

Book Review

Carola McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its Implications for the United States. Competition and cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, 136 p.

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The author outlines a renowned concept of “soft power” coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the late 1980's as the ability of "getting others to want the outcomes that you want"¹, but in-depth there is much more to it. And rightly, Nye continued to further explain this concept which today without which many of us would not be able to imagine the entire system of international relations.

In 2011, Hu Jintao was stepping off from China's helm giving the opportunity to a new generation to state itself; a generation represented by Xi Jinping. However, I believe that this new wave of Chinese leaders took automatically in an unconscious manner the idea that "imagine matters"², deciding therefore to invest a good portion of its energies towards enhancing China's soft power strategies. "And in 2014, Xi announced, “We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world.” Under Xi, China has bombarded the world with a welter of new initiatives: “the Chinese dream,” “the Asia-Pacific dream,” “the Silk Road Economic Belt,” “the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road,” “a new type of major-country relations,” and many others.”³

Although the examined issue has been published long before the observations mentioned above, this denoted the fact that China had been totally aware of its direction. Recognizing it ultimately is simply added value to the entire architecture of the Chinese soft-power initiatives.

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¹ J.S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, p. 5.

² D. Shambaugh, 'China's Soft-Power Push. The Search for Respect', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 4, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push>, (accessed 7 June 2016).

³ *Ibid.*

The report aims to analyze a set of activities undertaken by China in developing regions around the world in terms of soft-power. Speaking about the dimension of the geopolitical factors, for instance, within this Chinese setting⁴, or taking "a deeper look at what China is doing in these regions and what China's soft-power activities mean for the United States"⁵ are concrete projections of what this report intends to bring into light. It is a gateway towards examining "the future of U.S. - China relations in 2009 and beyond."⁶

Since Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms, China witnessed a shift from a "war and revolution period under the rule of Mao Zedong to an era of peace and development under more recent leadership"⁷ which makes it today, I would say, one of the most powerful nations in the world. This being said differently, the examined issue is of current interest because we cannot ignore China's growth and progress that has transformed it into a key player in vast fields, assuming commitments for prosperity and stability. All of these facts rise questions in the United States whether Chinese "projection represents a healthy competition or a strategic threat."⁸

The perspective and methodology approached by the authors evaluates the performance of China's soft-power instruments giving the reader a concrete vision upon the various statements which support the assumptions. It also debates the characteristics of Chinese soft-power around the globe, comparing it to the equivalent specific American mechanisms.

China's soft-power tools are entitled to be called "omnidirectional" and, therefore, these can be classified into at least five different groups⁹. This relevant framework anticipates a certain dispersion of power, interests and different governmental actions of investments, involvement in international and regional entities polished by diplomacy and political discourse yet sprinkled with lobby and advocacy.

⁴ D. E. Zheng, 'China's use of Soft-Power in the developing world. Strategic intentions and implications for the United States', in C. McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its implications for the United States. Competition and Cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. v.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

The arguments are built by dividing the Chinese projections in different parts of the developing world, each with its very own characteristics. For instance, Southeast Asia where the Chinese concern is focused on establishing a "peaceful, stable periphery"¹⁰. Nevertheless, the United States got distracted in this region, lost focus, neglecting it.¹¹ Considering this, for me observing the evolution of these regards throughout the report is particularly interesting. What puzzles me is not the fact that the United States is seeking revival in Southeast Asia, but the strategy addressed for achieving this goal. I believe American efforts should be dynamic considering, for instance, ASEAN or the tensions created around South China Sea because it includes inevitably other regional state actors. Will the traditional bilateral relations established with countries such as South Korea or Japan be affected by the very own interests of the United States? To what extent the United States takes into account "regional sensibilities"¹²? Is this a test of patience and skills for the Americans? This brief set of questions had been striking me while reading the report and I am pleased to conclude that the assumptions advanced are very detail oriented and pertinent.

Yet another example of the Chinese-American analogy approached in the report is represented by Africa. The further parallel may be summed up inter alia by a series of opinion polls on the influence felt, for instance. I observe here the fact that in Mali's case, the Chinese felt influence upon the local population is 83% in comparison to 66% of the American side. In a contrasting comparison, in Kenya, people tend to appreciate more "Americanisms" than the Chinese ones.

Same polls were conducted in Latin America - another region which represents a gateway to raw materials and consumer markets for both sides, just as Africa does - and I do believe these last two developing regions mentioned represent the real "battlefield" of the two sided powers. They represent the confluence of the two dimensions taken into consideration by the authors. Likewise, we can put into balance the fact that Taiwan's sovereignty finds more support in Latin America than in other parts of the world.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. v.

¹¹ D.J. Mitchell and B. Harding, 'China and Southeast Asia', in C. McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its implications for the United States. Competition and Cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, p. 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Another interesting example is the Middle East. Both interests are driven by "energy needs" due to the fact that although "China was self-sufficient in oil"¹³ this aspect drifted towards the end of the last century. Hence, the author of this section evaluates and compares the trade volume outlining the discussions not only about the decline of the American prestige in the region, but moreover the increasing respect for China. It also debates the military Chinese engagements - and this is another equation which gives me food for thought: How much can China assure stability in the region? How strong is the Chinese influence in the Middle East? Does it have the strength to banish these American appease and to curb the renowned American exceptionalism?

We cannot ignore the "ideological affinities"¹⁴ between China and the Russian Federation. Meanwhile divisions between the West (US-EU tandem) and Russia represent simply an opportunity for Sino-Russian rapprochement. But the question arises: "To what extend the partnership deepends could be contingent to a considerable extent on the actions of the United States"¹⁵ and the European Union?

From my point of view, the purpose of this report is conceiving a set of recommendations which take into account multilateral approaches advocating that actors such as the civil society, government, international organizations are all important in these circumstances. Simultaneously, it goes on by analyzing and questioning aspects such as climate change. Such "issues have begun to feature more prominently on China's agenda"¹⁶ propelling debates related to queries linked to China's potential of becoming a reliable international player. From this conjecture questions as "Why China cares?" or "What is China doing?" does nothing but anticipating China's

¹³ J. B. Alterman, 'China's Soft Power in the Middle East', in C. McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its implications for the United States. Competition and Cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, p. 63.

¹⁴ A. C. Kuchins, 'Releveraging U.S. power amid Sino-Russian rapprochement', in C. McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its implications for the United States. Competition and Cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁶ J. Smith and J. Kaplan, 'The faulty narrative. Fact, fiction, and China's efforts to combat climate change', in C. McGiffert (ed.), *Chinese Soft Power and its implications for the United States. Competition and Cooperation in the developing world*, Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009, p. 102.

further steps which may demonstrate that China has never been more serious. And again, indeed answers are to be found throughout the report.

In conclusion, "China's efforts have had some impact."¹⁷ Its non-confrontational projection - driven by a certain thirst for natural resources, export markets and political influence - determined China to step up engagements in regions of the developing world. And one could not claim that the effects have been stalled. Yet ascertainment upon the sources and reasons for China's soft-power remains to be seen, especially when we take into account Beijing's view as using this mechanisms largely as defensive and reactive tools.

The overall assessment of the work drives me to affirm that I agree with most of the stated hypothesis and arguments presented in the report. Although such analyzed dynamics are continuously changing, my assumption is that this innovative research has given us a starting platform for initiating debates and try to unlock the premises of evaluating the aftermath of such events using relevant indicators by means of economic, political, sociological and cultural instruments.

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¹⁷ J. S. Nye, 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power', in *Project Syndicate*, 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-07?barrier=true>, (accessed 7 June 2016).

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