis has further

impacted their economy. Paradoxically China's central role in global transport and logistics is occurring at the cost of Europe's own traditional predominance in the western world. Nonetheless, the European powers are willing to be associated with China's OBOR Initiative.

US-China relations have always remained the bedrock of China's foreign policy. "China's stated aim is to build a cooperative relation with the US, where there will be no conflict, no competition, only win-win cooperation." This can be seen in China's attempt in trying to revive the US proposed G2 concept, which China initially rejected.

The speaker also addressed the questions: How can the growing US-China alliance impact India? On the one hand, we see China and India facing differences in international fora such as during the 2013 Bali Summit and on the other hand, the US-China relation is strengthening as was noticed during the signing of the 2014 Climate deal between the two. How is India dealing with this? India is balancing its relations with the two. On the one hand, it has linked its 'Act East' policy with the 'US' Rebalance' policy, on the other it is closely collaborating with China in both BRICS and AIIB.

The external discussant appreciated the paper. He first suggested that the paper should focus more on the maritime domain. He pointed out that China did employ 'soft power' in its maritime domain in history. Additionally, he made a few observations, like the general aim of 'soft power' is winning the hearts of countries. Though some actions of the US may be disliked by many, but still when it comes to 'soft power' many turn to the US as it has a more liberal views and a stable political set up. Undoubtedly, many countries could benefit from China's MSR initiative. So it can be seen that money is buying the hearts' of countries. But there are roadblocks to China's soft power in the present day as well, like its actions in the South China Sea.

The internal discussant highlighted if it is China's endeavour to pacify its 'threat image' in the Indo-Pacific region, then China should consider employing its 'charm offensive' in this region, rather than the developed world.

The paper was appreciated and invited a lively discussion. It also raised some thought provoking questions. The Executive Director stated that although China seeks the status of a global power and reorder the world through its revisionist approach, its

‘world-view’ – in terms of what kind of a world it seeks to achieve – is not very clear to the international community. This contrasts with the well known distinct ideologies of the current and past global powers like the US and even the erstwhile Soviet Union. China is therefore, unlikely to succeed in this crucial test of its soft power.

The Director pointed out that soft power is not new to China and has typical Chinese characteristics. He observed that in general, although countries are using soft and hard power in tandem, they are using soft power in a more pronounced manner. India should draw lessons from China as to how it uses soft power to further its national objectives.

In her concluding remarks, the chairperson appreciated the paper and pointed out that it brings out clearly how we can measure China’s ‘soft power’ in terms of impacting inter-state relationships. China’s relationship with Europe is changing. Europe’s economic imperatives and China’s effective use of ‘soft power’ could fundamentally alter the Trans-Atlantic relationship.

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