



China in Asia Seminar Series

Seminar 8: “Will China Wield ‘Soft Power’ in Asia?”

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SUMMARY

Mr. Joshua Kurlantzick (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace / New Republic)

Soft power generally refers to the appeal of a country’s culture and values, but the strength of China’s economic development model, its public and official diplomacy, business community and corporate branding all contribute to its growing soft power in Asia. Southeast Asian perceptions have shifted toward a more benign view of China over the past ten years.

Does China have a conscious soft power strategy? Soft power stems as much from non-governmental sources as from government actions. However, individual soft power tools on the ground operate within a framework created by the Chinese government. China is employing a variety of tools and approaches to persuade others in Asia to support its objectives.

China has backed rhetoric on the importance of cooperation and noninterference in internal affairs with real initiatives such as signing ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Chinese efforts often focus on countries whose bilateral relationships with the U.S. are faltering, such as the Philippines, Uzbekistan, and Cambodia. Chinese statements frequently portray the U.S. as a non-Asian, external actor. China’s economic success also gives its development model appeal to elites in countries such as Burma and Laos.

Beijing employs a variety of tools to exert influence in Southeast Asia. Trade initiatives such as the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area have helped improve China’s image and support its “win-win” rhetoric. China cannot match U.S. expenditures on development assistance, but Chinese aid has been increasing around the world and methods for delivering aid have grown more sophisticated. In some countries in Southeast Asia, Chinese aid now equals or surpasses U.S. assistance. China has organized trips and conferences for ASEAN government representatives (who might previously have been likely to visit the U.S.) Chinese officials also engage in ‘lobbying-like’ behavior to win Southeast Asian support for their projects.

China has invested in upgrading its official image and improving its public diplomacy. The PRC diplomatic corps is more savvy, educated, and skillful than in the past. Chinese representatives make a concerted effort to organize and attend regional meetings, even sending lower level officials to smaller, informal ASEAN summits. Chinese language and culture institutes are proliferating, not only in Southeast Asia but around the world. In poorer countries in the region, there has been an increase in scholarships for students to continue on to higher education in China. Many of these students are potential future leaders in the region and in the past might have come to universities in the U.S. China is also encouraging more out-migration, particularly in the border areas. As Beijing lifts travel restrictions, Chinese outbound tourism has increased, with many tourists heading to Southeast Asia.

These initiatives come at a time of waning U.S. influence. The U.S. response to the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis still resonates negatively in the region. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has

closed many language and cultural centers. Resources devoted to public diplomacy have been reduced and diverted to the Middle East, while tighter visa policies have made travel and study in the United States more difficult. With U.S. soft power and the appeal of American corporate brands in decline, China has seized an opportunity.

Will China be successful? There are already signs of considerable success in Southeast Asia. China is increasingly perceived as a model and constructive regional actor. Chinese books, television shows, universities, and brands have grown in popularity in a region where just decades ago the use of the Chinese language was banned in some countries. The renminbi now circulates as a second currency in border regions in some Southeast Asian countries.

There are numerous areas where the U.S. can offer things that China cannot match, providing room for U.S. policy adjustments. The U.S. could be promoting specific initiatives rather than broad goals, refocusing economic and trade policy, rethinking the utility of global sanctions, and tapping into the Southeast Asian communities in the United States. The United States might also post an officer in each embassy in the region whose primary job would be to monitor Chinese actions on the ground.

Even if the U.S. does nothing, China may eventually overplay its hand by making promises on aid or infrastructure projects that they cannot deliver. It is unlikely that China can use multilateral organizations such as ASEAN+3 or the East Asian summit to push the U.S. out of Southeast Asia. Increasing Chinese influence will spark negative reactions, and the U.S. role in the region is too established.

Dr. Elizabeth Economy (Council on Foreign Relations)

China's foreign policy and outreach activities in Southeast Asia are very much an extension of its activities around the world. It is not only China's message of non-interference which attracts other countries, but also its emphasis on win-win diplomacy. China at least appears to always have a positive message; to listen to the interests and needs of other countries whether it is debt relief in Africa or a UN Security Council seat for Brazil. When a country raises a particular concern, such as Vietnam and the South China Sea, Beijing has made moves toward cooperation. In contrast to the U.S., China also places more emphasis on regional organizations working toward regional solutions.

However, China faces significant obstacles. As China's economy grows, it will affect different countries and sectors in different ways. The impact on relations will depend on the domestic political influence of the affected companies and sectors. Another obstacle is the possible blowback from investments and activities of Chinese companies overseas. China is exporting its worst practices in labor and environmental standards. The Chinese government may also be promising much more than it can deliver. For example in Sudan in the 1960s Chinese investment provided education and work for the Sudanese, but now Chinese companies bring their own labor and managers and even restaurants and related industries. The local population is losing out. In many places, China's activities do not support its "peaceful development" rhetoric.

Dr. Robert Sutter (Georgetown University)

Mr. Kurlantzick's presentation offers many valuable details about the situation on the ground in Asia and points out a number of China's strengths and U.S. weaknesses. However we also need to look at China's weaknesses and U.S. strengths. China's weaknesses are not something that will develop later; they are evident now.

We should consider how we define influence. Influence is the ability to get somebody to do something they do not want to do or to get them to stop doing something they are doing. China does not really have this ability. Beijing may be doing well diplomatically, but it is not really exercising influence.

We also should look more closely at China's strengths. In terms of trade, ODA, and investment, how much are we really talking about? Compared to the U.S. and Japan, these numbers are still quite small. Because much of China's trade with the region involves processing, double counting occurs frequently. Chinese economic growth has consequences for Southeast Asia; some of these negative impacts are being felt now. Although there is a lot of talk of a China-centric order and approach in Asia, when actual foreign policy decisions are made in the region, countries still hedge.

The U.S. has tremendous strengths. The U.S. is willing to do the hard things in terms of deploying troops and confronting enemies. U.S. problems in the region have little to do with China. We continue to have interests in Southeast Asia, and we should pursue those without trying to directly compete with China.

Q&A

Dr. Economy asked Mr. Kurlantzick whether China's rise has stirred any soft power diplomacy from Japan and India and why he did not mention Iraq or 9/11 as benchmarks for the decline of U.S. influence in the region. Mr. Dan Blumenthal, asked if the rise of Chinese and decline in U.S. popularity is structural in that the U.S. has security obligations elsewhere while China does not.

Mr. Kurlantzick answered that the focus on counterterrorism and Iraq does force the U.S. to allocate resources to those areas and therefore does open opportunities up for China. However, the U.S. response to the Financial Crisis resonates stronger than 9/11 or Iraq. For non-Muslim countries of the region, terrorism and Iraq are not major issues. What is important is trade and investment. Southeast Asian officials still discuss the negative impact of the Financial Crisis.

India has been changing its policies in the region, most notably its policy toward Burma. The response has been more positive in countries such as Singapore that have significant Indian populations. Japan will have a difficult time improving its image; Japanese government actions are alienating countries rather than building support.

An audience member asked whether influence in the region is a zero-sum game and whether greater Chinese integration with Asia is something the U.S. should worry about. Mr. Kurlantzick said for the most part influence is not a zero-sum game. China has shown a willingness to work with the U.S. and countries in the region on some non-traditional security issues. In other aspects, such as democratization, particularly in mainland Southeast Asia, there may be a zero-sum game. The U.S.

and China have divergent ideas of how they would like to see these governments progress. China is clearly more integrated in the region with Beijing backing up rhetoric with resources and specific initiatives. As long as U.S. interests in the region are limited, China is always going to be more integrated.

Another audience member asked about the role of Islam – how do Southeast Asian countries view China’s treatment of its Muslim population? Mr. Kurlantzick responded that China has not used this as a strategy in the region and that few Southeast Asian countries with Muslim populations are aware of Chinese policies toward its own Muslims. The negative regional response to U.S. counterterrorism policy has made China look good by not doing anything.