Analyzing Rising Power from the Perspective of Soft Power: a new look at China’s rise to the status quo power

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A rising power has traditionally been considered as a revisionist power in realist international relations theories. However, a preliminary analysis of the rising China’s foreign policy behavior doesn’t uphold such conventional wisdom. Through the case study of China’s rise, this article investigates whether the soft power concept provides a new approach in analyzing a rising power. Firstly, empirical connections between soft power and the rise of China are established by discussing the Chinese idea of soft power. This is followed by an examination of how China adopts a soft power-based global strategy and wields soft power in its rise to a status quo power. The findings suggest that the soft power concept can be applied to analyze a rising power. Moreover, when a rising power tries to develop its soft power resources and wield its soft power, its revisionist policy orientation will greatly decrease. This in turn allows for a smoother transition to a status quo power.

The study of global politics provides a historical narrative that chronicles the rise and decline of power. The relative strengths of the world’s leading powers are constantly in flux, principally due to the uneven growth rate of different societies and technological and organizational breakthroughs which bring greater advantage to certain societies over others.1 These power shifts cause a constant reordering of the international pecking order of states. Since 1880, in a comparative ranking of world powers, the top five slots at sequential 20-year intervals have been shared by only seven states: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, and China.2 During the Cold War, the United States and the former Soviet Union were the only two superpowers in all aspects of military strength, political influence, and economic power. Since the end of the Cold War, both the structure of

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the international system and the international pecking order of major powers have undergone many dramatic changes. One of the most prominent changes is the increasing importance of China to both economic and strategic outcomes at the global and regional levels; coupled with that are other states’ long-term considerations of their own national interests. Many view China as the likeliest candidate to attain a superpower status. According to a survey of 1,112 faculties of international relations in American universities and colleges, international terrorism (50%), proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (45%), and the rise of China (40%) have been listed as the three most important foreign policy issues that the US must face in the next ten years.3

As China strengthens its national power and struggles for its status, the question of how China’s rise will transform the international system has become one of the most important and controversial issues in the field of international relations. Everybody agrees that China is playing an increasingly more important role in global affairs, but the consensus on the approach and nature of the state’s ascendancy has yet to be reached in the academic and policy worlds. The realist international relations theorists point out that a rising power is a revisionist power, which will disrupt the international system and pose threats to the status quo power. Is this conventional wisdom still true in the case of China’s rise? Furthermore, since Harvard professor Joseph Nye coined it in 1990, the term soft power has received great attention among scholars, the media, and the public. Can Nye’s concept of soft power be applied to the case of a rising China, which is utterly different from the United States in many perspectives? If it adopts the idea of soft power and wields its soft power, will China become a revisionist power in its rising process? This article attempts to provide readers with a new analysis of China’s rise by answering these three questions.

The limits of realism in analyzing China’s rise

Classical international relations theories tell us that a state’s interests are shaped primarily by its power, which is usually measured in terms of material resources and political influence.4 For example, Martin Wight argues that it is the nature of powers to expand by spreading their cultural, economic, and political influences to other countries with the final goal of expanding their territory.5 John Mearsheimer believes that great powers have always tried to shift the burden of preserving the balance of power onto both allies and rivals, and use the wars between rival states to preserve their status quo in international politics.6 In world history, an equal power distribution among major states has been relatively rare, and efforts to maintain a balance of power have often led to war.7 In contrast, inequality of power has often

helped maintain peace and stability as there is little point in declaring war on a status quo power. For example, the Pax Britannica in the nineteenth century ensured an international system of relative peace and security through maintaining an unchallengeable navy and controlling key naval trade routes.

If rising powers chafe at the international system which is in favor of the status quo power, they may build up their own capabilities or form alliances to challenge the status quo power. There are two motivations behind the rising power’s challenges to the status quo power. First, as Hans J. Morgenthau pointed out, ‘a nation whose foreign policy aims at acquiring more power than it actually has, through a reversal of existing power relations—whose foreign policy, in other words, seeks a favorable change in power status—pursues a policy of imperialism’. 8 Second, according to Randall Schweller, the expansion of a rising power is a product not only of internal pressure, but also of threats and opportunities in the external environment. Schweller believes that the weakness of surrounding states also compels the rising power to fill the void. 9 Therefore, in the realist theoretical framework, the rise of a new great power is a threat to international security and it often leads to war, either because the rising power uses force to change the international system to suit its interests or because the status quo power launches a preventive war to preserve its position while it still has the capabilities to do so.

China, as a rising power, represents a potential danger to the current international system and the status quo power. Moreover, as an authoritarian state, China’s communist government’s top priority in global strategy may not be to expand Chinese national interests or to exercise power abroad, but instead to gain external acceptance and internal recognition that will perpetuate the regime. This profound divorce of the regime’s political interest from the nation’s interest could easily turn Beijing into a typical rising challenger or even an imperialist power if it feels secure and powerful enough. 10 Many realist scholars have always predicted that conflict—and perhaps war—is likely to take place between China and the status quo power (the US) or another regional power (Japan) as China continues its rise. They question whether a dictatorial, nationalistic, and dissatisfied China would adhere to regional and international norms and further integrate itself into the existing global system.

While Morgenthau explained how a nation on the rise was pursuing a reversal of existing power relations (the status quo) of the international system, he stressed there were two most popular misconceptions about defining revisionist power. One of them is that not every foreign policy aimed at an increase in the power of a nation is necessarily a manifestation of revisionism. 11 Does the perception that a rising China is a revisionist power fall victim to this misconception? Moreover, Schweller believes that if ‘revisionist states value what they covet more than what they currently possess . . . they will employ military force to change the status quo’. 12

also lists three questions to determine if a state pursues a fundamentally status quo or revisionist foreign policy. Based on these definitions of revisionist power, China cannot be considered a revisionist state. In recent years, not only has China stayed away from any major military conflicts, but China has also become ever more compliant with international rules and norms. China has adopted a predictable and pragmatic foreign policy since the end of the Mao era. Compared to such revisionist powers as Germany and Japan in modern history, China’s foreign policy behavior does not quite qualify as revisionism.

Therefore, a preliminary analysis of Chinese foreign policy based on the realist theoretical framework does not lead us to conclude that China is a revisionist power in its rising process. This conclusion can also be found in similar studies by other scholars. For example, Alastair Iain Johnston claimed that

with more rigorous criteria for determining whether a state’s foreign policy is status quo or revisionist oriented than heretofore have been used in international relations theorizing, it is hard to conclude that China is a clearly revisionist state operating outside, or barely inside, the boundaries of a so-called international community.

David Kang also argued that ‘China’s expected emergence as the most powerful state in East Asia has been accompanied with more stability ... It has provided credible information about its capabilities and intentions to its neighbors’.

If China cannot be effectively defined as a growing danger on the basis of simple facts, why has China been consistently regarded by many as a threat to the status quo power and regional peace and stability in Pacific Asia? The US—as the status quo power—sees most others as threats or potential threats, especially in the case of China, which possesses a one-party political system. More importantly, these perceptual characterizations generally adhere to various realist insights into why rising powers are almost invariably interested in challenging extant institutions, norms, and power distributions. The realist hypothesis fails to examine both the status quo elements in China’s development of national power over the last several decades and the problematic status of the empirical evidence used to make claims about China’s revisionism. The conclusion that China is a threat is not based on a complete analysis of China’s national power. Instead, much of the analyses and predictions rest upon China’s military buildup and economic development, which belong to China’s hard power. They fail to take into account China’s development and wielding of soft power. If a soft power approach is applied to examine China’s rise, will China still be regarded as a revisionist power? To find the answer to this question, two important issues must be addressed: (1) Can the concept of soft power provide an approach to analyzing rising power? (2) Does China accept the idea of soft power and wield soft power in its rising process?

13. Gilpin’s three questions are: (1) Will a state government support and follow the existing rules in international affairs such as interstate diplomacy, regional security institutions, and international economic institutions?; (2) Are state leaders satisfied with the existing distribution of power globally or regionally?; and (3) How does the leadership speak and act regarding the hierarchy of prestige. See Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 23–24.
Soft power—a new approach to analyzing the rising power

While many accept the notion that a rising power is a revisionist power, other international relations theorists have consistently criticized the realist view of rising power. Excluding the realist methodology of coercion and outright bullying, they believe that there is a new approach to power and power politics. The work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye forms the core of a new international relations theory which has been labeled the school of neoliberal institutionalism. Counter to the realist theories, Keohane and others have sought to prove that cooperation is possible even under anarchy, owing to the role of institutions and information. By seeking to graft neoliberal concepts like interdependence onto realist insights about power, Keohane and Nye argue that in most instances states choose to cooperate in international relations. In their view, rising powers are not by definition threats. Instead, they are often likely to cooperate with other states, as it is in their interest to do so. Rising powers can learn to use institutions as a mechanism for the pursuit of mutual gains and to reduce the likelihood of their own malefeasance or dangerous manipulation of other states. In the institutionalist views, rising powers can transform the status quo through an evolutionary—rather than disruptive—process based on incremental changes. For rising powers, gaining wealth in absolute terms is more important than gaining power relative to other states. Based on this alternative to the realist description of power politics, Nye has developed a new conceptual approach—soft power—to understanding international relations and analyzing foreign policies in the post-Cold War world.

Although it is Nye who first coined and defined this concept, the soft power concept can be traced to the works of many other international relations theorists. For example, even a hard-core realist like Morgenthau plainly recognized the importance of ‘the quality of diplomacy’ as a power factor and also of admiration for a country in a broader sense. While Nye attempts to define soft power, he mentions the traditional power definitions of Hans J. Morgenthau, Klaus Knorr, and Ray S. Cline, who believed that to define power as the possession of resources might be more practical than the behavioral definition of power. For Nye, the realist model of power analysis is still the most applicable model to guide our thinking. In that model, Morgenthau identified nine elements of national power. Among them, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the quality of government are closely associated with what Nye describes as intangible components of soft power resources. The connection between Nye’s soft power concept and realist models of power analysis is reflected in Nye’s description of a country’s soft power resources from the perspective of state attributes, that is, power resides in the

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aggregate capabilities of states relative to others and can be measured by some inventory of domestic attributes. As Nye described,

soft power resources are the assets that produce such attraction ... [it] 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 polices (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).\textsuperscript{18}

Nye’s soft power concept has been mainly developed in his three books.\textsuperscript{19} Nye first put forward the idea of soft versus hard power in his 1990 book. He argued that getting other states to change might be called the directive or commanding method of exercising power, which can rest on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks). But, there is the consideration that is sometimes called the ‘second face of power’—an indirect way to exercise power. What Nye describes as the ‘second face of power’ deserves quoting at length:

A country may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situation in world politics, as it is to get others to change in particular situations. This aspect of power—that is, getting others to want what you want—might be called indirect or co-optive power. It is in contrast to the active command power behavior of getting others to do what you want. Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one’s idea or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express ... The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength.\textsuperscript{20}

In his 2002 and 2004 books, Nye further honed the definition, expanded the examples, used new polling data and historical research, and further explored the implications and limits of soft power. Specifically, he uses the current American war in Iraq as a new context for defining and delving into the importance of soft power in current international relations research.

Based on his understanding of the contemporary world—\textit{interdependence}, which is characterized by multiple channels, the absence of hierarchy among issues, and a minor role of military force—Nye elaborates another important issue in the definition of power—the changed sources of power. Before Nye, other theorists addressed this important issue. For example, Kenneth N. Waltz describes the power politics in a bipolar world as ‘competition [that] becomes more comprehensive as well as more widely extended. Not only just military preparation but also economic growth and technological development become matters of intense and constant concern’.\textsuperscript{21} Gilpin stresses that, besides a state’s military, economic, and technical capabilities,
there are other important—often difficult to measure—factors that help to influence political events, such as public morale and the quality of political leadership. He uses the term ‘prestige’ to sum up these factors. Richard Rosecrance argues that since 1945, the world is moving towards a territorial system composed of states that view power in terms of not only land mass, but of a trading system that has the potential to dramatically change the traditional views of self-sufficiency. Nye provides a more comprehensive investigation of the transition of power sources in the new international environment. In assessing a state’s power today, Nye focuses on factors such as culture, ideology, institutions, technology, and education. He argues that these components are becoming more important, whereas geography, population, and raw materials are decreasing in importance.

To some extent, Nye’s works reintroduce Morgenthau’s power analysis via a neoliberal paradigm. Although he is a convinced institutionalist, Nye’s stance on power and power politics reveals close affinities with realism. As Nye admits, while world politics becomes more complex, the appropriate response to the changes occurring in world politics today is not to abandon the traditional concern for the military balance of power, but to accept its limitations and supplement it with insights about ‘interdependence’. Nye criticizes the traditional efforts to define power on the basis of military and strategic aspects of power. He believes that in the current information-rich era of globalization, soft power resources like cultural attractiveness, political values, and foreign policies are becoming increasingly important elements in achieving great power status. Thus, power is becoming less tangible and less coercive among advanced countries. With soft power resources becoming increasingly important for a nation’s power, it is necessary to analyze a rising power’s foreign policy behavior from a new perspective—soft power wielding. Under this backdrop, foreign policy scholars and practitioners who have doubts about the power transition theory argue that China has paid close attention to building up its intangible power resources. Supporters of this argument point to how China’s ‘reform and opening up’ policies have engineered a major shift in Beijing’s foreign policy outlook, from Mao’s revolutionary diplomacy bent on undermining the international system to a pragmatist paradigm seeking to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the globalized world economy.

Can Nye’s soft power approach be used to analyze China’s rise? Not only did China’s rise begin at least one decade earlier than Nye coined the term of soft power, but also the conceptualization of soft power has primarily been associated with the case of the US, the only status quo power in the current world. Will these facts limit the analytical reach of the soft power concept and leave open questions about the applicability of soft power to the other countries, especially rising powers like China? Unfortunately, none of these important questions has been addressed by the existing literature on soft power. In order to answer those questions, the empirical connection

between the soft power concept and the current rise of China will be established by exploring the Chinese idea of soft power.

The Chinese idea of soft power

For more than two millennia, the idea of soft power had been consistently advocated and comprehensively utilized by ancient Chinese rulers. Even many Western scholars admit that since the time of Sun Zi (544–496 BC) and Mo Zi (470–390 BC), idealism has provided a counterpoint to realism. China’s ancient tradition of idealism held that morality, law, and cooperation can form the basis for relations among states; human nature is not evil; peaceful and cooperative relations among states are possible; and states can operate as a community rather than merely as autonomous self-interested agents. It is easy to find the idea of soft power in China’s ancient philosophies. For example, Confucianism, which was China’s dominant ideology for more than 2,000 years, advocates that a state should obtain its leadership status by setting an example, and it opposes imposition of one’s values on others. Confucius (551–479 BC) preached the golden rule of means, advising ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (behave toward others as you would like to have them behave toward you). In his teachings, Confucius put emphasis on the limitation and regulation of power instead of the use of power. Mencius (372–289 BC), another great Confucian thinker, believed that a benevolent king had no rivals in the world and could easily win the support of the masses, including the oppressed people in other countries. He regarded boasting of military expertise as a grave crime. Mo Zi, the founder of Mohism and the advocate of the doctrine of non-offense, argued that offensive uses of force would sow the seeds of long-standing conflicts like theft and murder. Influenced by these philosophies, ancient Chinese rulers preferred to defuse security threats internally through moral government.

When dealing with external relations, China’s ancient military strategies emphasized diplomatic maneuvering rather than military confrontation. For example, the ideas of ‘culture winning over an enemy’ and ‘winning a battle before it is fought’ are traceable throughout ancient China’s strategic culture. In his masterpiece The Art of War, China’s ancient military strategist Sun Tzu put forward his famous idea that it is better to attack the enemy’s mind than to attack his fortified cities. Sun Tzu advocated,

to gain a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the highest excellence; to subjugate the enemy’s army without doing battle is the highest of excellence. Therefore, the best warfare strategy is to attack the enemy’s plans, next is to attack alliances, next is to attack the army, and the worst is to attack a walled city.

The sources of Sun Tzu’s ‘the highest of excellence’ are similar to what are defined as soft power resources—people’s rationality, morality, values, and aspirations.

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Johnston’s characterization of China’s strategic culture indirectly highlights the Chinese idea of soft power in ancient China’s philosophies:

(1) a theoretical and practical preference for strategic defense . . . accompanied by diplomatic intrigue and alliance building rather than the invasion, subjugation, or extermination of the adversary;
(2) a preference for limited war, or the restrained application of force for clearly enunciated political ends; and
(3) an apparently low estimation of the efficacy of violence, as embodied for instance in Sun Zi’s oft-cited phrase, ‘not fighting and subduing the enemy is the supreme level of skill’.29

Before the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China was completely shut out of the discursive interchanges on international relations as a discipline and its theoretical and methodological contentions in the West. International relations as a recognized discipline in China has seen most of its growth only in the early 1980s.30 In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese scholars were able to study state-of-the-art Western international relations theories when translations of some classic texts were made available in China for the first time. Keohane and Nye’s works on the neoliberal institutionalist theory were introduced to Chinese scholars in the early 1980s.31 Although their theories, which de-emphasize the role of the state in international relations, have been given scant attention in China’s (Marxist) realism-dominated international relations field, Nye’s concept of soft power has been an exception. The concept of soft power was quickly introduced in China after Nye coined it in 1990. Nye’s first book on soft power—*Bound to Lead*—was translated by He Xiaodong and published by China’s Military Translation Press in 1992. Nye’s new approach to power analysis gained some influence on many young Chinese scholars. In early Chinese literature on the subject, soft power versus hard power was usually referred to as mental power versus material power.32

After the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, the political leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believed that the spread of Western culture and political values, which are important power resources in Nye’s definition of soft power, had contributed to China’s massive student movements in 1986 and 1989. As Deng said, ‘The rampant spread of bourgeois liberalization may have grave consequences . . .

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29. See Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 25.
the imperialists are pushing for peaceful evolution towards socialism in China, placing their hopes on the generations that will come after us’. Therefore, the CCP launched several waves of nationwide campaigns for the ‘spiritual civilization’ and against ‘bourgeois liberalization’ in order to discredit Western political values. The concept of soft power obviously belonged to those so-called bourgeois political thoughts, and they had not received any attention from Chinese leaders in the early 1990s.

Until the middle of the 1990s, as China gradually emerged from the shadow of the Tiananmen crackdown, Chinese government officials and international relations scholars had started to study the concept of soft power in a more objective way. Inheriting the traditional views from their ancient culture, Chinese scholars and policy makers view soft power as indispensable in their attempt to increase China’s comprehensive national strength (zonghe guoli) and regain the status of great power. The CCP leaders have reiterated the importance of developing comprehensive national strength as ‘the fundamental task of socialism is to develop productive forces, enhance the comprehensive national strength of our socialist country, and improve the people’s living standards and in this way reflect the superiority of socialism over capitalism’. For Chinese political elites, comprehensive national strength should include not only hard power, but also soft power. According to a news article published by China’s governmental news agency, Xinhua News Agency, the concept of soft power has been widely accepted by Chinese political elites:

[Soft power] has once again emerged as a hot topic at this year’s annual sessions of China’s parliament and top political advisory body . . . Such an expression of soft power can be found in government agendas and suggestions offered by legislators and political advisors who are here attending the country’s two most important annual political events.

In his speech at the 17th CCP Congress, President Hu called for enhancing the soft power of Chinese culture. He said,

Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength . . . We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests.

China’s development of soft power is critical for realizing the dream of becoming a great power, especially since China’s hard power resources lag far behind those of the status quo power—the United States. Chinese policy makers believe that in the

34. Quoted from Jiang Zemin’s speech on the CCP’s 80th anniversary ceremony held in Beijing on 1 July 2001.
twenty-first century, the international system is becoming a multipolar one in which major powers have intensified their competition over comprehensive national strength. In such a new international environment, China’s best development strategy is to seek to strengthen its comprehensive national strength while maintaining internal stability. While soft power resources and its associated foreign policy behavior are increasingly recognized as essential components of great power status, China, as both a developing country and a rising power, must rely on soft power development and wielding to realize its ascendency in the twenty-first century.

Among the existing scholarly works that analyze the rise of China, most attention has been on China’s hard power—the ability to use economic inducement and sanction, and military threats and invasion to get its way. Chinese soft power—the ability of its ideas and values to shape the world through attraction and agenda-setting—has received little attention. Most importantly, Nye’s soft power concept was proposed with the singular concern of how to preserve and revive the US hegemony. As a developing country and a relatively marginalized player at the outset in the post-Cold War world order, China has a different set of concerns and must tap different sources of soft power. Thus China’s soft power wielding must be understood and re-conceptualized on the Chinese, rather than Nye’s, terms. The following section will examine how a rising China incorporates its idea of soft power in its global strategy.

**China’s soft power-based rising strategy**

China’s vast territory, gigantic population, fast economic growth, attractive traditional culture, huge domestic market, and ascending international status have enabled it to be seen as a potential superpower in the coming decades. In the Mao era, China was unable to attain great power status because Mao’s continuous political and ideological campaigns, aiming to revive a revolutionary spirit, had produced massive social, economic, and political upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s. China’s rise began when the state embarked on an ambitious program of economic reform and modernization in the late 1970s. This program has led to profound and extensive changes in China’s politics, economy, and society. In the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown and the collapse of the communist regimes in the former Eastern Bloc, many questioned whether China’s communist regime would survive in the global trend of democratization. Since the mid-1990s, more and more foreign scholars, business leaders, and government officials have started to alter their views on China as Beijing successfully continues its economic development and integration into the world economic system.

In general, the vigorous China policy debates in the US and Asia–Pacific countries have come close to reaching a consensus that the rise of China is a reality, but the implications of China’s rise have become a new focus of this everlasting China debate. As China appears to possess significant resources that can be mobilized to pursue the state’s national interests beyond its borders, what is China’s new place in the international system? Will China be a responsible great power in the twenty-first century? Although Beijing has become increasingly optimistic about its future
growth in economic and military power, there is increasing unease in the West and the Asia–Pacific region about the impacts of China’s ascendancy on the stability of the international system. Indeed, in international politics, how a state rises often has more drastic consequences for the world than the rise itself. The accompanying speed, ideology, and impact on the international balance of power cause other countries to harbor suspicion, jealousy, fear, and even hostility. Moreover, those who believe in democratic peace strongly doubt whether a rising China can become a peaceful and responsible great power.

As a rising power who struggles for acceptance from other states, especially the status quo power, China must provide reassurance and pursue cooperation in its foreign relations so that no major opposition arises against its ascendancy. In this milieu, it is very important for China to design a new global strategy to secure its peaceful rise. In defining its new rising strategy, the goal is not to get involved with vicious political animosity, retaliatory trade war, and massive military buildup. Rather, China seeks the avoidance of conflict through peaceful ascendancy in the perspectives of political, economic, and cultural influences. This doctrine reflects a deeply held Chinese belief that armed conflict is an indication of failure, in which ‘every battle is won or lost before it is ever fought’. According to Sun Zi, ‘Before doing battle, in the temple one calculates and will win, because many calculations were made’. Therefore, it is imperative for a rising China to wield its soft power—attraction and agenda-setting capabilities—to deal with foreign challenges and create a friendly international environment.

Based on their own understanding of the importance of soft power for its rise, Chinese leaders and scholars try to define China’s own ways to rise to a status quo power. In their search for a rising strategy, the foreign policy makers in Beijing insist on heeding the injunction of Deng Xiaoping that China should balance activism with caution to improve its international environment through steady, successful domestic transformation and skillful, patient diplomacy rather than confrontation. In recent years, as it has become significantly stronger, China has already overcome its long-held ‘victim mentality’ and adopted a ‘great power mentality’ instead.

On the one hand, China has begun to take a less confrontational, more sophisticated, more confident, and, at times, more constructive approach toward regional and global affairs. On the other hand, the Chinese government is acutely aware of the anxiety and even hostility among many countries toward its rising power status. In order to

39. See the translation of Art of War.
40. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, China’s top leader, Deng Xiaoping, propounded the famous 28-character instructions for handling Chinese foreign relations. They are: ‘Calmly observe the situation; secure our footing; cope with changes with confidence; conceal capacities and bide our time; skillfully keep a low profile; avoid sticking hand out; be proactive’. See Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan III*.
42. As to what kind of mentality China has in its current foreign policy-making process, there are some disagreements among China observers. For example, Medeiros and Fravel present the view that China has already overcome its long-held ‘victim mentality’ and started to adopt a ‘great power mentality’ instead. However, in the China–Japan diplomatic crisis that erupted in Spring 2005, there was widespread criticism that China cannot get rid of its ‘victim mentality’.
43. See Evan Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s new diplomacy’, *Foreign Affairs* 82(6), (2003), pp. 22–35.
defuse the inevitable backlash resulting from its fast ascendancy of hard power, Beijing has adopted a soft power-based rising strategy to guide its foreign policies in recent years. In his speech at the United Nations Summit marking its 60th anniversary, Chinese President Hu officially presented China’s new foreign policy of building a harmonious world, which can be regarded as China’s new soft power-based rising strategy. This new strategy was described by the CCP’s mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, as follows:

We should build a harmonious world by aiming at ‘performing great deeds’. Although a developing country, China is a rising big nation. Change in the international environment casts a direct impact on China’s rise, and the country will suffer from its negative effects if she doesn’t take the initiative to push it towards a more harmonious direction. Such a pro-active approach will benefit both the international environment of China and the advancement of the whole world. In the spirit of ‘performing great deeds’ China has decided to take on the responsibilities of a big nation.44

Based on this soft power-based rising strategy, Beijing has developed a new conceptual framework to interpret the new international order and guide its foreign relations. This new conceptual framework is composed of: (1) Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (especially putting aside differences and seeking common goals);45 (2) mutually beneficial economic contacts; (3) greater dialogue promoting trust and the peaceful settlement of disputes;46 and (4) the concept of ‘peaceful rise’ or ‘peaceful development’—to develop by taking advantage of the peaceful international environment and, at the same time, to maintain world peace through its development.47 China’s soft power-based rising strategy and its new foreign policy concepts seek to reassure other countries, especially the United States and China’s neighboring countries, that a rising China will not become a revisionist power by threatening world peace and regional stability. Instead the United States and other countries can benefit from China’s peaceful rise, which emphasizes the development and wielding of soft power rather than hard power.

Not only has China adjusted its foreign policies in strategic perspectives, but also it has put some new initiatives into practice. In dealing with the most sensitive foreign policy issue—territorial disputes—China has been more likely to lower its nationalist tone and compromise in these conflicts with its neighbors, including Russia and Vietnam, each of which had fought with China over territory.48 On 21 July 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi

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45. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: 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.
47. Some China observers believe that the Chinese government decision to eschew ‘peaceful rise’ in favor of ‘peaceful development’ was fundamentally a question of terminology and thus preserved China’s strategy of reassuring other nations. See Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, ‘The changing ecology of foreign policy-making in China: the ascension and demise of the theory of “peaceful rise”’, *China Quarterly* 190, (June 2007), pp. 291–310.
signed a treaty in Beijing that formally ended their four-decades-old border dispute. The accord finally demarcated the last pieces of their 2,700-mile-long frontier, one of the longest land borders in the world. The settlement of the China–Russia border dispute not only created more favorable conditions for the China–Russia relationship for the long term, but also set a successful example for settling border disputes through peaceful negotiation. On 31 December 2008, both the Chinese government and the Vietnamese government announced they had solved their three-decades-old land border dispute. Although the two countries still have big differences over the Spratly Islands, the completion of the land border demarcation will promote economic development and strengthen friendly ties in the border provinces of two countries.

In Northeast Asia, Beijing has maintained its low-key profile in its historic disputes with South Korea over the ancient history of the Korean Kingdom, and China has avoided any escalation of its territorial disputes with Japan over the Diaoyutai Islands.

As China’s Asian neighbors grow increasingly concerned about the impact of China’s rise, Beijing has actively reached out, offering its ‘smile diplomacy’ to defuse the concerns about Beijing’s long-term intentions as a rising power. Based on China’s soft power-based rising strategy, Chinese President Hu Jintao made a five-point proposal in order to realize lasting peace and common prosperity in Asia: (1) enhance political mutual trust; (2) deepen economic cooperation; (3) meet challenges together; (4) increase cultural and people-to-people exchanges; and (5) keep to the policy of openness. According to David Shambaugh, Beijing’s new diplomatic campaign in Southeast Asia was a specifically designed foreign strategy to wield its soft power:

> China’s efforts to improve its ties with ASEAN are not merely part of a larger ‘charm offensive’. They represent, in some cases, fundamental compromises that China has chosen to make in limiting its own sovereign interests for the sake of engagement in multilateral frameworks and pursuit of greater regional interdependence.

Starting in the second half of the 1990s, China began holding annual meetings with senior officials from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. In 1997, China helped initiate the ASEAN + 3 mechanism, a series of yearly meetings among the ten ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, and South Korea. Next came the ASEAN + 1 mechanism, annual meetings between ASEAN and China. In 2002, China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN. In 2003, China and Southeast Asian countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Clearly China’s soft power-based rising strategy for Southeast Asia includes its multifaceted foreign policy maneuvering towards individual states and the region as a whole in the strategic, political, economic, and military dimensions.

In addition to its diplomacy towards its neighboring counties, China has launched its soft power campaign towards Africa and Latin America. China is very sophisticated in using its international aid to establish a favorable national image in

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49. President Hu made his five-point proposal at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) annual conference on 12 April 2008.

those developing countries. For example, Beijing’s financial support has been mainly provided to some iconic infrastructure projects, from new parliament buildings and conference centers to football stadiums and school buildings. In promoting its economic agenda, Beijing seeks to differentiate itself from Western countries by stressing the common history of exploitation that both China and Africa had experienced under Western colonialism. As the Chinese President stressed in the beginning of his speech at the China–Africa Summit in late 2006, ‘In the modern era, our peoples launched unremitting and heroic struggle against subjugation, and have written a glorious chapter in the course of pursuing freedom and liberation, upholding human dignity, and striving for economic development and national rejuvenation’.

As an important part of China’s soft power campaign, Beijing has launched various forms of public diplomacy towards many countries in Africa and Latin America. For example, China’s governmental news organizations have set up local offices in various cities in Latin America, and some of them, like China Radio International, have already broadcast their programs locally. The Chinese government has generously distributed a large number of governmental scholarships to students from the developing countries. Beijing has also strived to implement programs of Chinese citizens’ group tours to some African and Latin American nations and grant more countries destination status for outbound Chinese tourist groups in recent years. All these efforts are part of Beijing’s savvy soft power-based outreach efforts in Africa and Latin America.

In many other fields, China is also becoming more sophisticated in the substance and style of its diplomacy in order to increase its attractiveness in the global arena. Beijing is increasing its efforts to conform more to international norms on some sensitive issues such as free trade, nuclear nonproliferation, and even environmental protection. China does not seek continued handouts, and increasingly pays its own way in world affairs. When the Asian financial crisis broke out in 1997, Beijing adhered to its commitment not to devalue its currency and offered assistance to the affected countries. Since the establishment of Hamid Karzai’s interim government in December 2001, China has been actively involved in helping with the reconstruction in Afghanistan. In the global tsunami relief efforts, there was an unprecedented international disaster relief campaign sponsored by the Chinese government. Within one month, China donated more than US$182 million (including US$60 million from the Chinese people) to the tsunami-hit countries, the largest amount from a developing country.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games, the Chinese government has achieved a big victory in public diplomacy. Drawing the attention of world media, China has successfully showcased its growing soft power resources, demonstrated an attractive national image to the outside world, and cultivated a more favorable global attitude to China’s rise. In the current global economic downturn, the Chinese government’s confidence in China’s economic growth has become the only bright spot. In November 2008, the Chinese government announced its 4 trillion yuan (US$586 billion) economic stimulus package, which focused on massive

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51. See the text of President Hu Jintao’s speech at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation held on 4 November 2006.

infrastructure development projects, tax cuts, green energy programs, and rural development. China’s quick action has won worldwide praise.

Moreover, China is becoming more active in international agenda setting. Beijing has not tried to force other governments to accept its vision of international order. Instead, Beijing is skillfully developing a vision, and then presenting compelling reasons for other states to sign on. In the 1990s, Beijing started to build on new relationships with many important states to facilitate economic and security coordination, and to offset the Western system of regional alliance. It seeks to establish ‘partnerships’ or ‘strategic partnerships’ with most of the powers along China’s periphery (Russia, ASEAN, South Korea, etc.) as well as with other world powers (e.g. France, Germany, the US, Brazil, South Africa, etc). Along with Russia, Beijing has been instrumental in establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which organizes China, Russia, and Central Asian countries to crack down on extremism, separatism, and terrorism. The SCO has become an important mechanism for Beijing to secure its borders and advance its influence in central Asia.

While East Asia is moving rapidly toward regional integration in recent years, China has shown a genuine desire to be an active member of many regional organizations. In its diplomatic offensives towards another important neighboring region—Southeast Asia—Beijing has been pushing for an ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement and a China–ASEAN security pact. The ASEAN–China Free Trade Argument that will be effective in 2010 provides Beijing with an advantageous strategic position for future economic cooperation in the area of Pacific Asia. Indeed, China’s move toward embracing multilateralism in its diplomacy has marked an obvious strategic departure from the Mao style of power politics and secret diplomacy. Another good example is Beijing’s refreshing diplomacy in the North Korea nuclear crisis. By engaging itself in vigorous shuttle diplomacy in the six-party talks, Beijing has won considerable regard in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. China has worked capably to win the confidence of all the parties involved and make itself a central player in Northeast Asian diplomacy.

As part of Beijing’s efforts to increase its capabilities of agenda setting, China’s membership in international institutions and organizations has increased dramatically. From the early 1970s to the middle 1990s, China moved from virtual isolation to a willingness to participate in international institutions. For example, by the early 1970s China had signed 10–20% of the international arms control agreements that it was eligible to join. By the mid-1990s it had signed 80% of such treaties. Since the mid-1990s, China has not only increased its participation in various Asian multilateral arrangements, but also has become an active player in dealing with many important global issues. Until the mid-1990s, China had regularly abstained from council resolutions that would authorize the use of force in order to signal its opposition to the erosion of sovereignty such resolutions implied. In recent years, however, Beijing has begun to back some of these measures. An obvious example is that in November 2002, China voted for UN Resolution 1441 on weapons inspections in Iraq. Beijing has also increased its participation in peacekeeping operations,

supporting contingents in East Timor, Congo, the Middle East, and elsewhere. China has sent 11,063 military personnel from time to time to participate in 18 UN peacekeeping operations since 1990. As of the end of November 2008, China had 1,949 military peacekeeping personnel serving in nine UN mission areas and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.\(^{55}\) As commended by some China observers, China’s expanding peacekeeping role points to the Chinese government’s new flexibility on intervention. That is, when there is broad international consensus around a specific intervention, China has tended to lend its support.\(^{56}\) In short, as China’s modernization process moves forward, Beijing’s view of its international position is evolving. Beijing appears to be moving beyond viewing itself in the role of suitor to embodying the role of an emerging major player with the strength to negotiate more aggressively.\(^{57}\)

**Conclusions**

China is on the rise. Although there are some disputes about the speed and extent of this change, the majority of attention has been paid to the question of whether China’s growing power portends a threat. Most China observers point to China’s territorial and demographic size, its fast-growing economy, and its increasing military budget as evidence that China may become a revisionist power capable of dominating East Asia and challenging American interests. They tend to examine the rise of China by focusing on China’s hard power—the ability to use economic inducement and sanctions and/or military threats and invasion to get its way. China’s soft power—the ability of its ideas and values to shape the world through attraction and agenda-setting—have received little attention in either academia or the policy world. This article finds that as China undergoes its modernization process, Beijing policy makers have not only embraced the idea of soft power, but have implemented a new global strategy based on attraction and agenda-setting. Guided by this new rising strategy, Beijing has implemented a series of charm offensives in its diplomacy. China’s soft power wielding in its foreign policies has generated an international platform for Beijing to share its opinions on key international issues and garner increased respect on a global scale. Beijing’s strengthened capabilities in attraction and agenda-setting will lead to the realignment of international relations in ways that will propel China’s rise to the status quo power. All these in turn will further reduce the revisionist orientation in China’s foreign policy, and allow for China’s smoother transition to the position of status quo power.

However, many doubt if China is going to stick with its current soft power-based global strategy in the long term. After China achieves a more substantial success in its economic development and military modernization, will Beijing be likely to continue emphasizing soft power development and wielding? China’s rise, unlike the former


\(^{56}\) See Bates Gill and Chin-hao Huang, ‘China’s expanding peacekeeping role: its significance and the policy implications’, SIPRI Policy Brief, (February 2009).

Soviet Union during the Cold War or other revisionist powers in history, will not engage in a global power struggle or ideological competition with the United States or any other major power. Although China is an unsatisfied power in the perspective of seeking greater global influence and prestige, it portrays itself as a developing country that pursues an independent foreign policy of peace. As discussed in previous sections, increased evidences have shown China is becoming more socialized in dealing with other countries, and more cooperative within international institutions than ever before. However, even if China is currently pursuing a peaceful and soft power-based route to realize its rise, the quality and quantity of revisionism in China’s political ideology and strategic thinking are not static properties. There are still some possibilities in which we may find the increase of revisionism in the Chinese government’s worldviews and policy preferences. One possibility is that the communist government mishandles any of its major governance issues such as social inequities, environmental degradation, public health crises, and so forth. The currently brewing social unrest precipitated a nationwide crisis. The other possibility is that in the wake of foreign intervention, Beijing loses control over the Taiwan issue, the Tibet issue, or any other issue involving separatist movements. If these scenarios occur, the Beijing policy makers will see the gigantic challenges to their vital interest—the survival of the CCP regime as the legal government in China or the existence of China as a sovereign country in the world. In this milieu, revisionism will prevail in Beijing’s policy-making process and the soft power-based global strategy will be abandoned by Beijing policy makers.

In the long term, whether China can avoid the above two scenarios and become a peaceful rising power depends on both internal and external factors. Regarding internal factors, China should pursue a comprehensive and efficient development strategy by focusing on developing both soft power resources and hard power resources. When China focuses on its economic development and globalization, it cannot discount the demands of political reform and democratization. Regarding external factors, China needs a friendly and stable international environment. In order to encourage China to develop and project its national power in a peaceful and responsible way, other countries should help China integrate itself into the existing international political and economic systems. The United States and China’s neighbors in particular should engage China and use their own abundance of soft power to encourage China’s willingness to begin real political reform, respect human rights, implement responsible foreign policies, and so forth.