A Hard Case for Soft Power:

China’s Rise and Security in East Asia

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Soft power has become a ubiquitous term in foreign policy circles in recent years. Unfortunately, it is generally misused and misunderstood, undermining its potential contribution to help explain the world around us and, more often than not, confusing rather than clarifying complex issues of global politics.1 Perhaps nowhere have we seen the deployment of soft power more frequently than in discussions and analyses on the rise of China.2 According to the prevailing narrative, China has purposefully attempted to accumulate and utilize soft power to avoid many of the historical problems associated with being a rising regional power.3 Using its powers of attraction, it has been able to assuage fears of its expanding capabilities and reassure its neighbors. This has in turn allowed China to focus on its internal development based upon steady economic growth and increasing integration into global markets on its own terms, without concerns for a backlash from potential adversaries.4 Ultimately, some warn, China’s soft power could be a threat to U.S. leadership and its influence in the world.5

While this soft power narrative seems entirely plausible, reinforcing many perceptions of Beijing’s leadership as farsighted, shrewd, and resourceful, it is, in fact, flawed. First, and in large part because it is so poorly understood, the concept of soft power is misapplied and of limited relevance to any discussion of China. While it may be true that Beijing has spent much of the last decade ingratiating itself to its neighbors in Asia and building linkages to states in other regions, like Africa and Latin America, this is reflective of a prudent diplomatic strategy to purposefully downplay the expansion of material power that China has achieved in a relatively short period of time. It has little to do with “soft power,” which is an inherently relational concept that is predicated on an underlying commonality of interests, norms, and accepted rules of behavior between and amongst actors (for our purposes, states). To clarify this condition, soft power would seemingly be most appropriate to discuss in relations to the European Union or perhaps the larger “West” though this may be less appropriate than typically assumed. It is true that Chinese scholars and policymakers have focused on soft power, and the concept has received a great deal of attention from Chinese elites, and this intellectual discussion may in turn influence the diplomatic path Chinese leaders have embraced, but it does not mean that China has acquired or is able to utilize soft power if we apply a rigorous understanding of the concept. Moreover, soft power is unlikely to be any more relevant in the future than it is today when discussing the issues related to the rise of China and the development of Asia. There are simply too many obstacles that stand in the way of China obtaining any meaningful soft power even if it continues to embrace a “peaceful rise” strategy that may seek to emphasize what Chinese see as their soft power “resources.”

1 Kim Ghattas, "Clinton Focuses on Soft Power,” BBC News Online, October 18, 2009.
5 Erich Foliath, "China’s Soft Power Is a Threat to the West," ABC News Online, July 29, 2010.
This paper examines the concept of soft power and its misapplication to the rise of China. The paper is structured as follows. The first section will briefly provide a core definition of soft power, derived primarily from the work of Joseph Nye, and will also examine two major limitations of the concept. The first is that, almost by definition, soft power applies only to states that have some underlying shared set of values, norms, and rules of behavior. At some extreme point in the future, China may achieve such a relationship with its neighbors, but it is certainly not the case today and is unlikely to be moving forward. Moreover, because soft power, like other forms of power, is inherently relational, we must examine both sides of the relationship—the nature of the transmitter and that of the target—to understand how power relations influence outcomes. Introducing any level of complexity to state-based models of world politics severely limits the perceived analytical utility of soft power. Even well-crafted messages may be misunderstood or misrepresented by actors within a given target audience. Signals of benign intent are not always understood or received. The second section will examine the basic logic of China’s growing “soft power.” It is clear that Chinese leaders are concerned with the accumulation and utilization of soft power, but this reflects a basic misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept. China has indeed engaged in prudent, softer-line diplomacy to reassure its neighbors and diversify its relations, but this is not necessarily related to soft power.

Moreover, because, in large part the “attractiveness” of China is based upon its consolidation of primarily hard power resources the long-term effects are inherently limited. The third section will look at these obstacles confronting any Chinese attempt to obtain or wield soft power. The first obstacle is China’s expanding hard power, or material capabilities. While China’s impressive military modernization and economic growth may be attractive to other states and contribute to a positive image of China as an effective and progressively developing state, they also confront neighbors with a growing potential threat. This problem created by an increase of material capabilities is exacerbated by a second obstacle: the inherent and persistent challenge of understanding China’s intentions due to its opaque and autocratic decision-making processes. Given its external behavior over the past 70 years and its autocratic and repressive regime, observers have significant difficulties perceiving Beijing’s ultimate intentions and goals, despite its often benign and cooperative rhetoric. Similarly, China’s authoritarian domestic political system at best provides conflicting signals about its long-term intentions. The final obstacle is the nature of China’s neighborhood. While space constraints preclude a state-by-state analysis of views on China and its rise to great power status, it seems clear that the heterogeneous and culturally diverse nature of the Asian region, with its troubled history, is unlikely to provide the basis for the accumulation and utilization of significant soft power resources by China or any other nation. The fourth section will consider the seeming reversals suffered to China’s soft power strategy during 2010, and the implications these developments have for the concept of China’s soft power. In a relatively short period of time, several discrete incidents seemed to signal a major shift away from China’s overall policy of reassurance and cooperation with its regional neighbors. While this may not have been the outcome of an actual concerted strategic choice (or set of choices) by Beijing, the decade long “charm offensive” seems to have come to a screeching halt and much of the perceived
diplomatic progress that was made during that decade seems to have been reversed. Instead, the desire for closer ties with the United States, including increased military cooperation, has driven the policies of China's neighbors. This turn of events seems to seriously undermine the notion of China's growing soft power as a challenge for policymakers and also exposes the major limitations of soft power as useful concept in the field of international relations.

Understanding Soft Power

Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of soft power in his book *Bound to Lead* (1991). He has since further developed the concept in a series of articles and books. The brief definition of soft power is as follows: "It 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." This seems straightforward and applicable to both international relations and political interactions and daily life more generally. If State A shares the same interests as State B, and also shares a commitment to the same norms of appropriate behavior for achieving those goals (preferences), then it follows logically that State A would support State B's policies if those subsequent policies reaffirm and uphold underlying mutual goals and accepted norms of appropriate behavior. In this model, power is understood as the ability to achieve desired outcomes, rather than measures of aggregate material resources.

Because a state has developed a positive image, whether based on its actions or policies or on its inherent characteristics, other states are drawn to it. Nye calls this process “attraction.” Giulio Gallarotti calls it “endearment.” As a state attracts or endears itself to others, even if this is not a conscious choice or a purposeful action, it will have greater influence over those states, increasing its soft power. Other states will be more willing to follow its lead and defer to its wishes. At the extreme, some states may seek to emulate the attractive or endearing state, viewing its policies, values, or institutions as desirable and worthy of imitation.

Given this conceptualization of soft power, it is not surprising that the resources from which a state derives soft power are less a function of material factors like military

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6 This section draws from a larger critique of soft power that can be found in David W. Kear, Jr., "The Hard Truths About Soft Power," *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011).
11 Ibid., 21-22.
force or wealth. Rather, the attributes of a state that attract other are primarily social
and ideational including culture, political values, and foreign policies of a state. Most
of the definitions of soft power also attribute some level of “success” seems to underlie
these resources, which also contributes to the security, prosperity and welfare of a
leading nation. Nonetheless, the resources that contribute to soft power arise more
from how a state utilizes its material resources to the benefits of its own society and its
neighbors rather than from the actual possession or accumulation of those resources.

It is important to note that this construction of soft or “co-optive” power is that it
operates at a deeper level than either coercion or inducement. The latter two policies
are directed at changing an agent’s behavior, by either threatening to raise the costs of
a potential action or by increasing the potential benefits that can be gained by foregoing
that action. Both seek to alter what an actor would otherwise prefer to do by altering
its calculations of the perceived costs and benefits using hard power or material
resources. But neither approach changes the actor’s underlying interests or
preferences. Coercion, negative sanctions and/or positive inducements may influence
the actor by altering the perceived benefits of a prior strategy, and thus contribute to
changing behavior. But the actor may still prefer the previous strategy prior to the
application of threats or economic policies. Soft power works by influencing how actors
define their ends or goals, and the means they employ to achieve those ends. As Nye
writes, “If you believe that my objectives are legitimate, I may be able to persuade you
to do something for me without using threats or inducements.

Therefore power operates at the level of interests, or motivations or vital goals,
and preferences, or the strategies for achieving vital goals. The idea of co-opting an
actor would entail transforming its interests and preferences to be in line with those of
the leading state. If the target state shares the same underlying goals and also has
internalized the norms of appropriate behavior exhibited by the leading state, then it is
unsurprising that the target would support the leading state’s policy if that policy was
compatible with those mutually accepted goals and norms. States that are of “like
minds” on major goals and the appropriate means to achieve them removes the need
for leaders to threaten or bribe followers. Nye logically argues: “If I can get you to want
to do what I want, then I do not have to use carrots or sticks to make you do it.” This
may border on the tautological, but the main point is clear that one state can, through
the attractiveness of its own values, ideals, culture, and or policies, influence the
interests and preferences of others, even transforming these critical determinants of
state behavior over time. If soft power is to be more than simply influence, playing out
in an ad hoc way on any given policy interaction through persuasion or the employment

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13 Ibid., 13.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 2.
no. 1 (1999).
17 Martha Finnemore, "International Organizations as Teachers of Norms: The United Nations Educational,
of some sort of leverage, as Nye argues, then its impact on behavior is necessarily indirect.\textsuperscript{19} Soft power works through the interests and preferences of an actor, which in turn shapes their choices and behaviors. Nye posits: "Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others."\textsuperscript{20}

Two key implicit assumptions seem necessary for soft power to truly influence the policies and behavior of states. The first is the underlying context in which soft power may operate. Much of Nye’s work seems to predicate a relatively high level of shared values and some sort of institutionalized, rule-governed setting in which states interact. The second is the presumed availability of relationships through which soft power can be utilized. In reality, there is significant difficulty inherent in sending and receiving messages even within a shared normative framework, and creating and perpetuating a preferred image to others is fraught with difficulties. While states that enjoy a high-level of shared values may possess the underlying capacity to effectively influence others through soft power means, the introduction of any measure of complexity significantly alters this depiction of international politics. Moreover, outside of this institutionalized context, in a more anarchic setting, it would seem that soft power would have very little relevance.

**Contextual Limitations of Soft Power**

The first major criticism of soft power pertains to scope. Nye notes the importance of institutions to the role of soft power without adequately explaining the crucial contextual role they play.\textsuperscript{21} It seems clear that a major assumption implicit in discussions of the influence of soft power is the degree of underlying shared values and interests among actors.\textsuperscript{22} The conditions under which we would expect this assumption to hold are most likely to be found within a highly institutionalized setting, where actors have some sense of the interests, preferences and capabilities of others, most likely derived from prior interaction. Where soft power may be strongest in fact, is within complex, interdependent systems where norms of appropriate behavior have already been formed over time.\textsuperscript{23} In such an environment, deviation from established norms can be understood as such, generating negative feedback that would be clear to the transgressor, victim and third parties alike. This is a high threshold of shared identity and values to assume in interstate relations even in a globalizing world. For example, Richard Ned Lebow notes that persuasion “is only possible within a community whose members share core values” and thus assumes underlying common identity and interests.\textsuperscript{24} Soft power seems to require a similar social context. Even within the United Nations, states and groups of states hold vastly different ideas about appropriate

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{22} Gallarotti, Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism, 23-28.
behavior, and possess divergent interests. Perhaps within an organization like the European Union, or the larger “West” we can see the influence of soft power at work, but this hardly reflects larger patterns of global politics.25

Therefore it seems that two conditions, a rule-governed institutional setting and the presence of underlying mutual interests, are crucial to understanding where soft power is likely to be accrued and utilized. This does not guarantee cooperation on any given issue but the rules of a given system are essential because states must have some objective measures to judge the behavior (or to the extent available, publicly articulated diplomatic strategies) of their peers. Without an accepted set of rules, such judgments would be difficult, if not impossible to make with any real degree of consensus. Rules are needed to identify and sanction transgressors. However, if rules are broadly accepted, why would states ever break them, or even bend them? The short answer is conflicts of interest. Thus the presence of mutual interests must be a second condition to truly set out the boundaries within which we can understand soft power as a truly independent influence in international affairs. If an issue, such as security, were to present two states with conflicting national interests, then those interests are likely to drive state behavior regardless of the potential costs a state may accrue in terms of image. The shared interest of avoiding war, for example, is not one that often has restrained states from acting in ways that further their subjective national interests. Thus significant shared mutual interests must exist for states to be concerned with their reputations in a given context and to view institutional rules and norms as valuable. Outside of such an interdependent system, soft power is unlikely to play a major role precisely because of an absence of mutual understanding and shared norms.

The Problem of Attraction: Messenger and Targets

Even accepting a relatively institutionalized context, where actors understand common goals and accept shared norms, and assuming minimal complexity for the purpose of discussion, presentations of soft power severely downplays the importance of interaction.26 For every message or policy choice, it is necessary to understand not only the messenger but also the audience. For example, Brantly Womack has argued that Nye’s depiction of soft power downplays the importance of the interaction between the messenger and the audience.27 At any point in time, the nature of the audience may be difficult to characterize, thus hindering our ability to develop probable explanations or predictions about its likely responses to external signals. Nye highlights the importance of “willing interpreters and receivers.” In fact, the nature of the interpreters and receivers are going to play a decisive role in determining the effectiveness of any given policy. For example, certain actions or policies that would be understood and interpreted in a positive light by similar liberal democratic states may be viewed negatively by autocratic states, and vice versa. In contested states, with multiple groups vying for power or legitimacy, the effectiveness of a policy is likely to be

determined by who is sitting in the leader’s chair at a given point in time. National elites compete to capture support of domestic mass audiences. Societal interest groups, based on class, ethnicity, religion, or any number of other factors challenge national and supranational authorities. Thus, for any situation, there may be multiple key audiences for any policy, often with diverse interests and concerns. Thus any single message may resonate differently with different groups in the same state and could ultimately work against the leading state’s interests, underscoring the central problem of subjectivity. Understanding the nature of the subject will be critical. Moreover, if complexity assumes the generation of positive and negative feedback from a given policy choice or action, the ultimate result will be primarily determined by the reception of the target state.28 It is quite possible that even a carefully constructed, diligently chosen policy will actually create both positive and negative feedback, depending on the diversity of interests and values within the target audience.

Shifting to consider the messengers, cultural attributes and fundamental institutional characteristics of a state’s domestic political system are unlikely to change dramatically over time, though they provide perhaps the strongest foundations for a nation’s attractive soft power.29 At the same time, these factors are outside of the control of government. Thus for relevant short-to medium terms considerations, domestic politics and foreign policies are likely to be the most important transmission belts of a state’s values and ideals.30 As in the case of the target state, however, these policies are the product of complex and potentially volatile domestic political processes. One needs look no further than the past two years of American domestic politics to understand the potential volatility of democracy. The United States is not alone in this respect. Democratic systems allows for major swings in ideology, with varying degrees of influence on domestic and foreign policies that other states will view and assess as signals of interests and preferences. In fact, more often than not, democratic states may present very mixed signals to foreign observers.31 Even highly attuned foreign policy leaders facing domestic opposition may have an exceedingly difficult time in implementing a coherent agenda. Moreover, different leaders in a leading state may have different approaches to addressing vital issues. Subjective worldviews will determine preferred policy and shape state behavior. Ultimately, the relative power and priorities of various key elites, the relative autonomy of leaders to craft and implement policies, and the constraints and opportunities provided by relevant institutions, will be a critical empirical questions to answer, further hindering the ability to develop generalizable explanations or predictions.32

30 Ibid., 59.
In short, attempting to understand, even in a very general way how certain policies are going to be interpreted and understood in a given state is a daunting task. It raises a host of questions that foreign offices and intelligence agencies around the world attempt to answer every day. It may be possible to make tentative judgments concerning the impact of policies on certain subsets of states at given points in time, but like other theoretical approaches that incorporate domestic-level factors, there will always be empirical questions to be answered before any larger implications can be drawn. From a theoretical perspective, this is a major limitation of soft power as a concept. From a practical perspective, this discussion shows just how much we need to know about a potential context and relevant actors to understand the implications of a given policy in soft power terms. It is no small task.

**Assessing the Claim of China's Soft Power**

The notion of soft power seems to intuitively fit as an explanation of China's behavior, and the implications of that behavior, over the past decade. In a prudent, calculating, and far-sighted way, successive leaders in Beijing have sought to assuage the fears of neighbors and U.S. allies in Asia by embracing a concept of a “peaceful rise” and avoiding provocations that could create dynamic that would contain China's development.

China's accretion and use of soft power can be a palliative, genuinely allaying other states’ worries about a “China threat.” Short of that, soft power can divert other states' foreign policymaking from assessments based solely on China's growing capabilities into more complex ones focusing on intent as well, giving Beijing a second front or a second chance to dissuade balancing or containment-oriented responses.  

Such a policy obscures the latent threat posed by the sheer magnitude of a rising China's material capabilities, and in doing so allows for Beijing to focus on its internal economic development, expansion of diplomatic relationships that contribute to sustained growth, and increase China's international standing and prestige. After seemingly self-defeating instances of Chinese “assertiveness” in the mid-1990s, a conscious decision was made to embrace an alternative approach that would avoid raising alarms among its neighbors. Ostensibly, this approach, can rightly be understood as what Joshua Kurlantzick has called China's “charm offensive”

Beijing eventually realized its mistakes: Seizing reefs had turned countries against China, but offering assistance during the financial crisis had won friends... after internal debate, the leadership in Beijing decided to tone down military action and instead focus on building China’s global soft power.

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34 Ibid.: 506.
Additionally, China’s commitment to “noninterference” plays well to regimes isolated by the United States and the west because of human rights issues.\textsuperscript{36} This allows China to access markets for raw materials and critical resources without competition or interference. This practice has contributed to China’s economic growth and also raised its visibility and influence beyond its immediate region. More importantly, aside from contributing to its economic development and diplomatic influence, there is a view that China’s rapid growth and subsequent domestic economic and political reforms may be an emerging alternative to the prevailing Washington Consensus model of development and governance.

The impact of the economic development component in Chinese soft-power is perhaps most evident in the vast discussion it has spawned of a “China Model” of development of a “Beijing Consensus” as a rival to the neo-liberal economic, liberal-legalist and democratic political creed of the Washington Consensus (and American and Western-style capitalist development paradigms more generally).\textsuperscript{37} If China was able to indeed provide such a model, that was admired and (more importantly) emulated by an increasing number of states over time, and those states also began to defer to China and define their interests and preferences in ways that reflected China’s interests and preferences, then we may be able to consider China as having accrued and being capable of utilizing soft power. However, such a development would seem to be far off in the future. As the next section will illustrate, China confronts several significant obstacles to achieving such status. There is little evidence that a “Beijing Consensus” is sweeping the region or anywhere else in the world. In fact, what China has seemingly accomplished in economic terms is not unlike that of some of its smaller neighbors, albeit on a much larger scale but over a longer term. But several of them achieved rapid growth without first instituting liberal democracy or unfettered free markets. China is only an alternative “model” in that it doesn’t hold client states to standards like many western states attempt to do. While those client states appreciate the “non-interference" it is stretching the concept of soft power beyond any coherence to depict this as the accumulation of soft power. These are very instrumental relationships, and are viewed with some disdain by members of the international community. While China may not pay any tangible costs for these initiatives, it does not mean that their image is being undermined in the eyes of other states. Similarly, China’s military expansion and its arms exports to other states have been viewed as a means of influencing other states, ostensibly creating a favorable set of alliances. This argument seems less plausible and more likely to create potential negative feedback for China, the underlying logic fits into a larger “soft power” approach.

Arms transfers, made possible by the indigenous production capabilities that China has acquired during its military-buildup, serve as a principal instrument of Chinese-style alliance building. That is, by developing a network of states in the region

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 44.
that are favorably disposed toward, or dependent upon, Beijing, China intends to prevent prospective foes from envisioning a victory over China at an acceptable cost.\textsuperscript{38}

Again, it is simply not clear that the image or message that China is attempting to create in this type of policy is actually seen or understood by its neighbors. The intent may indeed be to create alliances or dependencies, but this ignores the “target” side of the message. States in the region seem far more concerned about China’s buildup, a development which would seem to be at odds with its expressed larger goals associated with a “peaceful rise.” Ultimately, because of the lack of an underlying context of shared ideals and commitment to norms or appropriate behavior, the messages that China attempts to send will be mixed, and the impact of its diplomatic strategies will be based not just on its preferred message, but also its perceived capabilities and actions and the motives and intentions that others impute from those capabilities and actions.

It does seem clear that Chinese elites have become fascinated with the notion of soft power and that the concept has been embraced by leader in Beijing precisely because it is viewed as a potentially effective means for assuaging concerns created by its expansion.\textsuperscript{39} Various initiatives to spread Chinese history and culture, as exemplified by the growing number of Confucius Institutes around the region, seem driven by a concerted strategy of developing a positive image of China among its smaller neighbors and subtly reinforce the notion of its emerging role as the central (or leading) power without provoking fear or opposition. Nevertheless, while Chinese elites may embrace soft power as a tonic for potential opposition to its ascension, the interpretation of China’s benign messages must be interpreted alongside its growing capabilities, future intentions, opaque decision-making, and in the historical context of the region. These are serious obstacles to any such strategy, and ultimately illustrate the limitations of soft power as a concept.

**Obstacles to China’s Accumulations and Utilization of Soft Power**

Despite its best efforts, China’s attempts to assuage the fears of its neighbors face considerable obstacles. While it has succeeded in expanding trade and financial ties within and beyond its East and Southeast Asia, and generally improved its image throughout the first decade of this century, it suffered a significant reversal in 2010 that reflected the fragility of its newfound popularity. China’s growing material power—most importantly its military modernization—coupled with uncertainty over its long-run intentions provide ample reason for its neighbors to maintain a relatively high level of mistrust. The opaque nature of Beijing’s decision-making system only exacerbates the uncertainty over its intentions. Finally the regional context—and troubled history and


cultural diversity—of the region significantly constrains the ability of the regime to calm the fears of its neighbors, and also underscores the limitations of soft power as a concept.

China’s Expanding Capabilities: Military and Economic Power

The sheer size of its military and its recent decade-long modernization program provide China with capabilities to threaten its neighbors. While the primary focus of China’s expansion may be to deter Taiwanese independence, it is increasingly difficult to maintain this logic given the sheer size and characteristics of the modernization program. Investments in missile, submarine, surface warfare, and strike aircraft programs, seem to indicate a potential shift in China’s capabilities from a Taiwan focus to a desire to project power within and perhaps beyond the Western Pacific. China’s defense budgets have grown at an average of approximately 12.1 percent per year during the period from 2000-2010. It was estimated to spend over $160 billion on military-related items in 2010.40

From initial requirements to deter or coerce Taiwan, to limiting U.S. ability to respond to a conflict in the Straits, to a potentially large theater-level nuclear force, the development of robust short and medium range missile capabilities have emerged as a focus of China’s efforts. As part of China’s “missile-centric” strategy, both the quantity of Chinese short and medium range ballistic and cruise missile systems and the increasing quality of those systems (particularly improvements in accuracy) have shifted the military balance in the Taiwan Straits and increasingly threaten U.S. forces and allies as time goes on.41 The modernization and expansion of China’s missile force has been extensive, with over one thousand shorter-range ballistic missiles deployed across from Taiwan. More recently, since 2005, increasing numbers of intermediate range ballistic missiles and ground-based land attack cruise missiles have significantly expanded the inventory of INF missile forces.42 The PRC is estimated to have produced approximately 50-100 of these intermediate-range cruise missiles per year over the past 3 years. More recently, China has reportedly developed a “carrier-killer” anti-ship ballistic missile variant which has received a significant amount of interest because of the potential threat to U.S. Naval assets in the region.43

The nature of the threat created by China’s expanding missile force has grown over time.44 First, these capabilities ostensibly provide Beijing with a formidable capacity to deter Taiwanese leaders from unilaterally declaring independence or compelling a reversal of a declaration should deterrence fail. The quantity of conventional short- and medium-range conventional missiles that China has shifted the

41 James C. Mulvenon et al., Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Transformation and Implications for the Department of Defense (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006).
44 Mulvenon et al., Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Transformation and Implications for the Department of Defense.
cross-Straits’ military balance. The missile forces could be utilized to saturate Taiwan’s air defense, destroy much of Taiwan’s air force on the ground, and seize air superiority.  

Secondly, as the size and reach of the missile force grows, U.S. forces that can be expected to support Taiwan’s defense are increasingly under risk. Specifically, the U.S. airbase at Kadena on Okinawa, Kunsan Air Base in South Korea, and U.S. naval forces in the region may be targets of preventive strikes to degrade the capabilities of the United States to intervene on Taiwan’s behalf in the event of a crisis. With U.S. forward bases knocked off-line, the U.S. would likely be left to launch operations from Andersen Air Force base on Guam and from U.S. Navy assets in the region which now must operate outside of a certain perimeter to operate safely. Experts on Chinese military affairs argue that China possesses a growing “Anti-Access/Area-Denial” capability. While a strategy of AA/AD is not explicitly used in Chinese military writings, several concepts combine to imply that Chinese military strategists are thinking along these lines. Seizing the initiative, active defense and others are precisely the kinds of concepts that would underlie a broader AA/AD strategy. So the mix of Chinese capabilities and emerging doctrine seem focused on keeping the United States beyond the so-called “First island chain,” which would significantly complicate efforts to relieve and reinforce Taiwan in the event of a conflict. At this point, air superiority over Taiwan would be contested, but over time it may become increasingly difficult to achieve.

Finally, a longer-term potential threat that has received less analytical focus than the potential disarming strike scenario against Taiwan and the potential larger AA/AD campaign against the United States, would involve the Chinese decision to deploy a larger portion of the intermediate range missiles with nuclear warheads. Because of the opaque nature of China’s military modernization, it is difficult to estimate how many of the currently deployed missiles have been equipped with nuclear warheads, but the dual-capable missile has been a program that has expanded significantly over the past 5 years. One recent estimate places the number of CSS-5 launchers devoted to nuclear missions at 80, while 36 launchers are employed for conventional missions. The equipping of existing intermediate-range missiles with nuclear warheads would seem to be a feasible alternative means to achieve a formidable nuclear force capable of bolstering China’s influence in the region, rather than focusing on a new generation of ICBMs that directly targets the United States. Much of the existing literature on Chinese nuclear doctrine and strategy would seem to attach a low probability to such a policy, but the sheer number of delivery vehicles that China continues to develop and deploy creates a latent capability that could be used to coerce its regional neighbors in the

45 David A. Shlapak et al., A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), 128-29.
46 Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, Meeting the Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003).
47 Shlapak et al., A Question of Balance, 135.
future. Given U.S. interests in the region and its alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), this is a significant potential threat.

China has also engaged in an extensive naval modernization program. By next year, it is estimated to have a submarine force of approximately 44 boats, with 32 being “modern,” and an ultimate target of a 75 boat force within the decade. Similarly China has engaged in the expansion of its surface fleet, with plans to deploy advanced destroyers, frigates, and perhaps an indigenous aircraft carrier within the decade. Beijing recently launched the Russian made carrier Varyag, which is to serve as a training platform. Today, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has the largest force of principal combatants, submarines, and amphibious warships in Asia. China’s naval forces include some 75 principal combatants, more than 60 submarines, 55 medium and large amphibious ships, and roughly 85 missile-equipped patrol craft.

Finally, China has also made significant investments in fourth-generation fighter and strike aircraft and has recently exhibited a “stealth” fighter, a capability few experts believed China would obtain in a relevant time frame. These programs provide Beijing with a growing capability to project power in the region and beyond. This is not to overstate any potential threat of the Chinese modernization program. As a rising regional and potentially global great power, China has interests beyond its borders and logically requires capabilities to protect those interests. However, the extensive capabilities that China has accrued in a relatively short period of time will persistently influence the perception of China’s neighbors in the region and will undermine or confuse messages of benign intentions over the longer-term. It is more and more difficult for China to maintain the argument that its military forces are primarily devoted to preventing Taiwan’s interdependence. Increases in power-projection capabilities will make such a rationale less credible to neighbors over time.

While China’s economic dynamism has generally had a very positive impact on many of its neighbors (through trade, investment, etc.) and contributed to a generally positive image of China as the central economic actor in the region, this may not always be the case. China’s willingness to engage in free-trade agreements FTAs with neighbors and provide access to its markets has allowed it to become primary partner of many of its neighbors. Nonetheless, there are often winners and losers in free market economics.

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51 Ibid., 20-28.
52 Ibid., 31.
Over time, can China translate this economic interdependence into political influence? China is unlikely to appease its major Asian trading partners through economic inducements. First, high levels of economic interactions and positive views of China are not strongly correlated. Second, to date China does not appear to have had much success in translating economic interactions in political influence. In some countries, the economic losers from trade with China have been a vocal minority. The winners, such as local consumers, are often a diffuse political force.\(^\text{55}\) The sheer size of China’s market may come to dominate its smaller neighbors. More importantly, different sectors of neighboring states may find themselves in competition with similar actors in China, creating a competition that may be painful to the neighboring economy. Resentment arising from China’s domination of the regional economy could undermine its ability to expand its soft power. We have seen this unfortunate populist backlash play out in the past, when ethnic Chinese were targeted for violence during the 1997 financial crisis in places like Indonesia and Malaysia. China’s economic power is thus a double-edged sword. It is both the object of admiration and attraction and also a potential threat to the socio-economic wellbeing and prosperity of its neighbors. Finally, and more basically, continued rapid economic growth allows for and supports China’s ability to invest in its military capabilities. With its massive population, industrialization and adoption of high technology, China’s economic success contributes to its formidable potential power, which any rational, security-seeking state must be concerned with when looking to future.\(^\text{56}\)

**The Use of Force: Imputing Intentions from Past Behavior**

The opaque and secretive nature of China’s regime makes understanding its motives and intentions exceedingly difficult. Thus, the problem of intentions coupled with the capabilities China possesses present a serious obstacle to China’s acquisition of soft power. Taken together, China’s hard power resources—its military capabilities and its economic power—will always drive the concerns of its neighbors despite the rhetoric, symbolism and reassuring diplomatic policy deployed by Beijing. Despite its willingness to settle disputes peacefully and its larger “charm offensive” of the past decade, China’s neighbors need only look at recent history to realize that Beijing has been willing to use military force to achieve its national objectives. Moreover, not only has China participated in several large-scale military conflicts since the founding of the People’s Republic, it has struck first in each instance, seizing the initiative against its adversaries. Three times, China initiated conflict with extensive offensive operations: in November, 1950 against U.S. forces and allied forces in Korea, in October, 1962 against India, and in February, 1979 against Vietnam. China has also engaged in smaller-scale operations in the South China Sea, seizing the Crescent group of the Paracel (Xisha) Islands from South Vietnam in 1974, Johnson Reef from Vietnam in 1988, and most recently Mischief Reef from the Philippines in 1995.\(^\text{57}\) Finally, China

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\(^{55}\) Ibid., 239.


\(^{57}\) Mark Burles and Abram N. Shulsky, *Patterns in China’s Use of Force: Evidence from Historical and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2000), 15.
has been willing to engage in militarily provocative during crises, over the Taiwan Straits in 1954 and 1958 also against the Soviet Union in 1969.\textsuperscript{58}

The historical record shows a pattern of using force in a conflict to achieve surprise and thus administer a strong psychological or political shock to the adversary. By upsetting the strategy and expectations, China hopes to force it to make a radical reevaluation of its goals and to acquiesce to a new status quo that is much more favorable to China.\textsuperscript{59}

While China’s military doctrine has transformed over time from the revolutionary “people’s war” concept of Mao, predicated on large-scale utilization of infantry, to “local war under high-tech conditions,” a multidimensional, combined arms approach incorporating new platforms and technological applications, certain important continuities remain. Underlying doctrinal and intellectual foundations of Chinese military thought continue to place a priority on taking advantage to knock an opponent off balance. The current doctrine of “Active defense” maintains this ambiguity:

The disturbing conclusion of this analysis is that China, despite an awareness of its relative weakness, might nevertheless be willing to use force against the United States or in a way that runs a major risk of U.S. involvement.\textsuperscript{60}

It is clear that, in the past, China has been willing to use force against its neighbors. Its increasing assertiveness in claiming its rights in the South China Sea, as well as the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands only reinforce the image that China is willing to provoke and coerce its neighbors and potentially use forces against them to protect perceived Chinese interests. Raising its exclusive economic rights in the South China Sea to the level of a “core interest” on par with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinxiang, would seem to confront neighbors disputing Chains’ claims with a real challenge and potentially the threat of military conflict moving forward.\textsuperscript{61} It may be easy to dismiss these claims as nationalist rhetoric meant to satisfy domestic audiences, but for states in the region China’s expressed claim to these disputed territories could precipitate crises in the future, when China is likely to be in a much stronger position to support those claims.

\textit{China’s Internal Dynamics: Domestic Politics and Future Intentions}

Moreover, because of the closed and autocratic nature of the Chinese regime, neighbors have no guarantees that a currently friendly China will not become aggressive and belligerent in the future. Despite the stability of the CCP leadership over the past two decades, it is not clear how leaders would resolve a crisis generated by a period of economic recession or civil turmoil. In attempting to gleam insights and predict (even if probabilistically) the course of China’s future foreign policy, looking

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., vii-viii.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., ix.
\textsuperscript{61} Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, “Can China Defend A "Core Interest" In the South China Sea?,” \textit{The Washington Quarterly} 34, no. 2 (2011).
inside China’s political system provides greater reason for concern than for confidence. China’s willingness to use force against domestic political opposition, as well as its management of relations with its troubled provinces like Tibet, Xinxiang, and Taiwan undermined its outward commitment to a “peaceful rise.”

If one abides strictly by Joseph Nye’s definition of soft power, Beijing’s domestic political values stand out as a major handicap. Its democratic deficit, to name one glaring weakness, leaves it at a severe disadvantage with emerging and well-established democracies such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and India.\(^{62}\)

While Beijing may have greater capacity to shape the flow of information out of the country than most democracies, the leadership is unable to completely control its own internally-derived image vis-à-vis the outside world. Crackdowns on political dissidents, problems with ethnic minorities, high-profile arrests of human rights leaders, and other acts of repression are reported and disseminated throughout the globe with relative frequency. As China has become increasingly integrated into the world economic system, it is less able to seal itself off from the world. Information flows move through increasingly porous borders despite the best efforts of the state to manage a desired image. This severely limits Beijing’s ability to craft and effectively implement its soft power policies.

**China’s Neighbors**

The final obstacle facing China’s ability to truly accrue and utilize soft power relates to its environment, and the nature of the greater East Asian region. Given the importance of some measure of shared values and identity, and a rule-governed, institutionalized context for soft power to operate, we would not necessarily expect to see soft power play a prevalent role in East Asia, or even the larger Asian region.

...the Asian region is characterized by extreme diversity with regard to levels of economic development, regime type and cultural norms and values. While such disparities can be overcome, they create significant clashes of interest concerning a host of important issues...\(^{63}\)

In short, there is no shared “regional” identity. This goes to a larger point, that the reason that soft power may be more relevant to discussions of Western Europe or perhaps “the West” is the high level of shared values and also a willingness within the European Union to actually surrender sovereignty over certain important issues like economic policy.\(^{64}\) Even now, the depth of that commitment may be tested with the sovereign debt crises affecting some of the poorer Southern European member states, but it seems clear that there remains an underlying acceptance of norms and rules of appropriate behavior among the states. There is no such underlying regional culture or

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\(^{64}\) Ibid.: 575.
history of shared values or in East Asia, which remains, fundamentally, much more anarchic.

Thus, China’s narrative of “returning” to a position of regional leadership based upon some acknowledgment by other states of its historical and cultural priority is unlikely to be embraced. In fact, invocations of history may often create more friction between states in the region than any semblance of shared identity or mutual values. Moreover, the states of East and Southeast Asia have embraced a number of different developmental models that have produced, in most cases, impressive economic growth as well as wealth, prosperity and political stability. Civil and political rights may vary, but it would incorrect to argue that states necessarily seek to emulate or are attracted to a “Beijing Consensus.” The success of the “Asian Tigers” predates China’s rapid expansion, and claims to an “Asian Way” of development have been deployed in responses to perceived Western heavy-handedness for almost two decades.65 Perhaps, in some Southeast Asian nations, where large numbers of ethnic Chinese have emigrated, there may be a greater receptiveness to China’s emerging calls for leadership, but this may go too far. Violence against these minority groups marked the 1997 financial crisis, despite the perception that China played a constructive role in it policy responses.66 In short, the cultural heterogeneity and diverse developmental experiences of China’s neighbors are unlikely to provide the basis for a common, shared system of values and norms that allow for the utilization or accumulation of soft power by China, Japan, or any other potential claimant to regional leadership.

Seeing China through the Lens of Taiwan

U.S. security concerns vis-à-vis China are primarily driven by a possible crisis or actual conflict over Taiwan. China’s extensive military modernization program has been largely focused on deterring Taiwan from unilaterally declaring independence or, if necessary compelling Taipei to reverse such a decision. However, in the past few years, the cross-straits balance has significantly shifted in favor of the PRC. With its extensive inventory of short-range missiles, and growing stocks of medium-range missiles and fighter and strike aircraft, in the view of many analysts, the PLA now has capabilities well-beyond the initial deterrence/compellence mission. There is growing consensus that, in the event of a conflict, China would likely be capable of gaining the critical objective of air superiority over the Straits. By using its missile forces to destroy or significantly degrade Taiwan’s air force on the ground, the PLA air force would be unchallenged in the absence of U.S. intervention. Perhaps of greater concern, with the expansion of medium- and intermediate-range missile programs, U.S. forward bases in the region are increasingly under risk. The critically important air base at Kadena on Okinawa is well-within range of China’s new missiles. China’s modernization has seemingly incorporated the lessons of the 1996 Taiwan crisis, and is predicated on deterring or, if necessary, defending against the intervention of the United States in a future conflict in the Straits.

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While China’s ability to prevail in a Taiwan conflict is a major challenge and a legitimate focus of discussion and analysis, the ongoing military modernization program may have longer-term implications. The ostensible rationale of improving its capabilities to deter Taiwanese independence has somewhat deflected the potential threat that China may present to its neighbors. However, as China’s capabilities continue to expand, particularly in areas such as surface and sub-surface naval vessels, longer-range strike aircraft and longer-range cruise and ballistic missiles, the “Taiwan rationale” becomes less tenable. In various official venues, Chinese strategists have considered the possibility of a peaceful reunification with Taiwan as essential precisely because it will unlock what-is-perceived-as the existing barrier to China’s expansion into the Pacific. In the long-term, with Taiwan as a settled issue, China would be free to utilize its altered geographic situation to project power into the East and South China Seas and even the Indian Ocean, significantly altering its maritime situation. This expansion of capabilities and discussion of China as a full-fledged naval power of the future has not gone unnoticed by its neighbors.

2010: A Summer of Discontent versus a Decade of Charm

The year 2010 was not a good one for China’s foreign policy. Several incidents led to a rapid and significant shift in the perceptions of China’s behavior from accommodating and cooperative to assertive and even belligerent. As exemplified by the harassment of U.S. naval vessels by Chinese fishing trawlers in the March of 2009, Chinese provocations in the South China Sea have intensified fears in Vietnam and led to an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in July 2010 where twelve of the member states expressed significant concerns about China’s policies and behavior. Similarly, the Philippines have expressed concerns about China’s intentions in the disputed region and incidents of problems between fisherman and Chinese naval assets have been reported. This was followed by a collision between a Chinese fishing trawler and a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and the subsequent political row between Tokyo and Beijing in September. China’s deployment of troops along the border with India and the disputed lines of control raised India’s concerns. Finally, Beijing’s unwillingness to more actively engage or criticize the regime in Pyongyang after North Korea’s sinking of the ROK naval vessel Cheonan in March 2010 and the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, has strained relations with Seoul. All of these events had the clear net effect of pushing concerned regional neighbors closer to the United States.

Requests for weapons like diesel submarines and patrol craft and increased military cooperation with countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Japan, South Korea, and Australia has re-energized the United States presence in the region and confounded China's attempts to limit or rollback U.S. influence. China can certainly repair the damage that has been done, and return to the more benign path it embraced after similar incidents raised regional alarms in the mid-1990s.

The larger issue at stake is that China's move away from its prudent policies of reassurance seemed to have diplomatic costs and therefore Beijing will likely avoid such provocations for some time in the future. But soft power has little to do with this story. A rising regional, and perhaps, global great power seeks to assuage the fears of its neighbors and thus avoid countervailing coalitions, opposition and isolation. Bismarck would call this prudent diplomacy. China has attempted to portray its policies in an attractive light in order to develop relationships, but the depth of those relations and the underlying regional context remain relatively anarchic.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that China's leaders are interested in the potential contribution of soft power to their underlying mission to achieve China's rise to a position of regional and global leadership without instilling fear and provoking hostility in neighbors or status quo global powers. Avoiding the kinds of countervailing coalitions that have confronted rising powers throughout history is a priority. It thus logically follows that in the wake of the spike in regional tensions that accompanied China's more assertive behavior in the early and mid-1990s a shift to policies that would resemble a "charm offensive" would emerge. In large part, this policy has paid significant dividends. China has deepened trade and financial relations with many of its neighbors. It has also significantly expanded its access to export markets, to critical raw materials, and to high technology beyond its Asia. These developments have contributed to the achievement and maintenance of impressive growth rates throughout the last decade.

If the soft power accrued over the course of a decade of benign and reassuring policies can be essentially wiped out by two summer months of assertive or provocative behavior, then one must seriously question the ultimate contribution of the concept. It's well and good to say that China may have undermined its own cause by moving away from its "Charm Offensive" to a more assertive policy, but the almost-immediate reaction of China's neighbors to engage in balancing behavior against China in light of its actions seems to indicate that there was very little "soft power" to be lost. If soft power mattered, China should have either 1) been concerned enough with the potential downsides of what-could-be-perceived-as aggressive policies to refrain from implementing them, or 2) been able to maintain relatively positive relations with its neighbors precisely because the soft power it had accrued should have offset any shock caused by China's behavior. Of course, neither outcome happened. China acted in defense of its perceived national interests, after likely having weighed the potential diplomatic implications, and China's neighbors proved acutely sensitive to a perceived hostile shift in policy.
Given the generally-accepted conceptualization of soft power, its irrelevance to China's rise in Asia should not be surprising. Given the expanding material capabilities and opaque and potentially aggressive intentions of China, as well as the troubled historical legacies of the East and Southeast Asian regions, even if soft power has some conceptual utility in other contexts, it does not here. Any rising power is likely to inspire some level of concern, if not outright fear, in its neighbors. Policies constructed to assuage such fears are certainly prudent, but are likely to be difficult to achieve even in the best of circumstances. Surrounded by much smaller states (barring India) China's extant and potential material power will always generate concerns. Given that its power has expanded so dramatically (particularly its military power), it is almost inconceivable that any diplomatic campaign to dampen fears would be seen as much more than cheap talk. The problem China faces is only amplified by its opaque decision-making apparatus and the uncertainty surrounding its intentions. The response of China's neighbors to draw more closely to the United States seems a textbook case of the traditional realist concern that even if future intentions may seem accessible, uncertainty over future intentions will drive states to fear their neighbors. China's perceived willingness to use force only intensifies the perception of threat. Finally, the historical legacy of the region and the diverse cultural identities of its inhabitants make virtually impossible the underlying sense of common identity necessary for soft power to operate. Today we see fissures even among the west over the current "Euro-crisis." Greater Asia is a far different context, and despite a decade of relative peace and prosperity, long-standing rivalries and fears are difficult to erase. This is not to say that over time peaceful policies cannot overcome these obstacles, but it clearly underscores the challenges confronting China as it grows. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that while prudent policies may seek to reassure neighbors, the concept of soft power is particularly unsuited for understanding China's rise and its impact on Asia. Unfortunately for Beijing, these obstacles make maintaining a benign image exceedingly difficult, and no quantity of "Confucius Institutes" or other transparent attempts to spread an unrealistic image of China will overcome the conflicting messages created by its material capabilities and unpredictable future intentions.