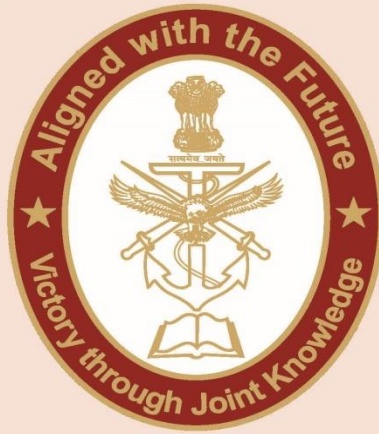


# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### CHINESE HARD AND SOFT POWER



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From the commencement of his term, Xi Jinping devoted extra energy to build Chinese 'soft power'. The announcement of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) came as a boon to many nations which were seeking funds to develop. Loans from global financial institutions come after intense study and with strict monitoring. What China offered were easy loans, accompanied by bribes, with minimum questions.

Nations rushed to participate, even accepting projects which had little chances of generating revenue to repay the high interest rates. The fact that some lost valuable strategic assets due to default in payment, meant little. Xi Jinping was being received with pomp and glory wherever he went, as China was the investor. Currently, over 135 countries are part of the BRI.

With cheap labour and centrally controlled investor friendly policies, China became the hub for the global supply chain. Chinese investments were welcomed in most nations. Their companies were trading on the US stock exchange and gaining from US investors. In Europe, China had expanded its trade and ties. Its actions in the South and East China Seas,

where it demanded almost complete control, were being questioned, but economic dependency of ASEAN nations made them relent on discussing a 'code of conduct' for the disputed waters. The US objected but continued with its appeasement policy.

Chinese red lines were respected globally. These were Taiwan and Tibet. Nations downplayed their relations with Taiwan. The US ignored the Access to Tibet Reciprocal Act, which had been passed by the Congress in 2018. When the Taiwanese President, Tsai Ing-wen, transited through the US in Jul last year, on her visit to the Caribbean Islands, the Chinese objected. A US statement on the visit read, 'The US facilitates, from time to time, representatives of the Taiwan authorities to transit the US,' adding, 'Such transits are undertaken out of consideration for the safety, comfort, convenience and dignity of the passenger and are in keeping with our one-China policy.' She had no official interactions in deference to the US's one-China policy.

When protests began in Hong Kong, China displayed patience, despite global protests on crackdowns. It accused western nations of being behind the violence, however, kept its accusations below levels of diplomatic rows. Even the trade war with the US was heading to a close with a trade deal on the cards. In fact, till the commencement of the pandemic, everything was moving smoothly for China. Its soft power had made it the nation in demand.

With COVID 19, the global environment changed and with it, China too. As the virus spread in China, it received global support and sympathy. Nations rushed to provide it with equipment and stores to battle the virus. With the pandemic's global spread, China sought to return favours by exporting medical equipment, but in many cases, they were faulty or of poor quality. As the pandemic gained root and the world became frustrated with its impact on human lives and global economy, China became the culprit. It was accused of not being truthful, failing to act decisively and projecting fake inputs to the WHO. In the World Health Assembly (WHA), the bill seeking an 'impartial, independent, and comprehensive evaluation' of the 'international health response to COVID 19', was supported by over 120

nations, many of whom were members of the BRI and had close relations with China. China was forced to accept the demand. As global casualties mounted, accusations of China increased.

Facing global anger, China changed tack. Its diplomats, which till then were projecting Chinese 'soft power' and seeking to build bilateral relations, overnight began resorting to 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, on occasions even threatening their host governments. Social media handles of Chinese diplomats almost tripled in no time. They challenged accusations and questioned local government abilities to counter the pandemic. Chinese soft power was on the decline and in its place were the first signs of its future strategy, enhanced dependence on 'hard power'.

The first signal of a changing China was announced in Nov 2019, when the Chinese Ambassador to Sweden, Gui Cong you stated in an interview, 'We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns.' It indicated that possibly Xi Jinping felt that China has now grown in power and would now seek to push its economic and military weight to gain its rightful place in the global community. It was possibly paused by the pandemic, which originated in Wuhan around the same time.

Nations, near and far, began experiencing Chinese pressures. Australia faced economic blocks and China launched cyber-attacks for blaming it for the pandemic, seeking a probe and banning Huawei 5G. China targeted Sweden over Hong Kong and demands over the Coronavirus investigation. It terminated the screening of UK Premier League matches in China over their decision to ban Huawei technologies. In Europe, wolf warrior diplomacy pushed nations away. In an opinion piece in Bloomberg on 07 May, Andreas Kluth writes, '2020 may go down in history as the moment they (Europeans) turned against China in defiance... It's because China, by trying to capitalize on the pandemic with a stunningly unsophisticated propaganda campaign, inadvertently showed Europeans its cynicism.' He added, 'Chinese officials have managed to offend Europeans across the continent, who usually agree on nothing.'

Nations which were wooed to join the BRI and sought deferment of repayment of loans, due to economic impact of the pandemic, were asked to provide vital assets as collateral security. This was a reversal of the earlier Chinese policy of inviting nations to be a part of the initiative with every conceivable promise.

Nations in the near vicinity faced Chinese military pressures. Malaysia had a standoff with a Chinese vessel in its waters, Vietnam had a fishing boat sunk, Japan witnessed heightened activity around its disputed islands and Taiwan faced regular intrusions by Chinese aircraft. Taiwan's foreign minister, Joseph Wu, stated last week, intrusions 'happened almost every day' in June and were 'much more frequent' than what the government had disclosed to the public. He said China has also made several 'simulated' military attacks on Taiwan.' Taiwan has activated its command and control centres to counter rising Chinese military threats.

Increased threats to Taiwan led to the US passing the Taiwan defence Act. Senator Mike Gallagher who introduced the act, stated, 'It's long past time to end strategic ambiguity and draw a clear red line through the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's liberty is a vital national security interest of the United States, and the Taiwan Defence Act helps ensure our military has the capabilities it needs to block CCP aggression.'

China's decision to pass a national security law for Hong Kong only alienated it further. It went against the Chinese commitment of one-nation, two systems. It resulted in multiple nations cancelling extradition treaties with Hong Kong and the US went as far as revoking Hong Kong's special status and sanctioning Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. As tensions grew over Chinese actions, the US ordered closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston and in retaliation China ordered closure of the US consulate in Chengdu.

Mike Pompeo stated last week, 'The freedom-loving nations of the world must induce China to change ... in more creative and assertive ways, because Beijing's actions threaten our people and our prosperity.' In a subsequent speech Mike Pompeo stated, 'The old paradigm of blind

engagement with China simply won't get it done.' He suggested the creation of a bloc, what he termed 'a new grouping of like-minded nations - a new alliance of democracies,' to oppose China. Evidently, it was to be diplomatic and economic opposition, rather than military. He also laid down the new US policy for China, which was 'Distrust and Verify.'

Chinese red lines are now being openly breached. The US providing arms to Taiwan and implementing the Taiwan Defence Act and Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act 2018, which it had ignored till date have been the first steps. It has deployed additional troops in Japan. Appeasing China has now ended, and the world community is uniting to challenge China.

The intrusion in Ladakh, against all existing agreements, was another display of Chinese hard power. Despite being the aggressor Chinese mouthpieces have been stating that India should meet it midway to seek a solution, possibly hinting at that the current line of standoff should become the accepted LAC, an idea India openly rejected.

India was an investment hub for China as also a market which gave it major benefits, yet it risked all by use of force. India reacted economically and diplomatically, apart from enhancing deployment to counter Chinese moves. While talks are in progress, India prepares for the long haul.

In every case where China has displayed a hard power approach, there has been a common thread. It has blamed the nation against whom it acted for taking the first step and attempting to either change status quo or challenging Chinese legitimacy.

Why did China suddenly change track and discard its soft power diplomacy, which was providing it global leverage? There are multiple reasons being quoted including internal political insecurity or exploiting an opportunity with the world facing economic downslide due to the pandemic. It is possible that China had presumed that with the current global economic slowdown, the world would seek to appease China, rather than stand united to counter it. It was wrong. However, the reputation damage to China, for its changed policy, will be enormous and trusting it again would be difficult.

The other question is whether this is only a temporary phase or a permanent change in the Chinese approach. Recent US counteractions indicate that they assume it to be a permanent change and hence have begun attempting to create a global coalition to counter China. If this be so, then China would face global economic and diplomatic backlash with passage of time.

China may be seeking to project the view that it is unconcerned about global views and has the economic and military power to counter any coalition against it, however it would be wrong. While the nations facing Chinese military pressure would handle their individual crisis with China slowly, for China to regain its stature and image would be difficult. It may soon feel economic and diplomatic isolation along with combined military pressure if it remains on the same path. Possibly, for once, China has misjudged its strategy and even if it decides to change, it will take time and effort for it to regain its stature.

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