

Less than meets the eye?

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The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was public diplomacy “shock and awe”. It was intended to announce to the world China’s return to centre stage and to vindicate in the eyes of the Chinese people its model of economic freedom combined with political constraint.

Anyone taking literally the titles of foreign policy magazines and books these days might be forgiven for believing the United States is in terminal decline, while the China juggernaut rushes to supplant its leadership role in Asia and even globally. China’s booming economy and the rapid military modernisation program its growth is facilitating have fed this declinist discourse, as has the crisis of US self-confidence over Iraq. But another much-touted factor has been the perceived increase in China’s soft power.

In our immediate region, former US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, said just last year, “In every measure, China is making real hay right throughout Asia.” Many other informed commentators also subscribe readily to the view that China is “cutting America’s lunch” across the region.

There are certainly plenty of indicators pointing to China’s rising power. In 2007 China accounted for some 11 per cent of global GDP in PPP terms. In June this year, China’s foreign exchange reserves passed \$US1.8 trillion. China has also become the first or second largest trading partner of major Asian economies including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Meanwhile, supposed harbingers of US decline are all around us. It is commonplace to hear that the Iraq war has challenged America’s military supremacy, drained its budget coffers and turned world public opinion against it. Oil prices have skyrocketed and Iran has been emboldened. The sub-prime crisis has forced the US government to bail out two of the country’s largest financial institutions. And as the global economic centre of gravity has shifted towards Asia, the United States has allegedly dropped the ball in the region – scaling back troop numbers in Japan and South Korea and skipping or cutting short attendance at major meetings, confirming suspicions it is out of touch and in decline.

This narrative has a certain morbid attractiveness. But is it really true? For Joseph Nye, who first defined the concept, a country’s “soft power” stems primarily from three main sources: its culture (when it is attractive); its political values (when it lives up to them); and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

China’s booming economy and huge domestic market are clearly an enormous attraction. But this is economic power – an old-fashioned form of hard power, along with military might. That’s not to say it isn’t important or effective – just that it isn’t a manifestation of soft power, properly described.

So how is China really going with its exercise in soft power – and particularly in terms of relative soft power vis-à-vis the United States?

Not as well as is commonly assumed.

Beijing works hard to project a positive version of China’s turbulent history, and the Confucius Institutes that Beijing is establishing around the world to propagate Chinese culture (including four in Australia) will no doubt influence some people. But ultimately it is impossible for a country as restrictive as China to match the popular appeal of the United States. Love it or loathe it, the export of US culture has a long head start. The dominance of US culture was highlighted in a recent Chicago Council poll that found respondents in China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam giving high ratings to the influence of US culture on local

popular culture. In all cases, except Indonesia, substantial majorities viewed this as mainly positive. That included some 70 per cent of Chinese.

When it comes to values, American dominance is even greater. Robert Kagan recently argued that China and Russia have developed a new model – one which combines market economics with an authoritarian political structure – and that this may prove sufficiently attractive to undermine the existing liberal order. Kagan may have a point: the hold of the Chinese Communist Party has proven tenacious. And Russia's assault on Georgia underscores its renewed nationalist assertiveness. The way these two powers combined to veto even modest UN Security Council sanctions against the appalling Mugabe regime is troubling.

But Kagan may be worrying too much. Just how attractive is the authoritarian model in actuality?

Marginal and marginalised regimes such as those in Burma, North Korea and Zimbabwe may draw some succour. But ultimately how can the values of an authoritarian state such as China really compete for broad global appeal with the country that has a constitutional bill of rights, helped found the United Nations, drove the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, defended the world's freedom in two world wars before prevailing in the subsequent Cold War, and encourages uninhibited debate and innovation in every field imaginable? The US system is far from perfect – witness Abu Ghraib – but its values and supporting institutions trump China's state-controlled market authoritarian model every time. Beijing knows that China lacks attractive values that can serve as an international rallying point; this is why its Ministry of Foreign Affairs reserves some of its strongest vitriol for any hint of "values-based" diplomacy.

There can be little doubt that China's "smile diplomacy" of the past decade or so has been effective in securing Beijing's short to medium term goal: stable relations with neighbours as a means of securing access to markets and resources, both key to sustaining economic growth and with it the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. While broadly successful, however, China's diplomacy has not always been the well-oiled machine that is often portrayed. An increasingly confident and nationalistic China occasionally throws its weight around in ways that are counterproductive. In some quarters China's rise has encouraged hedging by other states – witness efforts by Japan, Singapore and Indonesia to strengthen ties with the United States and to include Australia and India in Asian regional organisations. At times, China's foreign policy can be just as disjointed as the United States', with different organs of state undermining each other. The secrecy with which China delivers its aid program has fostered suspicion about its motives, including in the South Pacific. The poor labour and environmental standards of some Chinese companies (many state-owned) operating abroad have at times stirred up local opposition, as recently occurred in Zambia. And the opacity of China's system undermines international trust and fuels suspicions.

This applies particularly to China's military modernisation but extends to other areas of policy. Draconian Olympic security arrangements and an opening ceremony minutely directed by China's most senior leadership – down to the lip-syncing of Beijing's "Nicky Webster" – attracted widespread international comment that only served to underline the continuing extent of state control in China.

Indeed the key to understanding the continuing dominance of US soft power – and the key point of contrast with China – is the fundamental openness of the United States. It is the element of openness and dynamism in American society and institutions that attracts and influences. Ultimately it is the soft power generated by US civil society, broadly defined – not the state – that remains decisive. Authoritarian China simply cannot compete in that arena.

Focusing only on US popularity (or lack thereof) can paint a deceptive picture. It ignores the transient unpopularity of President Bush. It ignores the "punching bag" effect that comes with being the world's sole superpower. And it ignores China's own very real popularity constraints. In a 2008 Pew survey, majorities in only seven of the 23 countries polled gave China a favourable rating, and in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Japan and

South Korea people were more likely to say China's influence was a bad thing than a good thing. The Olympic torch relay was probably the most serious setback for Chinese soft power since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

Sure the United States has lost some lustre. But perhaps the most telling poll result of all, when it comes to the United States' soft power dominance, is how many people around the world say that life is better for those who move to the United States. Out of 46 countries surveyed by Pew in 2007, majorities or pluralities in 34 said life for emigrants to the United States is better. Even in China, 45 per cent said life is better in the United States compared to only 14 per cent who said it is worse. Moreover, the United States is a resilient and adaptive power. It would be foolish to discount its regenerative capacity and ability to bounce back from its current economic and strategic difficulties.

China's influence will inevitably grow as its economy expands. Tight domestic political and media control and disciplined diplomacy will continue to deliver short-term gains. But ultimately China's attractiveness to the outside world will reflect how it is seen to treat its own people. The absence of significant movement towards genuinely accountable and transparent government in China, and genuine respect for individual rights and freedoms that are enforceable even against the state, won't make up its soft power deficit any time soon.

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