

The Role of Sharp Power in the External Political Behavior of People's Republic of China (PRC)

By

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Abstract

This study deals with a new phenomenon defined as sharp power which is among the crucial field of study in the international relations. The term appeared in late 2017 in the studies of the leading American think tanks. This study aims to discuss the means and mechanisms of sharp power practice by considering the case of China as an authoritarian system. Considering the theoretical background and the existing literature, the study tackles the role of sharp power in shaping China's foreign policy which is reflected in her behaviour as an authoritarian state in the international scene. Hence, the problem of this research is the term and the ambiguity of the concept as it may shape itself as a soft power of the despotic states or a malicious use of it. A few questions are considered here; how does China project sharp power? Why do authoritarian states prefer sharp power to the other forms of power in the international scene? Does China employ it in her foreign political behavior? what is the aim of China in using sharp power? To what extent has China been successful in deploying sharp power in its international relations? The study attempts to answer the following questions through the comparison it makes between the practice of different types of powers. The study explains sharp power through presentation of the trends and issues related to the concept. The presentations concentrate on the similarities and differences between sharp power and other forms of power such as hard, soft and smart powers compared with terms and concepts used to signify non-traditional modern warfare.

Keyword: Sharp Power, Political Behavior, Chinese foreign Policy, China's Sharp Power.

Introduction

The concept of power is regarded as an axial concept in the international relations. However, with the development of the reality of the international relations and the attempt of the scientists and researchers to theorize and search for this reality, a lot of shifts have been made concerning the concept, which reflects in the reality of the international relations. The power is not a mean in itself, but it is an instrument for practicing hegemonic and creating influence, which guarantee achievement of the main objectives of a state. This is the status of international relations which is characterized with chaos and the absence of authority on power.

To be noted, the military power has been considered as a main form of sharp power for long, and it has been practiced by many states to show the strengths of state's power. The historical changes including the end of the cold war, changes in international order, globalization and technological development have brought different concepts and forms of power in the international relations. The different concepts and forms of power that have emerged during the course of history in the international relation are known as hard power, soft power and smart power.

Learning about the practice of sharp power has been recently introduced in the early 90s by Joseph S Nye. The power forms are different in this regard. Hard power consists of elements of military and economic material force. It is the capability of using the power through coerce by military and economic instruments with the aim of influencing the behavior of the others; while the soft power is meant the capability of influencing the others by attraction and persuasion rather than the hard power which involves coercion and force. Joseph S. Nye developed this concept in 1990 A.D. (Nye, 1990: 28).

Regarding the smart power, it is the ability of the state to mix the hard power and soft power in a form that can assure the effective and efficient achievement of state's objectives. The smart power is not just the possession of the sources of soft and hard power or one of them; it requires using the available capacity according to the status and situation as a main component of smart power. A complex direction to interpret the concept of power through the smart power means dealing with the elements of the soft and hard powers as a whole and the overlap which exists between them, not on the basis of dealing with each separately.

In November 2017, the American intellectual and research communities have introduced a new concept in the international relations which is the so-called sharp power. The term has emerged from a study which was conducted by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, entitled as "The Meaning of Sharp Power; How Authoritarian States Project Influence." It is explained that Russia and China use sharp power to pose their influence globally; economic manipulation and trade could be the clear examples. It is noted that authoritarian governments project their influence in which public manipulation is preferable compare it to attractiveness of state's image. (Walker and Ludwig, 2017a).

While conducting this research study a thorough literature review has been done to review the existing theories, approaches and concepts about sharp power and find the gaps in the field. Due to the nature of the study, the method of this study is descriptive, content analysis where various theories including sharp power and its relation to Chinese foreign policy are studied and discussed.

This study consists of six sections; Section one introduce the topic of the study in which it deals with addressing sharp power concept, and the second one reviews the literature by addressing the theoretical background related to sharp power. The third section explains the instruments and mechanisms of sharp power, the shortcomings of sharp power. The fourth section tackles sharp power practice in Chinese foreign policy, the fifth section addresses the peaceful rise of China through practicing sharp power, and the last sections presents the concluding remarks.

Literature Review

The sources of power have been synthesized into hard and soft powers where hard power is taken from common tenets of Realist Theory of international relations. In the theory

the source of influence relies on the ability of nations to compel other nations to act in a manner aligned with the interests of the former. While, soft power derives from Neoliberal and Constructivist visions of power. The source of power, based on their visions, is associated with admiration and respect garnered by a nation acting in accordance with appropriate behavioral modes posited in the paradigms nations with soft power endear themselves to other nations (Gallarotti, 2010). Liu (2021), in turn, defines sharp power as results of unsuccessful implementation of smart power, as unskilled combination of soft and hard power elements. The launching of the concept of sharp power came through studying of the influence and leverage of the authoritarian states in the international arena, especially in the case of the People's Republic of China. This is so as China has devoted billions of dollars to increase its world leverage through soft power instruments. From the early 1990s China has started projecting regional and international influence. In a sense that it has extended its influence beyond its borders than at any time. This leverage is not through the use of sharp power; China is projecting its military power in the South China Sea and along with its disputed borders with India. The Chinese influence and leverage are also growing in the international arena day after day through using other forms of leverage, however, China has not used economic instrument as one of the instruments of sharp power to impose its will and gain leverage and influence (Walker, 2018 a). Accordingly, the regional and international presence of China has been noted as "under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party, China has established platforms abroad for educational, cultural, and other forms of influence within undemocratic and democratic societies alike." (Walker, 2019). Based on the recent experiences, China has its development models, governance practices and norms that become more legitimated when they are adopted, mimicked and received positively by the international community (Benabdallah, 2020). Indeed, China merges influence and attractiveness to create a positive image for itself globally and regionally. In fact, China has been focusing on moving from a weak nation to a stronger, by developing a "three-line development" which has been the economic development (Yang, 2014).

It is vital to remember that authoritarian governments forbid practicing the elements of openness including freedom of speech, free media market, political pluralism and the existence of non-governmental organization where the democratic governments allow. Highlighting the concept of sharp power could be defined as the aggressive actions of the state carried out with the use of methods imitating soft power elements for manipulating the image of a country, or to destabilize its social-political system and forcing certain actions by its authorities (Skoneczny and Cacko, 2021). Considering globalization and the fast growing global interdependence have resulted in reshaping relations among nations including great opportunities and instability. In the context of such complexity in the international relations, soft power is better oriented around the existence of objective interests. That is to say, that soft power is systematically categorized as deriving from two sources: foreign policies and actions, on the one hand, and domestic policies and actions on the other hand (Gallarotti, 2020). Regarding soft power, it is crucial to consider the importance of international treaties and alliance commitments as central to the creation of soft power. Meanwhile, soft power can be used to achieve evil ends, its means depend on voluntarism, which is preferable from the point of view of human autonomy. Hard power, by contrast, rests on inducements by payment, coercion or by threat (Nye, 2018b). In accordance with this, hard power itself will be counterproductive to enhancing influence when it is used in a less enlightened manner especially if it is in such ways consistent with the main principles of peacekeeping, protection against aggression or genocide, and providing economic aid (Gallarotti, 2020).

Sharp power is the capability to influence the others to get the required results through employment of different political, economic and media instruments. These are based on manipulation, distraction to penetrate the target state by reliance on subversion, bullying and pressure in order to constitute the interests of the political elites, influence the influential forces, and then influence the process of decision-making in this state (Walker and Ludwig, 2017a).

Indeed, the sources and approaches of pursuing sharp power are the same as other sources of power, thus the state can make the difference in their practice. The main tenets are as follows: the corrosion of the legitimacy of institutions, the manipulation of public opinion to strengthen the image of the host state, and the pressuring of political and economic actors in a state. Sharp power tools can fall into any or all of these categories, and any foreign policy tools that achieve these ends covertly. Similar to soft power, sharp power entails a degree of subtlety. However, unlike soft power, states use sharp power to achieve their ends through manipulation and distraction rather than attraction (Walker et al., 2017). With regard to coercion element in sharp power, it has two characteristics; furtiveness/stealth and covert, and in terms of resources, sharp power resources are not similar to hard power ones, they are mostly intangible resources (Shao, 2019).

Sharp power differs from soft power despite that there are identical goals between them; both of them try to change the public idea in the target states through influencing them and gain required outputs. They rely on similar instruments to make changes; culture, beliefs, values and policies and share in the means of influence like media instruments, public diplomacy, cultural and teaching establishments...etc. Similarly, contrary to soft power, the goal of sharp power is not to improve the image of the state in the society of the target state, however, its mechanisms and technics are aiming at another thing; it is intervention in the political process in the target state and violation of its political stability and posing a threat to its national security (Leonova, 2019). In understanding sharp power and how states project it, it is crucial to know that hard power can be viewed as the direct coercion from states onto other states. Hard power is generally associated with military force or economic inducements as methods of coercion. Projecting hard power militarily can range from winning a conventional war to sending naval vessels for freedom of navigation operations. Economically, hard power can range from economic sanctions to foreign aid supplies (Richter, 2022).

Instruments of Sharp Power in the Chines Case

Authoritarian states have adopted words of soft power means to create and project affection and influence in the international relations. As in the case of China, she tries to show her influence by using of methods of soft instruments along with hard instruments rather than instruments of attraction and persuasion. This type of policy is called soft coercion or soft force which means the ability to control and achieve goals by non-military means. As the integral part of this approach the institutions and groups, which are mainly supported by the state, contribute to achieve the goals. Non-governmental independent actors are excluded and financing of the state is only existing to the groups which empower the state to reach to its goals. Through those instruments a mix of secretive and public measures are used, which are not suiting the conventional concept of soft power (Lutsevych, 2016). Being known as authoritarian government at home with concentration of power in the hands of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping has defined Beijing's sharp power (Stepar, 2022).

Furthermore, China is considered as the largest employer of sharp power similar to Russia (Richter, 2022). The state, upon using of power, employs all its political, diplomatic,

cultural, media, economic, military and intelligence instruments to achieve its goals. (Wolfberg and Young, 2016: 27-28). For China, sharp power is the employment of different instruments available to the state to penetrate political, economic, media, social environment of the target state. This means that the state uses all political, diplomatic, cultural, media, economic, intelligence, ideological and propaganda instrument, except for military instruments, in achieving its objectives. Using of these instruments, indeed, does mean conventional diplomacy and transparent public diplomacy or processes of collecting of conventional intelligence information where all existing states participate in them (Rosenberg and Garnaut, 2018).

Sharp Power in the Context of Chinese Foreign Policy

Increased interest in sharp power is an inevitable result of globalization in the era of information and the advancement of internet which permits rapid and dynamic circulation of information all over the world; and therefore, it strengthens the efficiency of the countries with the equitable opportunities in publicizing its values abroad whether they are democratic regimes or authoritarian regimes. Some researchers contend that when information itself has become a means and expensive, and the world order turned from a two block system to a multi block one, instruments and techniques of unconventional wars proliferated with different concepts and terms, which are collected under the term of foreign political influence operations.

For China, the reforms and changes have been aligned with Deng Xiaoping's policies of "reform and opening to the outside world, and peaceful development." Focusing on China's rapid economic development and its access to great power status need not to threaten the existing global powers as well as the Asian neighbors (Diamond and Schell, 2019). In the context of China, the respond of China in post-cold war era has been different than Russia. As China has responded to Western threats by introducing economic and political reforms. China has been upwardly mobile in international politics and economics over the past two decades. Local political content is an advantage for practicing sharp power as China is a one-party communist state. In the regional context, China becomes the regional hierarch displacing the U.S. (Koesel et al., 2020).

Chinese political leadership has criticized the term 'Chinese threat' through which sharp power raised. Researchers, Chinese officials and media institutions considered emergence of the concept of sharp power as a new tour of threat of China, which started in 1990s of the last century and they described it as the China Threat Theory. However, in another name, it is a new satanic instrument in a behavior which is the same as Western behavior upon using its soft power and smart power (Yabin, 2018). In this context, the Chinese model of governance is central to the formulation and implementation of its foreign policy. For global strength and regional survival, Beijing shows sensitive issues abroad as posing a serious challenge to the sovereignty of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and China, which must be addressed at all costs at home and abroad (Stepar, 2022). Furthermore, China has decided to take one side and 'to lean to one side' which has been headed by the Soviet Union (Guo & Hua, 2007).

Since the early 1990s China has a different international approach in practicing foreign policy means. She has updated its foreign policy through diplomatic relations in terms of economic relations via openness in trade, and development of investment such as in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. To be said, China is focused to maintain regional status quo. As China rises, the interests will expand and it will seek to establish a regional sphere of influence

for standard neorealist security and power consideration. No denial that China is a returning power and it has been a regional hegemon (Khood, 2020). In rival world, China dreams and has a vision for the rejuvenation of China's role as a pre-eminent regional power and a leading global power in the new era. Meanwhile, it is unclear how China uses its power. For survival, China consolidates and enhances its strategic partnership with Russia, while the relations between China and Russia are closer than the U.S. (Ross et al. 2021).

In Chinese standpoint, the term sharp power started through the political context which confirms the dividing line between authoritarian regimes and democratic policies, this approach has directly targeted Russia, China and Iran. Accordingly, there is a controversy about this concept, which lacks clear understanding of evaluation to determine the essence of power, besides, sharp power draws ideological line between West & East (Shao, 2019: 136). Meanwhile, in the Western point of view, China relies on strategic narrative of sharp power; and strategic account of China consists of two elements; Chinese Dream Vision and Classical Chinese Values which concentrate on Confucianism. China seeks to restore its position as a central state through overcoming the historical injustice of 'Humiliation Century' which was imposed by Western and Japanese militarism impose; and this will be through a one-hundred-year marathon (Taehwan, 2018: 10).

The question of sharp power is associated with the notion of state legitimacy on the global arena and how state responds to regional and global threats. It could be mentioned that China has taken lessons from the failure of the Soviet Union and avoided the ideological catastrophe to happen in China. Regardless of global power and influence competition, China has become a regional power as well as a global economic power that combats to compete with countries including the United States. In this regard, China's ambition is highlighted in regard of being at the global state for promoting its own ideas, norms and approaches to governance, which are aligned with its own hegemony (Stepar, 2022).

Considering foreign policy and sharp power relations based on the highlights made by Alexander Richter (2022) if sharp power does not seek principally shaping long-term attitudes or preferences through attraction. While focusing on seeking to covertly and subtly decrease the attraction of other states by delegitimizing the ambitions of other states, manipulating public opinion through propaganda, and firmly pressuring economic and political actors within another state. Then, the current economic growth of China and its foreign relations could have the manipulative influence on the other countries especially in the developing world.

According to Shambaugh (2020) China's relations with the world during the 1950s have been dominated by its international isolation and mainly its relations with the Soviet Union. After the isolation phase of China, the 1954 Geneva Conference and 1955 Bandung conference were the main global events that China has participated. As noted, the 1960s again has been a harder period in the history of Chinese government of superpower confrontations where Beijing encountered the two major superpowers; the Soviet Union and the United States. Indeed, the 1960s were the revolutionary phase of China's foreign policy, where China aimed at toppling all established governments across the region such as Asia, Africa and even in Latin America. Moreover, the context of Chinese foreign policy is associated with the local policy content and government directions. Since 1970s Beijing has planned 'a peaceful rise' which has made economic growth and developing international trade priorities over any sort of overt military expansion. The recent worries about China's sharp power is linked with China's foreign affairs in today's world that reflects two specific aspects; the legacy of the empire and the authoritarianism of the government (Shambaugh, 2020). China's practice of 'peaceful coexistence' was to transcending from a bipolar structure, considering the five main principles

of the peaceful coexistence with the foreign countries including mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Those have become the foundation for China's independent foreign policy of peace during 1940s. Obviously, three things affected the China's foreign policy; the influence of the revolutionary movements in China including the one led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), the internal affairs, and the impact of the international context in which China's foreign policies have been developed. These three threads have characterized China's power and existence on the global map so far (Zhao and Chen, 2013). Since then, practicing the principle of peaceful co-existence, China has started reconciling with the regional states such as Japan in 1972, with the U.S. in 1979, and India, while today there are still tensions due to territorial integrity. Furthermore, the practice of foreign policy in post-cold war period has enabled China to pursue foreign policy goals strategically and become successful in getting involved in the globalization process that made china to move forward to a higher level of 'peaceful development' (Shambaugh, 2020).

China's Peaceful Rise while Practicing Sharp Power

China started readdressing the regional and global achievements based on local content; from this notion, China has been practicing diplomacy for peaceful development from 1979 until today. Besides, most of the principle of peaceful coexistence embedded in foreign policy goals. The ideological structure did not restrict China from opening up and an independent foreign policy of peace have the solid foundation for China's rejuvenation at the present (Shambaugh, 2020).

As noted, China has pursued different international growth and development approach, based on the principle of peaceful coexistence. During the cold war China focused on her foreign policy based on peace and development visions. That is to say, China's foreign policy has shifted from 'economy for diplomacy' to a mode to the 'diplomacy for economy' mode. In principle, China desired peaceful development based on a road map for building a harmonious world. Regardless of being categorized as a developing country, China also seeks its own national interest in the practice of foreign policy similar to the other states. However, Chinese people consider her foreign policies as soft and complex. While, for China, due to the fast growth of the country, and the increased complexity domestically and internationally, foreign policy making has been complicated (Zhao and Chen, 2013). In principle, China has chosen a road which has never been taken by any other socialist country which has been added to the reforms and opening up policy. While practicing opening up to the world has been to capitalist and socialist countries, it has created a great influence on China (Guo & Hua, 2007).

Considerable attention has been on the Chinese foreign policies, guidelines and efforts for peaceful liberation, peaceful coexistence, and peaceful development as integral parts of China's 'diplomacy for peace'. Here the question of sharp power comes in at the heart of the discussion regarding the relationship between hard power, foreign policy and China's diplomatic theory where the principles of state, sovereignty and development falls into the values of the theory of socialism.

In fact, China's success is rooted in the notion of Mao Zedong's 'Three Worlds' theory, where China builds solidarity with the majority of the third world countries, wining over the Second World Countries and unite with the less threatening First World Countries. This has been the point where China has practiced soft, hard, smart, and sharp power.

The other side of the concern is the perception of the world concerning the development and rise of China, where the peaceful power might transfer to hard power. As so far, China does not abide with certain international rules and regulations such as climate change concerns, human rights and democratization that have created international community skepticism. The fast economic growth of China has made few other states concerned, as China's economic strength has been improved massively, while the GDP has been ranked second in the world that is besides of the drastic population's growth. (Zhao and Chen, 2013). Nevertheless, China has been among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which has the veto power, this membership has a global privilege. Moreover, China has been open to the world and also opening borders has given more room to china to work in foreign territories including search for necessary goods and resources that are required for powering Chinese domestic economy (Foot, 2013). Based on the power transition theory, states fight to conquer global system, while China as in the principle has chosen peaceful development, that is to say China's economy is about 61.8% of the U.S. size. (Chan, 2008). Highlighting on the status of Chinses sharp power and foreign policy practice, it can be noted that China has been practicing a peaceful rise, while opening up to the world. Besides, China is in favor of a multipolar structure in the international politics in the Post-Cold War era. (Guo, & Hua, 2007).

Concluding Remarks

China has started practicing soft diplomatic approaches and strategies in its foreign policy, as it has changed its diplomatic behavior from being bilateral oriented to a multilateral approach. Through foreign policy China has focused on developing economic ties and relations with many regions including Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin American countries. The sharp power of China can be seen at its military capacity, while its foreign policy is exclusively focusing on economic relations (Gua & Hua, 2007). For China a peaceful rise has been priority, as China is concerned about domestic, regional and global challenges that might affect her rise. It is vital to point out that globally China has been seen as a global leader as well as a threat to international peace and security. Even though, it seems that China does not want to get into a war with regional or global powers. The shift in Chinse foreign policy has eroded sharp power notion concerning China, because her foreign policy is oriented with peaceful political and economic ties.

It is concluded that China projects sharp power to create influential impact and has created hegemony on a few of the targeted countries. In many conditions countries like China misuse the means of soft power in exploring and intervening in the internal affairs of other countries. In other words, she employs sharp power in her foreign policy behaviors which reflected in retain her status as a successful international player. Finally, China aims behind practicing sharp power is to converse the hearts and minds of the targeted country's people to accept Chinese hegemony and dominance rather than influencing people with soft manner.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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