



The hard facts on 'soft power' by Axel Berkofsky

"China has not started any wars lately," Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman wrote in February, pointing to Beijing's competitive advantage over the U.S., whose Iraq misadventure is making sure that Washington's international image deteriorates on a daily basis.

Not having invaded other countries is admittedly not a bad point of departure for a country that has made a "peaceful rise," the "democratization of international relations," and the establishment of a "harmonious international society," the mantra of its regional, global and foreign-policy strategies.

Back in the real world, we might not have seen all the small print and details on China's foreign, economic, and energy-security policy agenda, argues Hugo Restall, editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, in the magazine's latest edition. "The West now needs to face the possibility that it has welcomed a Trojan horse into the international community," he writes, suspecting that we know relatively little about Beijing's "real" foreign-policy goals, except the obvious: "China is ready to re-establish primacy in Asia."

Whereas the U.S. and the European Union mainly react to international developments and a crisis these days, China's political leaders are planning on shaping world events in as many areas and continents as possible. Indeed, there is a deadline for almost everything on Beijing's foreign, economic, and energy-security policy agenda, and the list of long-term plans outlining policies and strategies is growing.

Driven by a growing appetite and thirst for energy and backed by an economy growing at 11 percent per year, China's leaders are planning to double trade with Russia and Africa by 2010, fully implementing a free-trade agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations by 2012, take a lead establishing the so-called East Asian Community by 2020, and so on.

Believe it or not (and many don't), China's political leaders are surprisingly transparent and up-front about their global political and economic ambitions and seem to care very little about international criticism accusing Beijing of conducting "value-free" economic and energy diplomacy toward energy-rich dictatorships in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa.

Washington consensus vs Beijing consensus

Offering no-strings-attached financial aid and economic assistance to African and to Southeast, South, and Central Asia has become a central part of China's foreign and trade policies.

China's economic development model, coined the "Beijing consensus" by Joshua Cooper Ramo of the Foreign Policy Center in 2004, is unlike Western economic

development models in that it does not link economic and financial aid to preconditions such as good governance, democracy, transparency, rule of law, respect for human rights, and other "annoying" issues to dictatorships around the globe. In other words, it is the exact opposite of the so-called "Washington consensus" applied by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Not surprisingly, Africa's and Central Asia's dictatorships and autocratic regimes welcome Chinese-style "soft power" and economic assistance as an alternative to the European and U.S. versions of both.

However, Chinese soft power has very little to do with the original "soft power" concept Dr. Joseph Nye introduced in 1990. Instead, China's policy approach toward Africa pretty much looks like good old power politics – securing energy and profits at the expense of other countries that are unable to offer China oil or other commodities.

Beijing is having none of this and argues that the expansion of its relations with Africa is "mutually beneficial." China provides economic and financial assistance, it builds roads, hospitals and airports, and Africa sells oil and other commodities. It's a win-win situation, Beijing maintains. Besides, Beijing's political rhetoric goes, China is applying the so-called "principle of non-interference," i.e., a strategy of not bothering African and Central Asian dictatorships with Western-style criticism of human-rights violations and political oppression in countries China is doing business in. Awarding Zimbabwe's dictator Robert Mugabe an honorary professorship at the China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing in 2005 and signing economic-cooperation agreements with Uzbekistan a few days after the country's Interior Ministry fired into the crowd of peaceful demonstrators in May 2005 are infamous cases in point.

Beijing's recent decision to appoint a senior diplomat as special Africa envoy with a focus on the crisis in Darfur, Sudan, on the other hand seems to point to a (partial) change of heart regarding China's insistence on not meddling in other countries' genocides.

To be sure, China's approach to the Darfur crisis – beyond providing Khartoum with weapons despite a United Nations arms embargo – is not the result of a voluntary change of policy to help end the government-induced killing in Darfur. Rather, international pressure, including the U.S. Congress, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others who labeled the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics the "genocide games," made Beijing reconsider its strategy of seeing no evil in Darfur.

Initially, Beijing reacted with fury to the criticism and "interference" in its affairs, but then caved in as the "genocide games" label threatened to have a lasting impact on its ability to stage the "best Olympic Games ever." It remains to be seen whether China's Africa envoy and his masters in Beijing will

really put effective and visible pressure on a government that is selling 60 percent of its oil to China. Either way, this month Beijing announced that it was dispatching a 275-strong team of military engineers to Sudan to join a UN peacekeeping mission set to begin operating in Dafur this year.

No time to fight, Beijing says

China does not have time for war, claims the “inventor” of China’s “peaceful rise” theory, Zheng Bijian, chairman of the China Reform Forum. Economic and social development, Zheng told me in Beijing, is China’s main and indeed only priority in years and decades ahead. That sounds reassuring, but “rising peacefully” does not keep Beijing from launching the occasional military threat against Taiwan, warning Taipei not to declare formal independence unless it wants to be “reunified” with the mainland by force.

The Taiwan question aside, China’s diplomats and politicians are in charm-offensive mode wherever they speak and travel to these days, reading from pre-written scripts that China is striving for the establishment of a “harmonious and peaceful international society.”

Western (until now mainly U.S.) concerns about China’s rapidly rising defense budget, on the other hand, are typically dismissed as “alarmist.” More than 30 percent of the annual rise in defense spending, Beijing maintains, is spent on salary increases, as its soldiers would otherwise look for more lucrative jobs in China’s emerging private business sector.

Analysts widely agree that China’s economic and military rise, peaceful or not, will increasingly challenge U.S. economic and security interests in East Asia. That is hard to argue with, but Washington has stationed 100,000 troops in the region and China is still, despite its rising defense budget, nowhere near challenging the U.S. military, in East Asia or elsewhere.

Washington going too soft on China and engaging Beijing on a come-what-may basis is the “real” problem, writes journalist James Mann. U.S. political leaders, he argues in his new book, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*, are in a state of denial with regard to current China policies. U.S. engagement, Mann argues, has not made China less autocratic and more democratic. Political and economical engagement, he writes, did not trigger the introduction of political reform beyond the experimental introduction of semi-democratic elections on the village level, “supervised by China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs.

Maybe not, but one should not be blamed for trying, and engaging China – as opposed to containing it – is certainly the preferred option for U.S. multinationals making profits in that country.

Business over principle, and not only in China.

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