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## Underpinnings of China's rise: concepts and soft power

**Abstract.** This paper puts forward theoretical concepts and principles which formally guide the foreign policy of the successive generations of leadership of the People's Republic of China since the later era of Deng Xiaoping. It describes the main tenets of these concepts and shows how they influence the approaches to the foreign policy conduct, as well as how they are seen by those who criticise China abroad.

The soft power policy is another main subject of this article. Special attention is paid to the so-called Beijing Consensus, or the Chinese model of development, as an alternative to the neoliberal Washington Consensus. The results of the conducted research show that these theoretical guidelines should not be dismissed, since they provide a way to maintain a dialogue with China by using a language and concepts which both China and its regional and Western partners can understand. This could help China to better integrate into the current global order. The conclusion is therefore that disregard of the abovementioned concepts and policies would be a mistake, because through them China declares its willingness to play by the rules of the international system. China has an interest in preserving the system which has led the country to its meteoric rise and provides it a status quo in the matters of power, making it reformist instead of revisionist. Any revisionism must be understood as part of China's attempts to rebalance the neighbouring regions after its long absence as a regional power.

**Keywords:** China; Soft Power; China's Peaceful Rise; Harmonious World; Chinese Dream; Nationalism

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**Основи економічного зростання Китаю: концепції та принцип дії «м'якої сили»**

#### Анотація

У статті розглядаються теоретичні положення та принципи, які лягли в основу ведення успішної зовнішньої політики Китайської Народної Республіки від часу пізнього періоду керування державою Ден Сяопіном. Автором статті було проаналізовано те, як основоположні засади різних концепцій впливають на вибір підходів до ведення зовнішньої політики КНР, а також те, як ці засади сприймають критики Китаю за кордоном. Політика «м'якої сили» – ще одна тема, яка досліджується у статті. Особливу увагу приділено Пекінському консенсусу, або Китайській моделі економічного розвитку, яка є альтернативою неоліберальній моделі Вашингтонського консенсусу.

Результати проведеного аналізу доводять те, що положеннями згаданих вище концепцій не слід зневажати, оскільки вони створюють умови для ведення діалогу з Китаєм через мову й термінологію, які є зрозумілими як Китаю, так і його регіональним і західним партнерам. Це в свою чергу може допомогти Китайській Народній Республіці краще інтегруватися в існуючий світовий порядок. Автор статті дійшов висновку, що не слід нехтувати згаданими концепціями та принципами ведення зовнішньої політики, оскільки через них Китай декларує своє бажання діяти за правилами, визначеними світовим співтовариством. Окрім цього, Китай зацікавлений у тому, щоб зберегти систему, яка забезпечила цій країні стрімке зростання та статус-кво в питаннях влади, яка на цьому етапі розвитку країни є реформістською, а не ревізійською. Разом із тим, будь-які прояви ревізійзму слід сприймати як спроби Китаю відновити баланс сил в регіоні після тривалого періоду втрати цієї країною статусу регіонального лідера.

**Ключові слова:** Китай; м'яка сила; гармонійний світ; китайська мрія; націоналізм.

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**Основы экономического роста Китая: концепции и принцип действия «мягкой силы»**

#### Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются теоретические положения и принципы, которые легли в основу ведения успешной внешней политики Китайской Народной Республики со времен позднего периода управления государством Дэн Сяопином. Автором статьи было проанализировано то, как основополагающие принципы различных концепций влияют на выбор подходов к ведению внешней политики КНР, а также то, как эти принципы воспринимают те, кто критикует Китай за рубежом. Политика «мягкой силы» – еще одна тема, которая исследуется в данной статье. Особое внимание уделено Пекинскому консенсусу или, другими словами, Китайской модели экономического развития, которая является альтернативой неоліберальной модели Вашингтонского консенсуса.

Результаты проведенного анализа показывают, что положениями упомянутых выше концепций не следует пренебрегать, поскольку они создают условия для ведения диалога с Китаем, используя язык и терминологию, которая понятна как Китаю, так и его региональным и западным партнерам. Это, в свою очередь, может помочь КНР лучше интегрироваться в существующий мировой порядок. Автор статьи пришел к выводу, что не следует пренебрегать упомянутыми концепциями и принципами ведения внешней политики, поскольку посредством их Китай декларирует свое желание действовать по правилам, определенным мировым сообществом. Кроме этого, Китай заинтересован в том, чтобы сохранить систему отношений, обеспечившую этой стране стремительный рост и статус-кво в вопросах власти, которая на данном этапе развития страны является реформистской, а не ревиизионистской. Вместе с тем, любые проявления ревиизионизма следует воспринимать как попытки Китая восстановить баланс сил в регионе после длительного периода потери этой страной статуса регионального лидера.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай; мягкая сила; гармоничный мир; китайская мечта; национализм.

## 1 Introduction

In the two decades after 1990, the economy of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as «China», or PRC) grew at a rate of more than 10% per year. It is currently claimed that based on purchasing power parity (PPP), China overtook the US economy in late 2014, although based on GDP, it is expected that China will not be able to overtake the USA until the mid-2020. This trend was in place until 2010, and then was re-estimated downward, so that China is expected to reach the highest GDP in the world by 2027. (Flores-Macias & Kreps, 2013, 357) [1]. China's growth is now slowing down, with the current estimate for the years ahead between 6-7% annually, which is still more than the global average (World Bank, 2016) [2]. Along with this growth, China's political, diplomatic and military power has also grown. Since China is already a regional power and is on its way to becoming a global superpower, it is necessary to understand China's position in the global order without being involved in a needless conflict. One of the objectives of this paper is to aid this by demonstrating theoretical underpinnings behind China's foreign policy and its growing role on the world stage. Another objective is to present the soft power initiatives which China is carrying out. The use of soft power is meant to reinforce the message within the guiding theoretical principles that China wants the world to receive, which links theory with practice. Since this article means to only show certain soft power policies as they apply to the guiding principles, it presents a partial view of China's foreign policy. An analysis of Chinese practical policy moves which are contradictory to these principles is not within the scope of this paper.

After a short literature review and statement of purpose, the article will discuss the formal guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy as stated by the successive generations of leadership from Deng Xiaoping (namely the policy of «Hide Brightness and Nourish Obscurity» and the Good Neighbour Policy) onward. Particular emphasis will be placed on the current principles established by the last two generations - the concepts of «China's Peaceful Rise», «Harmonious World» and the «Chinese Dream». The main tenets of each principle will be described, but the article will not go into much discussion of their merits for the lack of space. The focus of the article will then shift to China's soft power, with examples of China's attempts to live up to its rhetoric in the realms of investment, cultural and educational exchange, etc. The concept of the «Beijing Consensus», or the «Chinese model of development», will also be discussed.

Information for the research was obtained mainly from Internet databases of scientific papers of the relevant scholars, with small additions from online news websites and the World Bank website. The research was conducted mainly by using the method of study of scholarly sources. Among the methodology used, there was an analysis of texts by various scholars on the topic and synthesis of their findings into a coherent narrative. The descriptive and comparative methods were also applied when discussing the content of the studied guiding principles. The paper is written from the viewpoint of the discipline of International Relations (IR) (specifically the realist school of IR), and therefore it uses the terminology of IR. In this view, China will be studied as a unitary actor keeping within the realist paradigm.

## 2. Brief Literature Review

To ensure an objective and balanced view and to avoid a one-sided pro-Chinese view on the issue, the article relies almost exclusively on sources from outside mainland China. Foremost among them is Joseph Nye who defined the term and concept of «soft power» in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* printed in 1990. Another expert is Joshua Cooper Ramo who coined the term «Beijing Consensus» in his 2004 paper *The Beijing Consensus* published by the Foreign Policy Centre. An important scholar of contemporary China is Kerry Brown who works at the Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House in Great Britain. In his scientific papers, interviews and books, such as *China 2020: The Next Decade for the People's Republic of China* (2011), he offers a complex view on the trends in the Chinese economy, foreign and military policy and soft power.

Similarly well-known is Shaun Breslin of the University of Warwick in Britain, the author of the paper *China and the global order: signalling threat or friendship?* in *International Affairs* (2015). A very highly regarded scholar is Stephen Blank, who publishes books and articles mainly on Russia, but also on Asia as a whole, such as his article *Dragon Rising: Chinese Policy in Central Asia* in *American Foreign Policy Interests* (2011). Among the East Asian scholars studying the development of China's soft power is Jian Wang, notably as the editor of the monograph titled *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* (2011). Another scholar is Tsai Tung-Chieh, the director of the Centre for Contemporary China Studies and professor at the National Chung-Hsing University in Taiwan, who specialises in international relations, East Asian studies, Chinese Foreign Policy and Cross-Strait Issues. Especially relevant here is his scientific paper with Tony Tai-Ting Liu in *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* titled *Swords into ploughshares? China's Soft Power strategy in Southeast Asia and its challenges* (2014).

An interesting point of view can be supplied by non-Anglo-Saxon authors, such as Badar Alam Iqbal of Aligarh Muslim University in India who specialises in the BRICS countries, and the co-author of *Emergence of BRICS as an Economic Bloc in Transnational Corporations Review* (2015), or Detlef Nolte of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg whose research scope includes the Pacific region.

Though exhaustive in their own spheres of interest, most of the sources concentrate on either one sphere of policy (economy, trade, investment, soft power) or one geographical area (Southeast Asia, Central Asia, BRICS). Furthermore, the sources are constrained by the time periods they are written in, which is mostly prior or around the date of leadership transition, as well as with an emphasis on contemporary issues.

## 3. Purpose

China's importance in the global economy and international affairs has been growing for the past several decades, and this trend is set to continue in the future. Notwithstanding its predicted economic slowdown, China is still growing rapidly, and it will remain the second largest economy and largest trading nation for some time. Because of its military modernisation, China's hard power is set to increase. It is developing its soft power as well. Under these circumstances, it is useful to take note of the theoretical substantiation and the reasons China gives for its conduct of foreign policy. Too often, the emphasis is placed only on the consequences of Chinese actions and possible threats which it poses, without listening to China's explanations of its policies and strategies. And while it is easy to dismiss Chinese declarations and doctrines as propaganda, understanding the principles behind the Chinese policy is an important method to ensure China and its partners speak the same language, find common ground and help heal the rifts between them. This paper will therefore present the main guiding principles behind the formulation of China's foreign policy as stated by the paramount leaders of the various generations of Chinese leadership. As well, certain soft power initiatives will be put into context of these principles. This might help neighbouring and Western countries understand China better.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The Guiding Principles and Concepts behind China's Foreign Policy

The use of theory and theoretical concepts to guide and explain foreign policy has been observed in the PRC since it was founded in 1949. Under Mao's leadership, China attempted to export its revolution in accordance with Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought. This led to cooperation with developing countries based on a common heritage and experiences as part of the developing world and the non-aligned movement, linked together by a shared (semi-)colonial past. However, since the start of economic reforms under paramount leader Deng Xiaoping and his successors from the late 1970s, these Chinese leaders have stressed that China does not have any hegemonic ambitions towards the surrounding regions or the world. The necessity for assurances grew in the early 1990s after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, when China faced international isolation and questions about the merits of engaging China into

the global economic system arose in the West. In response, Deng formulated the principle of *taoguang yanghui*, translated as «hide brightness, nourish obscurity» (Breslin, 2013) [3]. Its basis is that China should not draw attention to itself in international politics, so as not to be seen as an aggressive power bent on revising the international system to its advantage and thereby discourage potential partners. China emphasises that the goal of this policy is not to mislead other countries about its intentions, but to explain and prove its peaceful intentions and the peaceful nature of its rise. This rise is primarily economic and thus presents opportunities to all countries willing to commit to closer economic cooperation. China considers this a logical principle of its foreign policy, as it still has to focus on domestic development and therefore has little to gain by an aggressive policy abroad.

However, the Chinese leadership was conscious of the necessity of allaying the fears of neighbouring countries. For this reason, it adopted the Good Neighbour Policy at the end of the 1980s (Liu & Tsai, 2014) [4]. This policy consists of four points:

- 1) peaceful resolution of territorial disputes;
- 2) establishment of a bilateral dialogue based on cooperation in the prevention and resolution of conflicts;
- 3) support of multilateralism;
- 4) economic cooperation deepening.

In practice, this manifests as attempts to stabilise the surrounding regions for its trade or as opening new markets.

China also wants to allay the persistent fears of its regional and global partners, expressed in scholarly literature as a «China Threat» (Suzuki, 2009) [5]. With this in mind, Chinese leaders embarked on an ongoing charm offensive and adopted some theoretical concepts to express China's peaceful intentions. Apart from the Good Neighbour Policy, from Hu Jintao's ascent as a paramount leader in 2003, China began to proclaim its «Peaceful Rise.» This had a negative reception abroad, however, since it evoked an ascent which by definition changes the status quo and the relative position of other countries. The phrase was thus gradually phased out, but its principles were strengthened in the form of the concepts of «Harmonious Society» (in the realm of domestic policy) and its foreign policy equivalent, a «Harmonious World.» This last one was introduced by Hu at the Asia-Africa Summit in Jakarta in 2005. It emphasises multilateralism, collective security, mutual advantage and respect of diversity (mainly in the form of government or economic model) (Liu & Tsai, 2014) [4]. In the sphere of security, this means promoting multilateralism and common or collective security based on mutual trust and cooperation. In the economic sphere, it means establishing a multilateral system of trade open to all countries without discrimination and based on mutual benefits and the realisation of a common prosperity and development, which are the main goals of China. This is in keeping with China's long-term calls for a reform of international trade and the financial system, so it would be fairer to developing countries. It also means acceptance of diversity (as in the form of government). The realisation of a «Harmonious World» has three prongs:

- 1) an active multilateral diplomacy based on taking part in international organisations and multilateral agreements;
- 2) support of a harmonious international environment through trade and proving of peaceful intentions;
- 3) an emphasis on cultural diplomacy and exchange.

This emphasis on multilateralism was a rather new trend in the Chinese approach towards its neighbourhood. Up until recently, China was sceptical of multilateralism, since it saw a risk of a counterbalancing coalition being formed against it in multilateral negotiations. It therefore long preferred a bilateral approach in negotiations, where it could bring to bear its ever-growing political and economic power. However, the growing engagement in several arenas let China test the efficacy of various approaches, and e.g. cooperation with Russia in Central Asia and in the SCO and BRICS, as well as growing economic relations with the EU countries, led to a higher appreciation of multilateralism, which China was sought to replicate elsewhere, like in its dealings with ASEAN (Blank, 2011) [6].

Since president Xi Jinping came to power in the years 2012-2013, his vision of the Chinese Dream has come to the

forefront as the ideological basis of both domestic and foreign policy, with the Harmonious World concept taking a back seat. Xi's more hard-line stance on the South China Sea dispute and other issues has caused some worry in the surrounding regions and the West that the Chinese Dream means a more expansionist China. But as Kerry Brown explains, the Chinese Dream is mostly about internal development and raising standards of living. In foreign policy, it refers to recapturing the past glory of China as a regional political, economic and cultural hub (Brown, 2014) [7]. This causes the same nervous reactions as the «Peaceful Rise» did earlier, but it is important to remember that China's rise does not signify so much a unbalancing of power in its own «near abroad» as it does a rebalancing after a «Century of Humiliation» when China was not pulling its weight. This was accentuated when the current foreign minister of the PRC, Wang Yi, declared at the NPC session in March 2014 that China will play a more assertive role internationally, especially in regional affairs, the support of developing countries and protection of overseas Chinese and their legitimate interests. China will also continue its peaceful development, with regional peace and cooperation helping to strengthen the reform process at home and the position of China as the world's largest trading nation. Wang also presented three trends of Chinese diplomacy within the scope of Chinese Dream:

- 1) a new model of great-power relations that would soften conflicts between them;
- 2) a regional «neighbourhood diplomacy» based on friendship, sincerity, and mutual advantage;
- 3) a foreign policy which better balances justice with protection of national interest (People's Daily Online, 2014) [8].

#### 4.2 China's Growing Soft Power

How do these guiding principles translate into practical policy? The answer is: by developing its soft power to prove the principles of multilateralism, mutually beneficial development and respect. The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990 as a form of non-coercive power based on culture, ideology or institutions (Nye, 1990) [9]. And, as China's hard power, especially economic, has grown, its soft power has grown as well. Indeed, it is the perception of Chinese success in the growth of its hard power and mainly its economic development that strengthens its soft power, showing how both forms of power are linked (Merickova, 2014) [10]. In practice, China's commitment to soft power was demonstrated by establishing branches of the Confucius Institute, founded in 2004, which were to spread a positive image of China abroad and facilitate learning about Chinese culture and language (Suzuki, 2009) [5]. China also began to offer scholarships to foreign students to enrol in institutions of higher education in China (Dehart, 2012) [11]. That was a reaction to the growing popular demand to gain a deeper knowledge of China in the countries with which China established a closer relationship.

However, the attractiveness of modern China does not lie merely in its culture. The Chinese can point to the success of their domestic policies, which lifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty and into the growing middle class (Wang, 2013) [12]. China's declarations and activities stress the alleviation of poverty and respect of each country's differences, political system and development strategy. This is often described as the Chinese model of development or the Beijing Consensus. This is a reference and contrast to the Washington Consensus, which advocates free markets and minimising state intervention. The Washington Consensus is also linked to the idea of conditionality of economic and developmental relations, meaning that standard trade relations and development aid should depend on respect for democracy and human rights. In contrast, the Beijing Consensus is attractive to many countries which do not fulfil the democratic standards set by the West. China thus becomes an important balancer of the USA (or the EU) (Ramo, 2004) [13]. Critics claim these are just slogans to legitimise undemocratic regimes and enable them to take part in the global economy without any sanctions that would force them to democratise. But China denies spreading any kind of model or consensus, claiming that the Chinese

Model is strictly tailored to China, and cannot be transplanted. This is what the respect for each country's political and economic system is ostensibly all about. At the same time, China claims that its goal is mutual development within the existing global economic and financial framework. It does however stress the need to reform the global financial system, which should be fairer to developing countries. Yet China does propagate a pattern of investment in developing countries which is meant to show its commitment to the concept of mutual development. It invests heavily in infrastructure projects, such as the building and reconstruction of roads, bridges, railroads, etc. In Africa, it also enters into joint ventures with local investors in agriculture, oil and other natural resources, as well as light manufacture such as textiles (Kovarova, 2015) [14]. And mutual development is not limited to LDCs. During the EU debt crisis in 2010 China offered to buy more Spanish bonds, citing the belief that China is obliged to help other countries during a crisis. Critics have pointed out the connection between this behaviour and China's attempts to have the EU arms embargo lifted (Tzou, 2015) [15]. This is a valid criticism, since every country has pragmatic interests, but it does not detract from the positive aspects of China's strategy.

The principle of non-conditionality of investments, loans and other aid is a tried and tested tool in China's repertoire. Cooperation with China is thus more attractive to countries with a sceptical or even negative view of the concepts of human rights, democracy or neoliberal market policies as pushed by the West. Developing nations can lessen their dependency on the model advocated by the IMF and WB and choose their own methods of development, thanks to China. For example Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela, because of their economic and developmental policies not reflecting neoliberal norms, had problems borrowing from states and organisations advocating the Washington Consensus in the previous decade. As a consequence, they received loans from China (Nolte, 2013) [16].

This mutual development is to be accomplished through multilateral institutions which show so much new promise for China. Especially its membership in the BRICS group, along with Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa, has a strong soft power dimension. Though the term BRIC was coined by Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs as early as 2001 to describe the initial four countries excluding South Africa, formal cooperation between them did not start until 2006, with annual summits beginning in 2009 (Iqbal & de Araujo, 2015) [17]. BRICS comprises 25% of the world's land/surface area and 40% of the global population, which gives the member states the

right to speak for a sizable chunk of the world and its population. And its growing share of global GDP, currently around 25 percent (which the member states would like to double to 50% by 2050) gives an important impression of success, which other countries gravitate to (Burian, 2015) [18].

## 5. Conclusions

As we have seen, each generation of Chinese leaders since Mao Zedong has sought to provide a theoretical underpinning of its practical foreign policy by guiding principles. Their purpose was to calm the fears of neighbouring and Western states and present the values that China ostensibly stood and stands for. This has always had an air of propaganda surrounding it, especially in the cases when the reality of Chinese practical policy did not fit the theory. This could be seen in China's approach to multilateralism, which often results in a divide and conquer approach. And the utilisation of soft power by China is a very controversial issue itself. Criticism focuses mainly on China's propping up of authoritarian regimes by its refusal to apply Western-style conditions in its use of foreign investment, as well as its emphasis on mutual respect as part of the so-called Beijing Consensus. Critics of China dismiss these theoretical principles as propaganda with little to no substance behind it, and claim China is using the Beijing Consensus to revise or even outright destroy the current global economic, financial and political order. But these interpretations are no reason to disregard China's statements of guiding principles and soft power. From the ideas and values espoused in these doctrines, it can be surmised that China is trying to be seen as a «team player» who does not want to abolish the existing global order. As a beneficiary of that order, which enabled it to reach the status it has today, China would prefer to reform it rather than destroy it. After all, as Deng Xiaoping stated, it does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice. China is not a revisionist «outsider» power, but an integrated member with a vested interest in the current global system. Since China is a potential superpower, it is necessary to engage it constructively. For that, China's partners need to understand China and recognise what values it stands for. Part of this lies in the study and comprehension of the guiding principles and how China uses its soft power to fulfil them. It is also necessary to accept that China's grievances may be legitimate, and that instead of destroying a delicate balance of power, it is merely rebalancing an unbalanced state of affairs resulting from China's absence among the great powers during the Century of Humiliation. Such a rebalanced world could benefit not only the immediate region, but the world as well.

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