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**Monopoly broken – again? The emergence of China's
alternative soft power**

Dr Barbara Onnis
Department of History, Politics and International Relations
University of Cagliari
(email: bonnis@unica.it)

Abstract

The rise of China is one of the most important geopolitical events of this century and China's position today as a great power is indeed irrefutable. There is a general consensus among observers and analysts that the 21st century will be 'China's Century' (中国世纪 *Zhongguo shiji*), as the 20th century was for the United States and the 19th century for Great Britain. Following the Soviet Union's implosion and the end of the cold war, Beijing leaders and policy makers thought that the world would evolve towards a multi-polar structure, but from about the middle of the 1990s, they realized that the United States was not only remaining a world superpower, but was also showing determination to assert clear world domination – witness for e.g. Nato's eastward expansion in 1994 and the re-negotiation of the guidelines of the US-Japan alliance in 1997. In other words, it seemed that uni-polarity was likely to be the most viable world order structure for the foreseeable future, while China's calls for multi-polarity appeared increasingly "out of touch with reality".¹ In such a U.S.-dominated global order, China needed to find a proper role, conforming to its inexorable rise and increasing ambitions. The main goal of Chinese leaders from then on has been trying, by 'peaceful' means, to (re-)gain a great-power status for China on a par with its economic and military capabilities, by using soft power instruments, in sharp contrast to the hegemonic behaviour simultaneously displayed by the US. China's soft power policy has been launched worldwide, sometimes at the expense of the West, and the United States in particular. The main targets of such a policy have been its neighbouring countries – South East Asian and Central Asian countries – but also some African and Latin American governments which the U.S., and the West in general, have tried to marginalize (Sudan, Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan) or whose bilateral relationship with the United States is one of dubious trust (Philippines or Cambodia in South East Asia, Venezuela in Latin America). The purpose of Beijing's soft power approach has been to spread Chinese values throughout the world to project a more benevolent view of the country, in order to contrast the so called "China threat" argument and thus to assuage the fears of the neighbouring countries, which had arisen as a result of the more assertive regional policies of the early to mid 1990s with regard to Taiwan and the South East China Sea. China's new policy has of course also been driven by its unprecedented need for resources necessary both for its continued economic growth and, with economic growth being the cornerstone of China's social stability, for the survival of the communist regime itself. In some cases, as in Central Asia, where China's presence is evident in one of the few institutional structures of the world outside of the U.S.' reach, i.e. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it has also aimed at trying to reduce American influence in an area which Beijing has always considered one of its traditional zones of influence. In this paper we are going to analyse the feasibility of implementing such a policy, especially the possibility of Beijing's social and economic model becoming a credible alternative to the U.S./Western model and for Chinese soft power to seriously rival the American monopoly of influence.

Key words: 'China threat' theory; "Peaceful rise" theory; grand strategy; soft power; Beijing consensus; multilateralism; SCO

Introduction

Different interpretations of China's rise

The re-emergence of China as a great power is one of the most important geopolitical events in this century. The extraordinary economic growth that People's Republic of China (PRC) has sustained

¹ Quoted in R. Foot, "Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging", in *International Affairs*, 82, 1 (2006), pp. 77-94, esp. p. 81.

in the last three decades has not been followed – as many hoped – by democratic reforms, but has witnessed instead an exponential growth in its political and diplomatic weight. The result is that China is today a great regional power (地区强国 *diqu qiangguo*), looking forward to becoming a world power (全球强国 *quanqiu qiangguo*) in a few decades. This is the main reason why Beijing is more than ever intent on affirming its new role in the international arena, as shown by the politics China is and has been carrying out in specific areas such as Africa, Latin America and Central Asia. It is interesting to note that in all these cases, Chinese foreign policy is mainly driven by what has been called the “hunger for oil”, the “bulimia for raw materials”;² or the “global hunt for energy”.³ At the same time, China aims to re-gain the central role she had played for millennia as *the* Middle Kingdom (中国 *Zhongguo*), which was undermined by the incursions of imperialist Western Powers starting from the second half of the eighteenth century, precipitating the so-called Chinese ‘century of shame and humiliation’ (百年耻辱 *bainian chiru*), which lasted from the end of the Opium War in 1843 to the Japanese surrender in 1945. In actual fact, China being a pre-eminent player on the world stage would not be a first. Up until 1830 China had the largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world, accounting for about 25% of the world GDP; today, despite its phenomenal growth, Chinese GDP is about 8% - 9% (while the United States still accounts for about 25%). In these terms, China’s rise should be rather seen as an attempt to catch up “its previous glory”, a way to re-gain a central position on the world stage, and its ambition to re-achieve great-power status (强国地位 *qiangguo diwei*) interpreted as an effort to avoid another “century of shame and humiliation”. However China’s economic success has alarmed many analysts and has prompted politicians – both in Western as well as in some Asian countries – to wonder what kind of power would an increasingly strong and assertive China become. Many observers have subscribed to the realist argument that its rise will be a kind of “zero-sum” game where the rise of one power will lead to the decline of another. Indeed, over the past decade there has been a heated debate in the West over the potential challenge of an increasingly strong and assertive China not only to the Asia-Pacific region but to the entire world. Many questions have animated such a debate; however they all can be summarised in the following “dilemma”, i.e., “will a more prosperous and powerful China be an irrational, bellicose nation that will challenge the existing international order” or “will it be a peaceful, responsible and constructive member of the international community, respectful of international society’s rules?”⁴ In other words, “will China be an expansionist state or a conservative one?”⁵

Those who subscribe to the first option (the so called ‘China threat’ theory, 中国威胁理论 *Zhongguo weixie lilun*) have argued that the economic and military rise of China signifies a threat to Asian and global security since it will potentially “upset the balance of power and spark realignments in East Asia as well as in the world”;⁶ in the US, the strongly influential ‘neo-cons’ in the Bush Administration have warned that the prospects of China’s emergence as a great power would challenge American primacy, with China seeking to extend sovereignty by launching

² F. Mazzei e V. Volpi, *Asia al centro*, Università Bocconi Editore, Milano, 2006, p. 168.

³ D. Zweig and Bi Jianhai, “China’s Global Hunt for Energy”, *Foreign Affairs* 84:5, Sept.-Oct. 2005 (internet ed.).

⁴ Rex Li, ‘Security challenge of an ascendant China: great power emergence and international stability’, in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese foreign policy. Pragmatism and strategic behavior* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 23-57, esp. p. 23.

⁵ For an overview of both argumentations see H. Yee and I. Storey, “Introduction”, in H. Yee and I. Storey, eds., *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2002, pp. 6-10; D. Roy, “The ‘China Threat’ Issue: Major Arguments”, in *Asian Survey*, 38, 8, August 1996, pp. 767-770; A. Goldstein, “Great Expectations: Interpreting China’s Arrival”, *International Security*, 23, 3, Winter 1997/98, pp. 62-71; A.I. Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”, *International Security*, 27, 4, Spring 2003, pp. 5-56.

⁶ Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Foreign Policy. Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior”, in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese foreign policy. Pragmatism and strategic behavior* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 3-20, esp. p. 3.

aggressive warfare against its neighbours.⁷ By contrast, other scholars have argued that the PRC's increasing integration into the international system – from the acceptance of the legitimate government of China within the UN,⁸ to the entry into the WTO – has favoured the creation of “constraints on its foreign conduct as well as incentives to adapt to the prevailing norms in contemporary international relations” which contribute to making China a conservative power and to predictions that it will probably seek to maintain the status quo (*yuanzhuang*) in the foreseeable future.⁹

This policy debate has coincided with the theoretical debate between realism and liberalism among international relations scholars. One of the main postulates of realism is that the rise and the fall of great powers is an integral part of the basic norms of change and development in interstate relations. As pointed out by Kenneth Waltz, in the last three centuries “the drama of modern history has turned on the rise and fall of great powers”.¹⁰ As mentioned before, realists see power in terms of a “zero-sum” game. According to John Mearsheimer “States are principally concerned about their relative power position in the system; hence they look for opportunities to take advantage of each other. If anything, they prefer to see adversaries decline, and thus will do whatever they can to speed up the process and maximize the distance of the fall”;¹¹ in other words, all great powers are inherently revisionist because in an anarchic international system¹² states are driven to achieve maximum security through maximum power to ensure their own survival. China is no exception.¹³ Followers of the power transition theory confirm that a rising power will seek to challenge the status of the leading power in the international hierarchy, potentially leading to a war between them. China, as an emerging power, is naturally dissatisfied with its role in the international system and is therefore a revisionist power.¹⁴ Furthermore, as an emerging power with a great civilization and a history of being humiliated by foreign countries, China will be likely to behave in the same way as other rising powers (for example the Wilhelmine Germany) did in the past.¹⁵

On the other hand, the main liberal argument states that China's reforms and growing economic interactions with the capitalist world will contribute to making it more open and democratic to the great advantage of international stability and security. Liberals often point to the transformation of Taiwan, South Korea, and other East Asian countries (“the little dragons”) where economic modernization has been followed by political liberalization and democratization, to lend credibility to their point of view on China's rise.¹⁶ From the liberal perspective, both China and its trade partners have common interests in maintaining stability and prosperity in the post-cold war and they should instead seek to maximize their absolute gains through international cooperation.¹⁷ Given the

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ UN Resolution 2758, “Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations”, New York, NY. October, 25th, 1971, at <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/26/ares26.htm>.

⁹ R. S. Ross, “Beijing as a conservative power”, *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 2, March-April 1997, p. 34.

¹⁰ K. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics”, *International Security*, 18, 2, Fall 1993, pp. 44-79, esp. p. 44.

¹¹ J. J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War”, *International Security*, 15, 1, Summer 1990, pp. 5-56, esp. p. 50.

¹² In international relations anarchism denotes the absence of a universal sovereign or worldwide government. In other words, it means that there is no hierarchically superior, coercive power with a prerogative to resolve disputes among nations. Barry Buzan in *People, State and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1983) distinguishes between an “unripe” and a “ripe” anarchy, and considers the international system born after 1945 a kind of “ripe anarchy”, where the existence of a great number of international institutions and the deep economical and cultural interdependence which characterizes the international community helps to reduce the major difficulties that can emerge among sovereign nations.

¹³ J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 29.

¹⁴ For an overview of the power transition theory, see A.F.K. Organski and J. Kugler, *The war ledger* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), pp. 19-23.

¹⁵ N. D. Kristof, “The Rise of China”, *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 5, November/December 1993, pp. 59-74, esp. 71-72.

¹⁶ Quoted in Rex Li, ‘Security challenge of an ascendant China: great power emergence and international stability’, *cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ivi*, p. 34.

importance of a peaceful global environment to Chinese economic modernization, China does not have any interest in destabilizing the existing regional and international order. At the same time, China's long term prospects of successfully modernizing its small and dated strategic nuclear force depends on its success at modernizing the country's economy, infrastructure, technology and human capital; therefore, as argued by Vice-admiral Thomas Wilson, "China is not likely to pose a challenge to US strategic primacy in the first two decades of the XXI century".¹⁸

Some critics of the "threat" assumption, such as Gerald Segal, have dismissed China as economically and militarily too weak to pose any real challenge to the West;¹⁹ similarly, Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross have pointed out that despite its sheer size, economic vitality and the drive to upgrade its military forces, China remains a vulnerable power, whose most pressing security problems are powerful rivals and potential foes on its own borders.²⁰

Summing up, we can say that the question remains a controversial issue. As Alastair Ian Johnston has astutely remarked, "it is not clear that describing China as a revisionist or non-status quo state is accurate at this moment in history".²¹ He takes China's ever-increasing willingness to adhere to the "rules of the game" by integrating into the extant international economic order and participation in multilateral organizations as clear evidence that it is actually a status quo power; moreover, while he recognises China's desire to reform some aspects of the international system (e.g. the 'Taiwan' issue), at the same time he thinks that Beijing's military expenditure does not appear to have reached such a level that it represents a real threat to U.S. primacy.²² Avery Goldstein focuses on the distinctive turn took by Chinese foreign policy after 1996, as a result of China's acceptance that the "constraints that come with working in multilateral settings was preferable to the risk of isolation and encirclement and could help foster a reputation for responsible international behaviour",²³ arguing that the PRC would probably like to see the formation of a multi-polar international system where it can play a greater role in global leadership as one of the great powers;²⁴ furthermore, he suggests that the economic interdependence and nuclear weaponry characterizing the present international system may help a new more peaceful power transition in the 21st century, since under such conditions a war between great powers would have inconceivably destructive consequences for all humanity.²⁵

China's response: the 'peaceful rise' theory

To counter the 'China Threat Theory' claims – dismissed as groundless and seen as a "myth created by the United States who needs an enemy to replace the former Soviet Union in their quest to maintain global hegemony"²⁶ – the Chinese government has launched a global public diplomacy campaign to convince the world of the nation's 'peaceful rise' (和平崛起 *heping jueqi*). The term was first used in a speech given by the former Vice-Principal of the Central Party School of the

¹⁸ Vice-Admiral Thomas R. Wilson, "Global Threats and Challenges through 2015", Statement for the Record, Senate Armed Service Committee, 8 March 2001, at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2001/010308tw.pdf> (last accessed July 18, 2007).

¹⁹ G. Segal, "Does China matter?", *Foreign Affairs*, 78, 5, September/October 1999, pp. 24-26.

²⁰ A. J. Nathan and R. R. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997).

²¹ A. I. Johnston, "Is China a status quo power?", *cit.*, p. 6.

²² *Ivi*, pp. 12-25; 39.

²³ A. Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 120.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 19-24.

²⁵ Quoted in P. Aron, "The Middle Kingdom. The Reinstatement of a Revisionist Great Power", Working paper, at <http://www.aronpatrik.com/china/greatpower.html>, p. 8.

²⁶ H. Yee and I. Storey, *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, *cit.*, ch. 1. According to some Chinese scholars (He Xin), the so-called 'China threat' is not concerned about their country's growing military capabilities, but rather with China's growing economic might. Cfr. *ivi*, p. 29.

Chinese Communist Party and actual President of China Reform Forum, Zheng Bijian, in late 2003 during the Boao Forum for Asia (the equivalent of Davos Forum for Asia) and soon reaffirmed by the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao in an ASEAN meeting as well as during his visit to the United States in December. It was used primarily to reassure South-East Asian countries and the United States that the rise of China's military and economic prominence will not pose a threat to peace and stability, and that other nations will benefit from China's rising power and influence.²⁷ Explicit in the doctrine is the notion that China's economic and military development is not a zero-sum game and that China is as much an economic opportunity as an economic competitor. The doctrine emphasizes the importance of soft power and is based in part on the premise that good relations with its neighbours will enhance rather than diminish its overall national power (综合国力 *zonghe guoli*). In diplomacy, the doctrine underlines multilateral cooperation through institutions and warns against the risks of a direct confrontation with the United States. In another speech given in September 2004, Zheng held that "China does not seek hegemony and predominance, nor will it toe the line of others. It advocates a new road toward a new international political and economic order by reforming and democratizing international relations. It will maintain world peace for its own development, which in turn will reinforce world peace. China is a constructive force – not a destructive one for peace and stability".²⁸ In other words, since the present level of economic development is relatively low, and by no means comprehensive, it is likely that for the next few decades – which China's top political leaders have dubbed one of "strategic opportunity" (战略机遇期 *zhanlue jiyu qi*) – the nation will be most preoccupied with securing a more comfortable and decent life for its people.²⁹ 'Maintaining harmonious development in economy and society' is thus the most important interest to be protected and China's current security goal is strictly related to creating a sustained, stable environment for its harmonious development in economy and society both at home and abroad.³⁰

The main evidence that China does not constitute a 'threat' and that its rise is mainly a pacific one is the recent skilful use that Beijing is making of soft power instruments aimed at improving its image around the world in order to gain influence which can be used to turn the present US-hegemonic world order into a multi-polar one.³¹ At the same time, the Chinese leadership is

²⁷ Zheng Bijian, "A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia", Boao Forum For Asia (2003), in The Brookings Institution, *China's peaceful rise: Speeches of Zheng Bijian 1997-2004*, 2005, at http://www.brookings.edu/fp/events/20050616_bijianlunch.pdf, pp. 13-7.

²⁸ Zheng Bijian, "China's Development and her New Path to a Peaceful Rise", Villa d'Este Forum (September 2004), in *ivi*, pp. 25-30, esp. p. 29.

²⁹ Zheng Bijian, "A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia", *cit.*, pp. 13-4. See also Zheng Bijian, "China's 'peaceful rise' to great power status", in *Foreign Affairs*, 84, 5, Sept.-Oct. 2005.

³⁰ Wang Xiangsui, "Key points of Chinese national security strategy", in *La Cina allo specchio*, ISPI, Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali, 3, Dicembre 2006, p. 7. Indeed, the creation of a harmonious society is also one of the main postulates of the 11th Five-year Plan (2006-2011), see Ma Kai, "The 11th Five-Year Plan: Targets, Paths and Policy Orientation", March 19, 2006, at http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/23/content_234832.htm. Therefore, according to Daniel Drezner, instead of continuing to voice China's "threat theory", the West, and the U.S. in particular, should be wisely trying to address the challenges and opportunities created by its rise. See D. W. Drezner, "The new new world order", 86, 2, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, (online ed.), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org>.

³¹ Chinese analysts have presented three possible types of multipolar systems: a three-polar world, in which the European community constitutes one pole, North America forms the second one, and the Asia-pacific region is rising as the third pole; a five-polar structure, which includes the United States, Germany, Russia, China and Japan; the third one presents a pattern of "one superpower and four big powers" (一超多强 *yichao duoqiang*), the superpower being the United States, while the big powers are the European Union, Japan, Russia and China. The most frequently mentioned pattern in Chinese literature on strategic studies has been the latter. Indeed, Chinese strategists admit that although the Cold War undermined the vitality of the United States, it has remained the sole superpower because of its comprehensive national strength, whether in terms of its economy, scientific and technological strength, military might, or foreign influence. See Suisheng Zhao, "Beijing's perception of the international system and foreign policy adjustment after the Tiananmen incident" in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese foreign policy, cit.*, pp. 142-3. An interesting

carefully trying to find common areas of interest with Washington, in order to secure its future. In reality, although Chinese-US relations continue to be characterized by more profound differences than any other bilateral relationship between major powers in the world today, their interests have grown so intertwined that cooperation is the best way to serve both countries.³² Avery Goldstein describes this double policy as a ‘strategy of transition’, which tries to “avoid the provocative consequences of the more straightforward hegemonic and balancing strategies”.³³ He also speaks of a ‘neo-Bismarkian’ strategy, aiming at reinstating itself as a great multilateral power without provoking strong rivals (especially the United States) or alarming the neighbouring countries.³⁴

China’s emerging soft power: strong points and limitations

Until the mid-1990s, Chinese foreign policy was limited essentially to trying to repair the damage to the country’s stature and reduce the isolation that followed international outrage over the military crackdown in Tiananmen Square on 3-4 June 1989.³⁵ “Observe developments soberly, maintain our position, meet challenges calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, remain free of ambition, never claim leadership”: according to Deng Xiaoping, these were the key principles for handling foreign policy after the Tiananmen incident.³⁶ It was only after Deng’s famous 1992 tour in the South (the so-called 南巡 Nanxun) that the regime began to reveal greater self-confidence at home and abroad. In order to avoid the same dramatic fate of the former Soviet Union, Beijing decided to accelerate policy reform. The resulting boom had international political effects as the Chinese government made peace and development the central themes of its diplomacy.³⁷ “Enhancing confidence, reducing troubles, expanding cooperation, and avoiding confrontation” became the new principles of Chinese foreign policy with particular reference to the PRC’s need to stabilize relations with the US.³⁸

In a couple of years China began to take a less confrontational, more sophisticated, more confident and, when required, a more constructive approach (simply pragmatic) toward regional and global affairs, dropping its communist ideology, at least in dealing with the outside world; expanding the number of its bilateral relationships; joining various trade and security agreements; abandoning its previous aversion to multi-lateralism, seen until then as a potential vehicle for outside pressures on China; deepening its participation in key multilateral organizations; helping face global security issues; increasing its engagement with the UN Security Council and its participation in peacekeeping operations; undertaking a major involvement in global arms control and non proliferation affairs. More important, it gradually started to abandon its “long-held victim

study of such patterns may be found in B. Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press Ltd., 2004), Part II.

³² Wang Jisi, “China’s search for stability with America”, *Foreign Affairs*, 84, 5, Sept.-Oct. 2005. In a recent speech given to students of the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Shanghai, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stressed the importance of Sino-U.S. cooperation, arguing that there would be no winner if the two countries got into a conflict”, see “Kissinger stresses importance of Sino-U.S. cooperation in Shanghai speech”, April 06, 2007, at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200704/06/eng20070406_364322.html (last accessed 05-05-07).

³³ A. Goldstein, *Rising to the challenge: China’s grand strategy and international security*, *cit.*, pp. 38-40.

³⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 204-212; by the same author, see also “An emerging China’s emerging grand strategy: a neo-Bismarkian turn?”, in G. Ikenberry and M. Mastanduno, eds, *International relations theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 57-106.

³⁵ A. Goldstein, “The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy: A Rising Power’s Emerging Choice”, *The China Quarterly*, 168, Dec. 2001, pp. 835-864, esp. p. 838.

³⁶ Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior”, in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese foreign policy*, *cit.*, pp. 66-88, esp. p. 85.

³⁷ A. Goldstein, “The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy...”, *cit.*, p. 838.

³⁸ Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior”, *cit.*, p. 85. By the same author see also “Beijing’s perceptions of the International System and Foreign Policy Adjustment after the Tiananmen incident”, in Suisheng Zhao, ed., *Chinese foreign policy*, *cit.*, pp. 140-149.

mentality” (受害者心态 *shouhaizhe xintai*) and begun to promote instead a “great-power mentality” (大国心态 *daguo xintai*).³⁹ The main result of such new assertive foreign policy may be found in the rise of international prestige – what Robert Gilpin calls the “reputation for power”⁴⁰ – acquired by China at the turn of the 21st century, thanks to the pragmatic policy developed in the post-Mao era.

Various means were adopted to demonstrate that China’s increased economic and political power would not constitute a menace to others. From 1996 there emerged what Avery Goldstein has labelled “China’s grand strategy” aimed at “engineering China’s rise to great power status within the constraints of a unipolar international system that the United States dominates. It is designed to sustain the conditions necessary for continuing China’s program of economic and military modernization as well as to minimize the risks that others, most importantly the peerless United States, will view the ongoing increase in China’s capabilities as an unacceptably dangerous threat that must be parried or perhaps even forestalled. China’s grand strategy, in short, aims to increase the country’s international clout without triggering a counterbalance reaction”.⁴¹ Central in the new strategy was the so called “new security concept” (新安全观 *xin anquan guan*), intended to promote “mutual trust, equality, mutual benefits and co-ordination”, resuming the themes of the “five principles of peaceful coexistence”⁴² and simultaneously condemning the outmoded “power politics” mentality. Beijing started to consider that multilateral diplomacy should be a good substitute for old-style bilateral military alliances (especially the U.S. alliances with Japan) as well as a means for the deploying of more advanced weapons systems (such as ballistic missile defences) in the region.⁴³ The main targets of China’s new diplomacy were initially its neighbouring countries, especially South East Asian nations, struck by Financial crises starting from 1997, and those countries that had emerged from the ashes of the former Soviet Empire. With the latter, Beijing engaged immediately in constructive dialogue about border disputes, in normalising state-to-state relations and in the resolution of problems dating back to the Czarist era. In April 1996, the signing of the “first multilateral treaty to build confidence in the Asia-Pacific region” between China, Russia and three of the five new Central Asia republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) which formed the so-called ‘Shanghai Five’ mechanism, was taken as a symbol of the “powerful rebuttal of the ‘China threat theory’” and evidence that “instead of being a ‘threat’, China actually plays a constructive role in preserving peace and stability in its peripheral areas”.⁴⁴ Although China’s espousal of multilateral diplomacy has been partial and conditional right from the beginning, and it has continued to prefer bilateral diplomacy for solving issues touching on its vital interests (especially sovereignty disputes like Taiwan), multilateralism has become one of the tools available for countering more hostile views of China and fostering a reputation for responsible international behaviour. So, even if in limited contexts, such as in the above mentioned case, multilateralism has clearly served specific interests for Beijing, and the change has undoubtedly been considerable. For instance, consultations and agreements among the ‘Shanghai Five’ would in fact facilitate China’s access to Central Asian energy supplies and help it cope with a growing concern about the risks of foreign support for Islamic separatism in the western provinces.⁴⁵

³⁹ E.S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s New Diplomacy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 82, 6, Nov.-Dec. 2003, pp. 22-35.

⁴⁰ R. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 31.

⁴¹ A. Goldstein, *Rising to the challenge: China’s grand strategy and international security*, *cit.*, p. 12.

⁴² First articulated at the Bandung Conference, they emphasize: mutual respect of each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each others’ internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; pacific coexistence.

⁴³ Goldstein, “The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy: A Rising Power’s Emerging Choice”, *cit.*, pp. 844-5. See also R. Foot, *cit.*, p. 85.

⁴⁴ Quoted in A. Goldstein, *Rising to the challenge: China’s grand strategy and international security*, *cit.*, pp. 120-1.

⁴⁵ A. Goldstein, “The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy: A Rising Power’s Emerging Choice”, *cit.*, p. 843.

However, it was the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 that gave Beijing the occasion to inaugurate China's soft power (软实力 *ruanli*).⁴⁶ According to Joseph Nye: "Soft power 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 ideas, and policies [...] If I can get you to do what I want, then I do not have to use carrots and sticks to make you do it".⁴⁷ "The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."⁴⁸ The idea of soft power is that countries can often best achieve their goals through persuasion rather than resorting to force. In other words, while "hard" power uses military and economic instruments, soft power instruments are mainly cultural and ideological. When Nye initially coined the term, he used a limited definition that excluded aid and investment and formal diplomacy, which were considered more traditional, harder forms of influence.

In the Asian context, however, both China and its neighbours held a broader idea of what constitutes soft power, comprehensive of all elements outside of the security realm, including investment and aid.⁴⁹ Examples of such a broader idea include the attraction of public diplomacy, such as funded government programs with the intention of influencing public opinion abroad, business actions abroad, trade incentives, cultural and educational exchange opportunities, and so on. As is well known, during the Asian financial crisis Chinese government moved promptly to offer economic assistance to countries affected and announced it would not be devaluing its own currency as a response to the crisis; by contrast, in Southeast Asian countries many complained about the behaviour of the United States, which seemed mainly interested in imposing an 'IMF straitjacket'.⁵⁰ In addition, Beijing started to engage far more actively with Asian multilateral security and economic organizations, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and APEC, aiming thus to demonstrate that China was not only a 'peaceful, developing' power, but was also emerging as a 'responsible great power' in world politics.⁵¹

As we have seen, China's economic progress and a series of 'strategic opportunities' such as the implosion of the former Soviet Union (which during previous decades had been America's primary competitor in soft power resources) and the Asian financial crisis have fostered a steady expansion in Beijing's cultural and diplomatic influence globally, especially in the developing world: in Southeast Asia, but also in Latin America, Africa and Central Asia. Of course, China has benefited from U.S. policy failures, especially the Iraq war which has dramatically affected its soft power appeal,⁵² as well as from the broader unpopularity of the World Bank, IMF, and Western powers in general, but the fact that its popularity has also increased in countries which still support the United States suggests that such an increase in Chinese popularity is not only due to U.S. failures, but also to successful Chinese policy.⁵³ While some experts consider China's increasingly expanding influence as clear evidence that the 'Chinese model' is becoming a more and more attractive one, others voice scepticism of the possibility that China's soft power will succeed, because of its

⁴⁶ Alan Hunter has properly pointed out that in China the concept of 'soft power' has been a fundamental part of military thinking for over two thousand years. One of the most important and most widely known principles of Sunzi's *Art of War* is in fact that the best strategist is the one who can "win victories without striking a blow". See A. Hunter, *China: soft power and cultural influence*, Center for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, at <http://ipra2006.com/papers/CRPBC/ChinaSoftPowerAndCulturalInfluence.doc>

⁴⁷ J. S. Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. X, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ J. Kurlantzick, *Charm offensive: how China's soft power is transforming the world* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 6.

⁵⁰ E. Economy, "China's Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the United States", *Japan Focus*, 6 October, 2005, at <http://japanfocus.org/products/details/1815>.

⁵¹ R. Foot, *cit.*, pp. 85-6.

⁵² J. S. Nye, Jr., "The Decline of America's Soft Power", *Foreign Affairs*, 83, 3, May/June 2004, pp. 16-20.

⁵³ G. Rachman, "The hard evidence that China's soft power policy is working", Febr. 20 2007, *FT.com*, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/367e1906-c089-11db-995a-000b5df10621.html>.

considerable internal challenges: the increasing gap between rural and urban areas, pollution, corruption, not to mention its authoritarian political system, all of which may undermine China's potential appeal.⁵⁴

The 'potential' of China's soft power

According to Elizabeth Economy, if we subscribe to Nye's definition of soft power, which mainly relies on the appeal of one's country's culture and values, "the Chinese have historically had a very-well established network for promoting this kind of influence".⁵⁵ The former *Middle kingdom* was itself a cultural and ideological paradigm within the so-called China world order, which considered China as the centre of the only known civilization and compelled its neighbours to recognize Chinese superiority by paying tribute to the *tianzi*, i.e. the Chinese emperor.⁵⁶ In doing so, the Chinese empire used peaceful persuasion as a means of bringing non-Chinese into the empire without establishing direct control over their territories; still, it cannot be denied that the Chinese sino-centric system was based on military might as well.⁵⁷ However, Joseph Kurlantzick, in his recent fascinating book dedicated specifically to the ways China has been building its global influence, by using soft power and diplomacy to appeal to its neighbours and distant countries alike, points out that China perceives 'soft power' as "anything that is outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investments and participation in multilateral organizations – Nye's carrots and sticks".⁵⁸ "Indeed", stresses Kurlantzick, "Beijing offers the charm of a lion, not of a mouse: it can threaten other nations with these sticks if they do not help China achieve its goals, but it can offer sizable carrots if they do".⁵⁹

One of the main purposes of Beijing's soft power 'offensive' has been "to spread Chinese values throughout the world and to project a more benign view of the country, one that is unquestionably committed to a peaceful rise".⁶⁰ Being fully aware that many countries were anxious about a rising China, Chinese leaders were nonetheless confident that by looking more friendly and attractive, foreigners would see China's growing power in a more positive and relaxed way, thus assuaging their fears. In a signed article recently published by the People's Daily, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao dwelled upon the significance of promoting a more positive image of China relying on soft power tools. Besides stressing the importance of cultural exchanges as well as the necessity of their further enhancement – "Cultural exchanges are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of people of all countries and an important way to project a country's image [...] We should use various forms and means, including tour performance and exhibition, Chinese language teaching, academic exchange and sponsoring 'culture year' activities, to promote Chinese culture and increase its appeal overseas. We should implement a 'going global' cultural strategy, develop culture industry, improve the international competitiveness of Chinese cultural enterprises and products, increase the export of books, films, TV programs and other cultural products, so that these Chinese cultural products (particularly the best of them) will reach the rest of the world" – he also underlined the importance of an "independent foreign policy of peace" and of "using public diplomacy in a more

⁵⁴ E. Pan, "China's Soft Power Initiative", May 18, 2006, Council on Foreign Relations, at <http://www.cfr.org/publications/10715/> (last accessed 10-06-2007).

⁵⁵ Quoted in E. Pan, "China's Soft Power Initiative", *cit.*

⁵⁶ J. K. Fairbank, *The China world order. Traditional China's foreign relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁵⁷ See G. Andornino, "Il Regno di Mezzo tra principi e *realpolitik*", in F. Armao and Anna Caffarena (eds), *Introduzione al mondo nuovo* (Milano: Guerini Studio, 2006), pp. 253-77, esp. p. 269.

⁵⁸ J. Kurlantzick, *Charm offensive, cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁰ J. F. Paradise, "Can China's soft power offensive succeed?", *Asia Media*, March 5, 2007, at <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=65078> (last accessed 10-03-2007)

effective way” in order to publicize China’s achievement in reforming and opening up its economy and society.⁶¹

As a result of the vigorous embracing of the concept of soft power, China’s international influence has been increasing significantly in the last few years. On the language front, it has invested in the promotion of the study of Chinese language and culture worldwide, aiming at making Mandarin a leading language not only in Asia – where it hopes it can become one day the lingua franca for Asian business transactions – but also all over the world. An important contribution on this front has been the opening or subsidising of many language schools to teach Chinese throughout the world, including a network of Confucius Institutes (孔子学校 *Kongzi xuexiao*) that are the equivalent to the British Council, Goethe Institute or Alliance Française.⁶² It has boosted its foreign aid to defy the US as a donor in some countries, has increased overseas investment, launched a series of trade initiatives, developing a dozen free-trade deals. With regard to diplomacy, as we have already seen, it has also evolved in a sophisticated and active way, thanks also to the upgrading of its diplomatic corps (half of the country’s 4000 diplomats are younger than 35). It has even created its own version of the Peace Corps – the China Association for Youth Volunteers – sending young people to developing countries such as Ethiopia, Laos, Burma, to work on long-term community-assistance projects, as well as to better China’s global image in the process.⁶³ Moreover, arts, crafts like dance, music, acupuncture, herbal medicines, not to mention martial arts and fengshui, are now part of the popular scene in most countries of the world.⁶⁴ The commitment to such initiatives has also been accompanied by a series of major achievements and breakthroughs such as the Chinese entertainment industry’s repeated international awards⁶⁵ – almost everybody today has heard of the director Zhang Yimou and the actresses Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi; the hosting of its first-ever Formula One in Shanghai at the end of September 2005, as well as the awarding of the 2008 Olympics to Beijing and Shanghai’s 2010 World Expo.

To a certain extent, these efforts have helped Beijing to reduce the previously perceived “China threat”, especially in South East Asia, where China is increasingly being seen as a “benign power” and a responsible actor on the world stage.⁶⁶ Indeed, China’s use of ‘soft power’ in the region has been so effective that, for the first time in half a century, Washington is facing a situation in which another country’s appeal outstrips its own in an important area, as Southeast Asia is. “Chinese business people, cultural elites, and policy makers are given the type of access in Southeast Asia once reserved for U.S. elites”.⁶⁷ The same may be said for some African and Latin American countries and, even if to a quite lesser extent, for Central Asia.

⁶¹ “Our Historical Tasks at the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues Concerning China’s Foreign Policy”, *People’s Daily Online*, March 07, 2007, at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200703/07/eng20070307_355104.html

⁶² A. Hunter, “China: soft power and cultural influence”, Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, 2006, at <http://ipra2006.com/papers/CRPBC/ChinaSoftPowerAndCulturalInfluence.doc>. After establishing a pilot institute in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2004, the first Confucius Institute opened on November 21 2004 in Seoul, but it was during the First International Conference on Chinese Language held in Beijing on July 2005, that the Chinese Government officially acknowledged the first group of 25 Confucius Institutes around the world. The number has now increased to more than 120, distributed in 49 different countries and regions. According to the plans of the Office of Chinese Language Council International (OCLCI), the number of such Institutes will reach 500 by the end of 2010. See “China to set up 3 Confucius in Central, West Asia”, Xinhua News Agency, Jan. 25, 2007, at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/education/197375.htm>.

⁶³ J. Kurlantzick, “China Buys the Soft Sell”, *Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 2006, p. B03, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/13/AR2006101301401.html>.

⁶⁴ A. Hunter, “China: soft power and cultural influence”, *cit.*

⁶⁵ E. Teo, “Asian Nations hitch their wagons to the Chinese star”, *On Line opinion*, 6 June 2005, at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/eng.asp?article=3521>.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ The decline of U.S. soft power in the region is largely due to America’s “slow reaction to the Asian Financial crisis as well as to the post-9/11 counterterrorism myopia”, J. Kurlantzick, “China’s Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power”, Policy Brief, 47, June 2006, at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf, p. 1. On this subject see also “China’s soft power in Southeast Asia: what does it mean for the region, and for the U.S.?”, June 13,

Some scholars do not share such optimism concerning China's reliance on soft power in attracting other countries. Bruce Gilley, for example, observes that Beijing exercises its soft power alongside hard power, including its military threat and its skilfulness in influencing other countries' political or economic security. "As a UN Security Council member with a veto, it can affect the fate of a lot of states [...] That's not China being persuasive; it's China wielding a club".⁶⁸

Main outcomes of China's soft power

Using soft power tools to project a benign national image, positioning itself as a model of social and economic success, is just one of the aims Beijing wants to achieve. Experts argue that China's increasing use of soft power instruments is also driven by the need to secure the resources to fuel its economic miracle, as well as by the desire to isolate Taiwan, in order to supplant its influence around the world. Indeed, from 1994 onwards Beijing has pursued a policy aiming at "using all economic and diplomatic resources to reward countries that are willing to isolate Taiwan". Such a policy goes beyond convincing nations to adhere to the "One China" policy (一个中国政策, *yige Zhongguo zhengce*), and includes attempts to keep Taiwanese representatives from participating in non-governmental regional forums, punishing Asian businessmen for links to Taiwan and so on.⁶⁹ The result is that the number of nations which still recognize ROC-Taiwan is actually decreasing and today comprises mainly small and insignificant countries.⁷⁰ This strategic competition between Beijing and Taipei is especially evident in Africa and in Latin America, where PRC is now using the same strategy ROC-Taiwan had used in the 1950s to gain its allies – mainly generous financial aid and trade deals – in order to secure the oil and the raw materials it needs; but it extends even inside the Confucius Institutes, where students are taught simplified Chinese characters (简体字 *jiantizi*), used in the mainland, instead of the classical Chinese characters (繁体字 *fantizi*) still used by the "rebel" province.

Regardless of this unquestionable success, observers reject the possibility of China becoming a "soft superpower", as the United States still is, despite the backlashes of the Iraq war. On the contrary, there is a general belief that Beijing is most likely to become a 'paradigm', thus to project its soft power, only in the poorer developing countries, since with its extraordinary economic success it can promote an alternative theory of development and international relations.⁷¹ In an essay published in 2004, the former *Time* foreign editor Joshua Cooper Ramo used the term 'Beijing consensus' (北京共识 'Beijing gongshi') to label the above-mentioned 'paradigm', considering that the developing countries appeared increasingly disillusioned with the widely-discredited doctrinaire "Washington consensus", and in the meantime looked more and more impressed by a "Chinese model" that emphasized pragmatism, innovation, social cohesion and self-determination.⁷² Furthermore, unlike Western economic development models, it did not link economic and financial aid to preconditions such as good governance, democracy, transparency,

2006, at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=892&&prog=zch> (last accessed January 10, 2007). See also J. Dragsbaek Schmidt, "China's 'soft power' re-emergence in Southeast Asia", Paper presented at the inaugural workshop "China World" on 10-11 March 2006 at Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School; E. Economy, "China's Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the United States", *Japan Focus*, 6 October, 2005, at <http://japanfocus.org/products/details/1815>.

⁶⁸ Quoted in E. Pan, "China's Soft Power Initiative", *cit.*

⁶⁹ J. Kurlantzick, "China's Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power", *cit.*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ These are: Belize, Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Gambia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Kiribati, Malawi, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Nicaragua, Palau, Panama, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, São Tomé e Príncipe, Solomon Islands, Swaziland, Tuvalu, Vatican City.

⁷¹ G. Rachman, "The hard evidence that China's soft power policy is working", *cit.*

⁷² J. Cooper Ramo, "The Beijing Consensus: notes on the new physics of Chinese power", The Foreign Policy Center, 2004, at <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>, pp. 3-4.

rule of law, respect for human rights and other tedious issues to dictatorial governments around the world. Not surprisingly, after its publication, Cooper Ramo's essay immediately caught observers' attention, especially in those "nations around the world who are trying to figure out not simply how to develop their countries, but also how to fit into the international order in a way that allows them to be truly independent, to protect their way of life and political choices in a world with a single massively powerful centre of gravity".⁷³ In China, an interesting debate went on in the pages of the People's Daily between the former president of Beijing University and current Chair of the Instructing Committee on Economics Teaching of the Ministry of Education, Wu Shuqing, and the Director of the Shanghai School of Economics Research Center at Shanghai's University of Finance and Economics, Cheng Enfu. Wu dwelled upon the differences between "Washington consensus" and "Beijing consensus" arguing that while the first one had been put forward deliberately and systematically, the second emerged spontaneously from international opinions against the background of China's fast economic development since the reform and opening up and considerable rise in people's living standard, whereas Cheng focused his attention on neoliberalism's contradictions, affirming that "none of the 49 countries, identified by the United Nations as the least developed countries (also called the fourth world), has become strong and prosperous with Neo-liberalist approaches such as privatization. Some even became poorer".⁷⁴ While the debate was still going on in China, many developing countries started to see China as a 'promised land', and to point clearly to a "Chinese way", looking at it as an alternative model of leadership to that of the United States. This is particularly true for some African countries, whose leaders' espousal of the 'Chinese pattern' seems to reflect what is most attractive about Beijing's soft power, i.e. a long-standing history of friendly ties, provision of appreciated 'no strings-attached' (other than affirmation of a "One China" policy) financial and technical aid to both elites and the most needy, and growing commerce between the world's largest developing nation and the continent with the most developing nations.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the importance of the "Beijing consensus" should not be exaggerated since it has yet to receive universal recognition, and its substance is still debated. In a new pamphlet called *Brand China*, published at the beginning of 2007, Cooper Ramo himself gives a much less optimistic view of China's image. Using global opinion research, he concludes that China's attraction is weak, it is not trusted overseas and, even worse, its knowledge around the world is scarce: by 2004/2005, the former *Middle Kingdom* appeared to be the most poorly understood country on earth.⁷⁶ Cooper Ramo identifies in the discrepancy between China's image of itself and how it is viewed by the rest of the world one of its greatest strategic challenges; that is why, alongside its other reforms, China should undertake a 'fifth transformation' – that of its national image – if the trust and understanding necessary for the next stage of its development are to be achieved.⁷⁷ This is particularly true after the recent scandals concerning the export of counterfeit products by the PRC. In truth, even some of the most praised examples of Chinese soft power – such as the 'special' relations Beijing has established with some African and Central Asian authoritarian governments like Sudan or Zimbabwe, or Uzbekistan after the 'Andijian disorders' – can be used instead as confirmation of the damaging impression that China makes by always placing profits above human rights. In Africa "people appreciate that Chinese go into sectors the US doesn't, and don't attach any political conditions to their involvement [...] The Chinese have a reputation for finishing infrastructure projects quickly and on budget. On the other hand, Chinese companies bring their own labourers in for projects, raising objections that they should be creating more jobs locally. And Chinese goods

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ "The 'Washington Consensus' and 'Beijing Consensus'", June 18, 2005, at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200506/18/eng20050618_190947.html.

⁷⁵ D. Thompson, "China's Soft Power in Africa: From the 'Beijing Consensus' to Health Diplomacy", *China Brief*, 5, 21, Oct. 13, 2005, at http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=408&&issue_id=3491.

⁷⁶ Cfr. J. Cooper Ramo, *Brand China*, The Foreign Policy Center, 2007, at <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/827.pdf>, esp. p. 26.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 20.

are flooding African markets and competing with African products”, affirms Princeton Lyman, Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow for Africa policy studies.⁷⁸ So, it is argued that China’s growing influence seems to have little to do with a new ‘Beijing consensus’ but instead seems rather to be a continuation of old-fashioned power politics.⁷⁹

From this point of view, even though the United States has lost most of its attractiveness in the past few years, it seems to have more chances to recover its image than China does. Surveys regularly suggest that in spite of the backlashes provoked by the Bush administration’s foreign policy, American society – thanks to its universalistic culture – still retains much of its international appeal. On the contrary, while China’s foreign policy engenders little hostility around the world (with a few exceptions), it is its political and social system that arouses some worries among foreigners. In fact, China’s impressive economic growth is widely associated with pollution, cheap labour, unemployment, disrespect of human rights, lack of transparency, and so on.⁸⁰ In other words, observes Bruce Gilley, “no matter how strong China’s charm offensive grows, it remains an authoritarian society that jails dissidents and puts down revolutions by its own people [...] Most of China’s influence is still security-related. It wins its influence because it can pose a threat – military, economic, or political – to many countries”.⁸¹ Indeed, it is interesting to notice that in all the above-mentioned cases, the diffusion of China’s appeal is mainly economic, having little to do with the acceptance of China’s values and its *model of life*. This is maybe less true for Southeast Asia, where there is a huge Chinese diaspora which is naturally attracted by Chinese culture and civilisation; but certainly the same cannot be said about Africa, Latin America and especially Central Asia, where Chinese have traditionally been perceived as aspiring hegemon, if not outright aggressors. In the next paragraph we will focus our attention in this last area, where China has invested much of its efforts since the beginning of the 1990s to changing its image, being careful to present its policy in a positive light and respect the specific characteristics of each republic that has emerged from the Soviet Union’s collapse, in order to appear as attractive as possible to the eyes of Central Asian populations.⁸² Such efforts have not been in vain. On the contrary, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be seen as a major achievement, which, in spite of its weaknesses and its still low international standing, Chinese leaders proudly consider it to be the “buttonhole” of the multipolar strategy adopted in their post-cold war diplomacy. Indeed, the establishment of the SCO has allowed Beijing to re-gain a major role in one of its traditional spheres of influence, contributing at the same time to reducing the U.S. presence which after the 9/11 terrorist attacks had become increasingly intensified and detrimental to China’s interests. Even more important, it represents the best platform to secure its core geopolitical and geo-economic energy-related goals.

China’s soft power in Central Asia: the effectiveness of the ‘SCO’

China’s interest in Central Asia is not new. Indeed, the former *Middle Kingdom* had established close relations with the region as early as 2000 years ago, largely through trade encounters along the legendary Silk Road. There have been times of peace, war, openness, isolation, trade and cooperation. Traditionally, the Chinese empire has been perceived as an aspiring hegemon, if not outright aggressor in Central, Southeast and Northeast Asia, and a significant portion of Central Asia was once an integrated part of the Sino-centric world order.⁸³ Especially, in the 13th century,

⁷⁸ Quoted in E. Pan, “China’s Soft Power Initiative”, *cit.*

⁷⁹ G. Rachman, “The hard evidence that China’s soft power policy is working”, *cit.* See also A. Berkofsky, “The hard facts on ‘soft power’”, *Asia Times*, May 25, 2007, at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/IE25Ad01.html>.

⁸⁰ J. F. Paradise, “Can China’s soft power offensive succeed?”, *cit.*

⁸¹ E. Pan, “China’s Soft Power Initiative”, *cit.*

⁸² F. Vielmini, “La Cina in Asia Centrale: un’opportunità anche per Teheran”, *Limes*, 5, 2005, pp. 231-44, esp. p. 231.

⁸³ N. Swanström, “China and Central Asia: a new Great Game or traditional vassal relations?”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14, 45, November 2005, pp. 569-584, esp. p. 569.

under the leadership of Genghis Khan, the whole of Central Asia – from China to Persia – was united. However, following the decline of the Mongol empire, the revival of Islam, and the isolationist policies adopted by the Ming dynasty in the 17th century, China gradually lost interest in the region. As a direct consequence of the dwindling of trade along the Silk Road, the Central Asian region became increasingly isolated during the late 19th and 20th century, and it was only the break-up of the Soviet Union that allowed the region to re-open its doors once again to the outside world. The implosion of the Soviet empire has therefore irrevocably changed Central Asia's landscape, since the birth of five new sovereign states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) quickly became a major focus of interest and influence for competing poles of spheres of influence, China included.

The PRC's initial national security concerns vis-a-vis Central Asia soon went hand in hand with growing economic interests, which were strictly connected to the need for development of its internal regions, such as the autonomous region of Xinjiang Uygur, as well as to the strategy of diversification in oil provisions.⁸⁴ From this point of view, the former Soviet Union's dissolution has provided a strategic opportunity for China, enabling Beijing to recover an important role in what had always been considered a kind of 'backyard' of the empire.⁸⁵

As already mentioned, Chinese leadership had long been courting Central Asian republics. Exactly one month after their founding, in January 1992, a high-level delegation visited the newborn republics and in a few days a series of agreements establishing diplomatic ties with all of them were signed, thus pre-empting any move by Taipei's leadership.⁸⁶ Starting from the mid-1990s, Chinese officials visited the capitals of the Central Asian republics promoting investments and trying to boost trade through proposed free trade border zones. In the meantime, Beijing began to invest in public diplomacy and in its aid programs, establishing a pilot Confucius institute in Uzbekistan in 2004 with President Hu Jintao attending the ceremony; launching programs to train Central Asian officials and politicians; promising the funding of a highway linking China to Central Asia.⁸⁷

Of course, China was not the only country interested in the new geopolitical framework emerging in Central Asia. The U.S., for its part, had also begun to send military advisers to many of the newborn republics, and by 1996 Washington had established full relations with all of them. Moreover, in 1994, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had all signed the so called NATO's "Partnership for Peace Program" (PfP).⁸⁸ Still, China was in a better condition to become more influential in the region, thanks to its past traditional relations with Central Asia, but also for its geographical proximity. In April 1996 and April 1997, two agreements for security and disarmament along the borders – the "Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions" and the "Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions" – signed by China, Russia,

⁸⁴ Being the world's second largest oil consumer after the United States, China is attaching a high priority to accessing oil and gas reserves in Central Asia. Furthermore, since its demand for imported oil is projected to rise enormously in the next decade, Beijing wants to reduce its dependency on the Middle Eastern oil. In case of conflict over Taiwan, current oil supply lines would in fact be seriously affected. Ensuring control of Central Asian oil is thus a logical path, since some of these oil and gas resources can be piped into China, obviating the need for more expensive and less secure transportation by tanker. That is why participation in the energy development projects in Central Asian republics is an important component of China's energy strategy. See A. Cohen, "The Dragon Looks West: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Heritage Lectures*, 961, Sept. 7, 2004, p. 4; R. Dwivedi, "China's Central Asia Policy in Recent Times", *CEF Quarterly*, 4, 4, 2006, pp. 139-159, esp. pp. 145-150.

⁸⁵ R. Dwivedi, "China's Central Asia Policy in Recent Times", *cit.*, p. 139.

⁸⁶ Pan Guang, "China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation", *China Brief*, 7, 3, February 7, 2007, at http://jamestown.org/publications_details.php?article_id=2371885&issue_id=3997&volume_id=422, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Quoted in J. Kurlantzick, *Charme Offensive*, *cit.*, p. 199.

⁸⁸ Established in 1994, the NATO's program was designed to address the unique demand of engaging the former Soviet republics, but in the meantime it provided an important vehicle for an ambitious U.S./Western military engagement in the Central Asia. Through the PfP Central Asian countries were able to gain significant experience and contacts with the US military establishment; on the other hand, for the U.S. and NATO it represented also an opportunity to foster greater integration in western security structures and the possibility for stimulating regional cooperation. See R. Giragosian, "The Strategic Central Asia Arena", *CEF Quarterly*, 4, 1, 2006, pp. 133-153, esp. 142-144.

Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respectively in Shanghai and Moscow, marked the beginning of the ‘Shanghai Five mechanism-SCO’ process, which made the strengthening of security cooperation between China and its Central Asian neighbours one of its major aims. Indeed, under the framework of the two agreements, not only were the disputes regarding the western section of the former 3000 km sino-soviet border completely solved in a couple of years, but it made it possible to create a solid structure for both parties to cooperate closely in combating terrorism, extremism and separatism, and various other cross-border criminal activities as well.⁸⁹ From then on, the Shanghai Five Group’s meetings became a regular practice and the topics gradually extended from building up trust in the border regions to mutually beneficial cooperation in questions of security, politics, diplomacy, economics, trade and other areas among the five states. On the fifth anniversary, in June 2001, after the signing of a joint declaration which admitted Uzbekistan as member of the Shanghai Five mechanism, the parties concerned jointly issued the “Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”. One year later, during the St. Petersburg’s Summit, the SCO Chart was also signed. According to the “Declaration” and the SCO Chart, the Organization abides by the following principles strictly related to the “new security concept”: adherence to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; respect of each other’s independence; sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, mutual non-use or threat of use of force; equality among all member states; settlement of all questions through consultations; non-alignment and no opposition against any other country or organization; opening to the outside world and willingness to carry out all forms of dialogue, exchange and cooperation with other countries and relevant international and regional organizations. In line with the above-cited principles, SCO’s main purposes are: the strengthening of mutual trust and good-neighbourliness and friendship among member states; developing their effective cooperation in political affairs, the economy and trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, environmental protection and other fields; working together to maintain regional peace, security and stability and promoting the creation of a new international political and economic order featuring democracy, justice and rationality.⁹⁰ Indeed, from the beginning, the SCO has been mainly focused on security issues, namely on the fight against “terrorism, separatism and extremism, being thus the first international organization to explicitly advocate the fight against the so-called “three evils”. In fact, exactly the same day of its establishment, the six member states had also signed the “Shanghai Convention Against Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism”, clearly defining “terrorism, separatism and extremism” for the first time on the international arena. The year after, during the St Petersburg Summit, the SCO member states signed the “Agreement of the SCO Member States on Counter-Terrorism Regional Structure” (the future RATS), while, from 2003 onwards they held successful multilateral joint anti-terrorism military manoeuvres.⁹¹ An anti-narcotic drugs cooperative mechanism – the future SCO-Contact Group – was also put into being to counter one of the major financial sources of terrorism.⁹²

⁸⁹ Pan Guang, “China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation”, *cit.*

⁹⁰ See the Declaration and the Chart in the SCO official site at <http://www.sectesco.org>.

⁹¹ So far, the most important ones have been held in 2005 between Russia and China. The so called “Peace Mission 2005”, which consisted of sea, land and air manoeuvres, provided both Beijing and Moscow with the opportunity to demonstrate to other countries the high level reached by their bilateral relationships. It also served as a strong signal to the rest of the SCO member states. The signal was that “Russia and China see it in their strategic interests to control developments in Central Asia and in the former Soviet republics” and it acted also as a “warning to those states – or factions within those states – that changes in foreign policy toward the West and away from the East could result in repercussions from China and Russia”, see R. Jensen and E. Marquardt, “The Sino-Russian Romance”, *Asia Times Online*, Mar 21, 2006, at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/HC21Ag02.html.

⁹² H. Plater-Zyberk, “Who’s Afraid of the SCO?”, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Central Asian Series, 07/09, March 2007, at [http://www.defac.ac.uk/colleges/cscc/document-listings/ca/07\(09\)HPZ.pdf](http://www.defac.ac.uk/colleges/cscc/document-listings/ca/07(09)HPZ.pdf), p. 8.

Initially the rest of the world paid little attention to the SCO. However, in the space of a few years it has been able to shift from an irrelevant ‘talk shop’, as most American officials had dismissed it, to a full-fledged international organization, achieving important institutional progress and successfully facing most of the challenges posed by the rapidly changing international security environment.⁹³ In fact, the SCO has made notable progress in a number of areas, considerably improving its institutional capacity-building, increasing its relations with external parties (UN, OSCE, ASEAN, CIS) and cultivating a positive image as well.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the SCO has attracted criticism and mistrust, and within the international community it still tends to be perceived as an old-style organization governed by realpolitik. The West, in particular, regards it as a Sino-Russian led alliance intended to compete against and curb the influence of the U.S. and NATO.⁹⁵ Indeed, some Western observers have compared the SCO to the Warsaw Pact and referred to it as the “Eastern NATO”.⁹⁶ The suspicions in the international community are especially fuelled by the economic, political and military potential that such an organization has. So far, if observer member states (India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan) are taken into account, the SCO is the largest (in terms of size and population) regional group worldwide. It includes three of the fastest growing economies worldwide; it boasts huge oil and raw materials reserves and it is one of the major weapons producers and suppliers worldwide. Furthermore, besides including some of the biggest nuclear powers, it has the potential to become an “energy club” or a “natural gas OPEC”, as stated in Vladimir Putin’s proposal.⁹⁷ Last, but not least, it remains the world’s only regional security mechanism without direct U.S. participation.⁹⁸

The 9/11 terrorist attacks represented a first major turning point for the young organization, given its incapacity to formulate a tangible response as a group (due perhaps to its infant status), and was the source of great disappointment for China, one of its major proponents. Not only did all the SCO member states demonstrate their support for the U.S. – as China also did, obtaining in return that the U.S. include in its list of terrorist organizations the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, one of the most active in Xinjiang – but the Central Asian republics even authorized the opening of American military bases in their territories. In addition to this, came the dramatic evolution of Russian-American relations, cemented chiefly by the threat of Chechnyan terrorism. Under such conditions, China began to feel strategically deterred by the U.S. both from the East (Asian Pacific) and West (Central Asia).⁹⁹ Having to a large extent lost the initiative within the SCO, China began to rethink

⁹³ A comprehensive statement of the SCO’s achievements and of the weaknesses it is still facing is in Zhao Huasheng, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization at 5: Achievements and Challenges Ahead”, *CEF Quarterly*, 4, 3, 2006, pp. 105-23, at <http://www.eurasia.org>.

⁹⁴ This has mainly been due to the so-called “Shanghai spirit” that permeates the Organization, which is based on the “new security concept”. As already noted, such a concept implies a new model of inter-state relations and regional cooperation based on the principle of non-alignment, openness to the rest of the world, mutual trust and benefits, equality, consultation, respect for diversified civilizations and mutual development. In other words, the exact contrary of the Bush administration unilateral and pre-emptive doctrine.

⁹⁵ Zhao Huasheng, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization at 5: Achievements and Challenges Ahead”, *cit.*, p. 107.

⁹⁶ F. W. Stakelbeck Jr., “A New Bloc Emerges?”, *The American Thinker*, Aug. 5, 2005, at http://www.americanthinker.com/articles.php?article_id=4703. Some other analysts, like the Italian Francesco Sisci, have dismissed such comparisons as absolutely “farcical”, arguing that not only would China and Russia have the capacities to contrast the U.S. and the West in general, but, even more important, they would not have the interest in doing so, since they both know the American presence in Central Asia acts as a barrier against the Islamic fundamentalism, while its disengagement would likely contribute to further destabilize the area. F. Sisci, “La NATO dell’Est”, *Peace Reporter*, 14 luglio 2005, at http://www.peacereporter.net/dettaglio_articolo.php?idpa=&idc=2&ida=&idt=&idart=3217.

⁹⁷ A. Cohen, “The Dragon Looks West: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Commission, U.S. Congress, August 3, 2006, at http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2006hearings/transcripts/aug_3_4/testimony_ariel_cohen.pdf (last accessed July, 13, 2007).

⁹⁸ U.S. application to join the SCO was in fact rejected in 2005.

⁹⁹ A. Cohen, “After the G-8 Summit: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *CEF Quarterly*, 3,3, 2006, pp. 51-64, esp. p. 51.

its strategy more in terms of economic and energy cooperation,¹⁰⁰ as well as the common fight against the attempts at regime change encouraged by Washington, the so-called “colour revolutions”, beginning with the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in 2003, and continuing with the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine (2004) and the “Tulipan Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Such revolutions, which disrupted the socio-political stability of several SCO member states, have in fact caused great uneasiness in Beijing as it perceived U.S. motives in the region as potentially threatening its sphere of influence; furthermore, Chinese leadership was particularly concerned about the possibility that Uyghur restlessness could be externally exploited.¹⁰¹ These concerns grew after the failed revolt in Uzbekistan, where the President Islam Karimov cracked down on opposition by suppressing the unrest in Andijon on May 2005, provoking the general condemnation of the international community, and of the U.S. administration in particular.

Sooner than expected, Beijing was ready to use the subtle influence it had acquired in Central Asia in order to sustain the region in taking a clear stand against the U.S. Indeed, following China’s reorientation strategy which aimed to shift emphasis towards a soft power style, during the SCO Summit held in Astana on July 2005, China and Kazakstan signed a “strategic partnership agreement”. The founding motive for the agreement was Beijing’s strong support for the “principle of political stasis” as opposed to that of the regime changes preached by the U.S.¹⁰² The shift was particularly relevant and potentially ridden with unpredictable consequences. In point of fact, while China had soberly offered increased aid to Central Asian countries before the Astana Meeting, after the events in Andijian and the U.S. criticism against the Tashkent regime, it quickly backed Uzbek policies, hosting the leader Karimov for a short visit in Beijing, procuring in return that during the Astana Summit the SCO would issue a declaration warning any countries “monopolizing or dominating international affairs”, and especially an explicit demand that Washington provide a deadline for the withdrawal of its military bases from the SCO member territories. The ‘Astana Declaration’ seemed to symbolize the emergence of a “consensus” within the SCO,¹⁰³ contributing to making it a more homogeneous organization, as appeared evident during the fifth Summit held in Shanghai on June 2006. In the “Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary”, SCO member states confirmed in fact the general rejection of all external interferences or ‘double standards’, while also simultaneously condemning any export of social development models.¹⁰⁴

Needless to say, the new geopolitical stratagems that emerged from the last two SCO summits, particularly relevant when compared to the state of ‘lethargy’ of the previous years, has naturally caught the international community’s attention, although its real significance has to a certain extent been overestimated. During an intervention by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace scholar Martha Brill Olcott, at the summit of the US Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe (or Helsinki Commission) which specifically focused on the SCO influence in Central Asia and its potential to interfere with the regional strategic interests of U.S., it was pointed out that in spite of the general considerations made by specialists who have warned against the constitution of a dangerous anti-Western, especially anti-US coalition, there are many factors which reveal instead a quite weak level of internal cohesion among the SCO members. As for the anti-Western rhetoric that has emerged since the Astana Summit, it may be partially attributed to verbal outbursts rather than to any real political willingness or ability to take concrete measures. From this point of view,

¹⁰⁰ The Framework Agreement aiming at enhancing economic cooperation among SCO member states was signed on September 2003 and it was a starting point for planned and controlled cooperation, aiming at the creation of a free-trade zone in the nearest future. See Pan Guang, “China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation”, *cit.*

¹⁰¹ R. Dwivedi, “China’s Central Asia Policy in Recent Times”, *cit.*, p. 144.

¹⁰² V. Niquet, “China and Central Asia”, *China perspectives*, 67, 2006, at <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/document1045.html>, § 49 (last accessed July 11, 2007).

¹⁰³ Yu Bin, “Central Asia Between Competition and Cooperation”, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 4, 2006, at <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3754> (last accessed July 11, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ See the “Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, at <http://www.scosummit2006.org>.

even the much commended joint military exercises between SCO members appear to be merely symbolic rather than representing a concerted capacity to cope with common threats.¹⁰⁵ A closer analysis therefore suggests that far from deserving the above comparisons with the Warsaw Pact and NATO, SCO cannot really be regarded as a monolithic entity, since the interests and visions of states are in conflict with one another. Apart from the dilemma over expansion that the organization is currently facing,¹⁰⁶ one of its main weaknesses is the lack of socialization among the member state populations. As Zhao Huasheng has pointed out “The SCO has largely been organized and led by the political elite of the various member states. There is a lack of identification with the SCO among the masses, and needless to say, the SCO has not created a sense of community at the regional grassroots level. [...] The lack of proper social interaction among the populations of the SCO member states is bound to have an impact on the SCO’s development since it means that policies implemented and activities organized by the SCO are likely to lack the popular support. This will become a major challenge for the SCO in times to come as it raises questions concerning its legitimacy at the basic level among the populace”.¹⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, the divergences are most pronounced in the energy sector. In fact, while Moscow hopes to utilize the SCO as an instrument to reinforce its monopolistic power in gas and oil transit, China envisages it more as a facilitator of regional trade and investment with Beijing as the dominant power.¹⁰⁸ Central Asian countries, for their part, look to the SCO as a useful buffer to exploit in trying to balance Russian and Chinese influence in the area.¹⁰⁹ This is why some observers have stated that behind the SCO there is ‘simply’ the question of the ‘black gold’ and consider the Organization to be a kind of ‘mutual non-aggression treaty’ contracted to thwart any expansionist force potentially able to threaten the geopolitical balances existing in the area, and thus the oil handling itself.¹¹⁰ Such considerations may be particularly true for China since from the beginning its interests have been strictly related to the issues of security and its need for resources, and because Beijing sees the region as a supplier of cheap raw energy resources and a market for its own goods as well. Considering that both these things could be guaranteed by security, China has been actively striving to promote the efficiency of the SCO, and further transform it into an institutionalized tool of security in Central Asia and a platform for the use of the region’s natural resources.¹¹¹ It is not by chance that the issue of energy security has always been absent from the SCO agenda, since the parties concerned prefer to prudently address such matter of importance on a bilateral level.¹¹² As already noted, from the outset China’s relationship with Central Asian states has also been based on the construction of bilateral relations, as shown by the series of “strategic partnerships” (战略伙伴关系 *zhanlue huoban guanxi*) which Beijing has signed with its Central Asian neighbours.¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ M. Brill Olcott, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Changing the ‘Playing Field in Central Asia’”, Testimony Before the Helsinki Commission, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sept. 26, 2006, at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/MBO0906.PDF?>, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ On this subject see S. Blank, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Cracks Behind the Facade”, *Eurasia Insight*, Jun 21, 2006, at www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav062106_pr.shtml.

¹⁰⁷ Zhao Huasheng, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization at 5: Achievements and Challenges Ahead”, *cit.*, pp. 113-4.

¹⁰⁸ A. Cohen, “The Dragon Looks West: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ M. Brill Olcott, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Changing the ‘Playing Field in Central Asia’”, *cit.*, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ L. Tamburrino, “Il terrorismo, i ‘tre diavoli’ e i sei di Shanghai”, *Mondo cinese*, 119, aprile-giugno 2004, pp. 19-22, esp. p. 21.

¹¹¹ J. Kurlantzick, *Charme Offensive*, *cit.* Similar views has also in Martha Brill Olcott, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Changing the ‘Playing Field in Central Asia’”, *cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹² H. Plater-Zyberk, “Who’s Afraid of the SCO?”, p. 10.

¹¹³ Except for Kazakstan, whose partnership with China has been elevated to a ‘strategic’ rank, owing to reasons of geographic proximity, to the narrow ties existing with Xinjiang but also because as regards the potential cooperation in the field of energy, the terms are much less ‘strategic’ with the other republics. With Kyrgyzstan, Beijing has signed a “partnership of good neighbourliness and friendly co-operation”; with Tajikistan a “partnership of good neighbourliness and friendly co-operation directed towards the 21st century”; with Uzbekistan – whose importance to China has dramatically increased after the Andijian events – a “partnership of friendly co-operation”; finally, with the neutral

Indeed, since China's main purpose is the control of local energy resources, the SCO arena has been a useful, even not fundamental, arena.¹¹⁴ Generally speaking, China has met with considerable success in pursuing a strategy of advancing loans and making investments in the Central Asian countries and in developing their economies as a whole, leading to enduring relationships with commensurate benefits in the energy sectors.¹¹⁵ For their part, Central Asian countries risked being marginalized after the Soviet Union's collapse, so have pursued from the beginning a foreign policy of multiple alignments, opening their doors to external aid and borrowing in all the important sectors of the economy and social sectors at large. Because of their "landlocked" position, a policy of engagement and friendship with the near giant was almost obvious, as it represented a viable alternative to decades of reliance on Russia.¹¹⁶ In the meantime they did not exclude any other possibility. As a result, with the exception of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, most of the Central Asian states continue to maintain strong links with the U.S., and seek to promote new ones with Europe, as a way to balancing Russian and Chinese power.¹¹⁷

At this point, the question that most comes to mind is: what of China's soft power in Central Asia? Some observers believe that while China has been able to make important gains in Southeast Asia, Africa and in some Latin American countries (thanks to its policies but also as a consequence of U.S. soft power declining), in Central Asia, where countries have had (and still have) a choice of European, Russian, or American influences, in addition to Chinese, China has not been as wildly successful in building its soft power. Similarly to what happened in other contexts, China's soft power in Central Asia does not seem to have much to do with culture, but rather looks like old power politics. In fact, besides the aid policies and the substantial investments in the energy, infrastructure and communication sectors, the establishment of Confucius Institutes and other forms of cultural cooperation, such as the Art Festival of Astana (2005) and Shanghai (2006) organized within the SCO, it does not seem that people are particularly attracted by Chinese culture, Chinese food, and in general by the Chinese 'model of life'. On the contrary, Central Asian countries' populations tend not to like the Chinese, as they do not trust them. Russia particularly fears Chinese immigration to Siberia and the same worries permeate all the Central Asian populations. The present structure of Sino-Central Asia trade – raw materials against textiles or other low quality products (even by Chinese standards) – which condemns the Central Asia republics to the paradoxical role of "underdeveloped suppliers of raw materials"¹¹⁸ may have unpredictable effects in the near future. It does not seem that the reality described above can contribute to boosting China's influence in the region.

Conclusion

Turkmenistan there are "relations of friendly co-operation for the 21st century on the basis of equality and the common interest". See V. Niquét, "China and Central Asia", *China perspectives*, 67, 2006, at [http:// chinaperspectives.revues.org/document/1045.html](http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/document/1045.html), § 20 (last accessed July 11, 2007). As to Sino-Russian good bilateral relationship, see R. Jensen and E. Marquardt, "The Sino-Russian Romance", *cit.*

¹¹⁴ M. Cerimele, "Tra «l'aquila», l'«orso» e il «drago»: sviluppi interni e direttrici geopolitiche del Kazakistan post sovietico", in M. Torri, eds, *L'Asia negli anni del drago e dell'elefante 2005-2006. L'ascesa di Cina e India, le tensioni nel continente e il mutamento degli equilibri globali* (Milano: Guerini Associati, 2007), pp. 27-67, esp. p. 60. On the various bilateral initiatives taken by Beijing vis-a-vis Central Asia, see R. Dwivedi, *cit.*, pp. 146-150.

¹¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 150.

¹¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 155.

¹¹⁷ A. Cohen, "What to do about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's rising influence", *Eurasia Insight*, Sept. 21, 2006, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092106.shtml> (last accessed July 30, 2007); on the relationship between Central Asia countries and the European Union, see A. Ferrari, "L'Unione Europea e l'Asia Centrale", *ISPI Policy Brief*, 52, maggio 2007, at http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/pb_52_2007.pdf.

¹¹⁸ F. Vielmini, "La Cina in Asia Centrale: un'opportunità anche per Teheran", *cit.*, p. 240.

As we have seen, in a relatively short period of time China has taken a series of important steps to wield its soft influence in a responsible way, joining multilateral institutions, supporting peacekeeping missions, powering and sustaining economic growth in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and fighting drug and human trafficking. More important, given its traditional aversion in meddling in other states' domestic politics, China has engaged in mediating other nation's conflicts (as in Sudan recently) and applying pressure on dangerous countries (such as North Korea).¹¹⁹ This pragmatic shift has enabled China to amass a huge amount of influence worldwide, though not to replace the American "way of life", given it is based on universal values such as freedom, which in China are far from being acknowledged or encouraged. On the other hand, China has also begun to export its own domestic problems regarding environmental issues and its labour practices. Its lack of political openness and its state-centred model of development, in particular, have attracted and reinforced admiration from only some of the more authoritarian-minded leaders of the developing world, such as Cambodia's Hun Sen, Burma's General Than Shwe, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe or Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov; its aid policies have (and still do) frustrated efforts to support better governance for many developing nations.

For all these reasons, the prospect of communist China wielding power softly and effectively (not only in autocratic and authoritarian conditions), is not convincing. The same may be said about whether it is suitable for an authoritarian capitalist state like China to represent a viable alternative path to modernity.¹²⁰ The appeal of the Chinese model will depend on China's continuing to register extraordinary growth rates and any back-sliding would have fatal effects on its soft power. It also depends on Chinese leaders' ability to cope with all the problems associated with China's economic miracle.

Probably, as wisely observed by Bruce Gilley in his *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead*, only a democratic China would have more and real chances to succeed in terms of soft power, since it would finally have the legitimate claim to world influence. We should not forget the lessons of the former Soviet Union. Despite all the billions spent in trying to expand its soft power during the cold war in competition with the U.S., it was only in 1989, after Michal Gorbachev finally changed the course of Soviet politics, with the adoption of glasnost and the end of the cold war, that Soviet approval ratings increased notably, to the advantage of its soft power.¹²¹ However, given the eventual fate of Gorbachev's policy, it is quite likely that China will continue in its idea of building a democracy 'with Chinese characteristics'. As for its soft power it is difficult to make serious predictions, given that so many questions need answering. The only certain thing currently is that for the moment it lags behind the U.S. and Europe.

Word count: 14232.

¹¹⁹ J. Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, *cit.*, pp. xi-xii.

¹²⁰ A. Gat, "The return of Authoritarian Great Powers", 86, 4, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007, (online ed.), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org>.

¹²¹ J. S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power*, *cit.*, pp. 73-75.