

Rejuvenation and Global Dominance of the Chinese People through the BRI: A Confucianist Solution

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Abstract

China has initiated its plan to become the world's next global power and to obtain influence over other countries. China through its soft power strategy wants to be able to influence countries and people around the world. There are different means for a country like China to gain soft power and persuasive influence over other nations ways are country's political values, its foreign policy and its culture. Xi Jinping delivered speeches referencing to the ancient Silk Route in Central Asia. He launched China's multi-trillion dollar project called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has two components; the economic belt and the modern day maritime Silk Road. China has also incorporated traditional aspects of Confucianism into its modern day policy to influence countries like Pakistan and gain persuasion over people.

Keywords: Rejuvenation, Global, China, BRI

Introduction

China's President Xi Jinping of the Communist party, after getting elected, introduced a plan for the national rejuvenation of China. This plan was initiated to help China become a global power to be reckoned with and to help it achieve influence over different nations. In order to accomplish national rejuvenation, China has been utilizing a "soft power" strategy through different mechanisms. China's national and international soft power strategy to attain global dominance has incorporated certain aspects of Confucianism and borrowed ideas from its traditions and history.

What is Soft power: China's perspective?

Harvard University's world renowned political scientist, Joseph S. Nye formulated the term "soft power" with respect to China's aim to achieve global dominance. In 1990, Nye defined soft power, or "co-optive power" as, "getting other countries to want what you want ...[by using] cultural attraction, ideology and international institutions" (Nye, 1990). A country can obtain power through methods like coercion, payment or persuasion and attraction (Nye, 2016). The first two would be considered *hard*, or aggressive, *power*, while persuasion is considered *soft power*. Soft power works best for a country when it is combined with economic and military power to achieve their goals. China has borrowed this idea as it has modified the fundamentals of how the nation is functioning and is trying to obtain political influence by spreading its culture and way of thinking throughout the world.

There are different means for a country like China to gain soft power and persuasive influence over other nations. According to Nye, the three main ways are through a

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country's *political values*, its *foreign policy* and its *culture* (Nye, 1990). A country can appear more attractive to its spectators through its economic policies, broadcasting media, public diplomacy and merely the way the country is running. Previously, before the emphasis on soft power, China had been using *hard power*, which alone is not the best way to gain influence over other nations. Soft power is a subdued yet important method to get inclination of foreign nations and foreigners towards China and the future decisions that it makes.

Soft power can be accumulated over time through conscious efforts and also through the way a country is functioning and thriving. China has increased its endeavors to enhance its soft power which is evident through the measures it has taken, including the large sums of money the government is spending on it. According to Professor David Shambaugh from George Washington University, China is spending about \$10 billion each year to support state-sponsored soft power initiatives across the world (Shambaugh, 2015). China's soft power initiatives are working hand in hand with total investments in infrastructure and development projects that sum upto \$1.41 trillion to date and by 2025, China plans to allocate \$1.25 trillion more (Shambaugh, 2015). Furthermore, over the past years, China's economy has boomed and grown, which has been an encouraging factor for foreign investment. A thriving economy, like China's, is an inspiration for many nations; the example China's economic growth has set for other nations is also a means of persuasion.

China through its soft power strategy wants to be able to influence countries and people around the world. Global dominance and achieving its rightful power will be ensured if its soft power strategy aligns with its public diplomacy and internal affairs. This aim to achieve China's great power again was introduced by President Xi Jinping, who has become the face of China's National Rejuvenation (Xi Jinping, 2017).

Xi Jinping and Communist Party's emphasis on National Rejuvenation and Soft Power

President Xi Jinping, elected in 2013, and the Communist party are the catalysts for the movement to help China achieve its former glory. In 2017, Xi Jinping delivered his Communist Party's "Political report" which reflected on the party's past achievements and set the manifesto for the next five years (Xi Jinping, 2017). His report covered China's mission for national rejuvenation which works concurrently with the soft power goal. After recovering from its "Century of Humiliation," Xi Jinping promised the nation would become great again. Xi's report announced the revival of global capabilities that will help China move into the limelight (Doshi, 2017).

As a result of this plan, an anti-corruption drive has been a key and persistent factor under President Xi Jinping. China has been a nation, where corrupt officials and businessmen have infected and polluted the functionalities of the state. Chinese

Rejuvenation and Global Dominance of the Chinese People through the BRI: A Confucianist Solution

leaders have not only emphasized this movement against corruption in their words but also through the practical steps taken by the state. China further plans to strengthen institutions and bureaucratic infrastructure and this will be echoed by moral infrastructure of the country as well (Xi Jinping, 2017).

In terms of *political values* and *policies*, Xi Jinping and the Communist party have prioritized their anti-corruption campaign. Politics and governance in China have had a tainted reputation amongst foreigners and amongst themselves. To revive the state of the nation, it was vital to monitor the corruption that had rampantly infected its people and officials. The anti-corruption drive has been a major element of emphasis for Xi Jinping. Chinese authorities punished over one million officials for crimes of corruption, like bribery and abuse of official powers, between the years 2013 and 2016 ('One Million' Chinese..., 2016). China's corruption watchdog called, CCDI, helped arrest Xu Chaofan, a branch manager of the Bank of China, who embezzled over \$485 million (China's 'Sky Net' Recovers..., 2019). More recently, in March of 2018, a new National Supervision Commission, which will work alongside the CCDI, was formed to extend the corruption investigation into educational, healthcare and other institutional sectors (Can Xi Jinping..., 2018). One measure of success of the anti-corruption drive is the number of officials convicted for corruption, and this number has increased.

With regards to *culture*, China is striving to revive it nationally and internationally. In 2017, the Chinese state sponsored over 2,000 Chinese New Year events in 140 countries around the world, which is a drastic increase since the 100 held in 2010. Over 500 Confucius Institutes have been established in 140 countries. The state has also partnered with international schools and provided funding to help teach students Mandarin and to encourage exchange programs. China is also utilizing media companies like *Xinhua* to enhance the national image locally and is trying to expand the company globally. *Xinhua's* currently has 170 foreign offices but this number is expected to reach 200 by 2020 (China is spending billions..., 2017). China has invested large dollar sums in media and newspapers to ensure well-devised publicity internationally for the nation in order to help achieve its goal of national rejuvenation and soft power. The expansion and globalization of its media outlets has made the globalization of China's cultural and traditional values easier.

After Mao Zedong's era and the Cultural Revolution, a sentiment that China was lacking its moral integrity and losing sight of its traditional values began to rise because of Mao's determination to get rid of Confucian beliefs (Babones, 2017). The Communist Party began utilizing this sentiment as ammunition to help revive China's culture and its beliefs (The Communist Party..., 2017). This restoration of culture and moral values is to help rejuvenate China in the view of both the nation and the world. President Xi's agenda places importance on traditional Chinese festivals, wearing traditional Han clothing for marriages and also learning ancient Chinese sports

(Babones, 2017). Furthermore, the Communist party also aims to launch TV shows as part of the media strategy that will emphasize and promote moral issues. China has placed a ban on foreign books and items to keep children from being influenced by foreign cultures. Instead they are promoting art and books which highlight Chinese values (Babones, 2017). Over the years, President Xi Jinping's actions and policies have helped him curate an image, which could also be propaganda, for himself as the savior of China's traditional values.

With respect to its *foreign policy*, China has taken major steps to become long term partners with countries around the world. After getting elected in 2013, Xi Jinping delivered speeches referencing to the ancient Silk Route in Central Asia. He launched China's multi-trillion dollar project called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has two components; the economic belt (land) and the modern day maritime Silk Road (sea) (China's Belt-and-Road Plans..., 2018). This project utilizes the ports of countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka and connects Asia to Europe for the ease of trade for China. To gain access to the Arabian Sea and to enter Pakistan, China's foreign policy and soft power aim is backed by hard funding of \$68 billion for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Chatzky & McBride, 2019). Through the BRI China has provided "aid" to countries in Asia and Africa, and government influenced media giants, like *Xinhua*, have helped propagate the initiative as a benevolent act on behalf of China (China's Belt-and-Road Plans..., 2018). Countries from the West are participants in this and any country can virtually join the BRI. The more countries that join the network and sing praise for China, the more positive propaganda there is in favor of China. Investments from China for the BRI, predicted to sum up to a total of \$1.4 trillion by 2027, are an important part of China's foreign policy and soft power strategy (Chatzky & McBride, 2019). This entire network is going to make it easier for different countries across the world to trade with China and eventually help it become the largest world power that will be difficult to compete with. All routes and ends of the BRI lead to China.

China has a larger stake in other countries like Pakistan through their CPEC project which is part of the larger BRI. China wants to connect its trade routes to the rest of the world. However, it cannot do it without the cooperation of other major countries like Pakistan. Pakistan plays a key geostrategic role in the BRI to successfully allow China to connect to the rest of the world. Without the Gwadar port in Pakistan, China would not have access to the Arabian Sea which allows for trade access to the rest of the world. For Pakistan to revitalize its faltering economic engine, CPEC serves as a catalyzing agent. The shrinking distances with the construction of road and rail networks would accelerate the flow of trade activity. To achieve the maximum, it could only be possible if strict implementation is to be ensured with caution and dedication. CPEC will prove a game changer in developing Pakistan's economy as 72% of the world trade with China and Pakistan will pass through Gwadar.

Rejuvenation and Global Dominance of the Chinese People through the BRI: A Confucianist Solution

To ensure that Pakistan does not back out, China is putting in efforts to guarantee that the CPEC plan carries out properly. China has been a long standing friend of China and helped Pakistan develop its economy and strategic interests in the region. In Asia, China's main competitor economically and strategically is India. In attempts to win the race with India, China has promoted itself strategically and through the BRI in order to achieve soft power. These acts to promote China in Pakistan promote China's soft power which works hand in hand with hard power. This alliance will aid both countries and ultimately help China achieve its goal of rejuvenating the nation.

China's perceived soft power and attractiveness to countries is better in Africa and Latin America, but not as well in Asia, as Asian countries view China as a threat. China has problems with so many of its neighbors which make it difficult to generate soft power in surrounding regions (China is spending billions..., 2017). African and Latin American countries have flourished overtime due to the rise in China's demand. China's efforts extend to these nations to help develop them or develop their infrastructure. Because of this, China's soft power, or ability to attract, is higher. The world is anxiously watching, as China modifies its expands and modifies its policies to rejuvenate the nation.

Confucian and traditional aspects of modern Chinese policies

Many aspects of Xi Jinping's manifesto and efforts for national rejuvenation borrow traditional aspects from China's history and from Confucian values. Confucius' teachings placed an emphasis on the ruler's relationship to the subjects. His teachings reiterate the importance of filial piety, which is an obligation of fulfilling the duty of ones relationship, and *Ren*, which refers to the benevolence of a government (Confucius, Lau, 1979). An official, who is part of the government, has the duty to serve his people and his ruler. Corruption and dishonesty in government especially go against the core tenets of Confucianism. Confucius stated, "The rule of virtue can be compared to the Pole Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place" (Confucius, Lau, 1979). Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive is reiterating on the core value of Confucianism, which has not only been taught, but also practiced by preceding dynasties. Though the anti-corruption drive has convicted thousands of officials in power and increased accountability to help the people, it has also helped Xi Jinping increase his own authority and the Communist party's single party rule (Shih, 2018). Xi Jinping's decisions that are consolidating power to a single ruler (Communist party/Xi Jinping) are also reminiscent of the autocratic emperors that ruled China for centuries.

Confucius Institutes (CI) are the world's largest public diplomacy programme, which have been the way that China's Communist party have seemed to replace Mao's Little Red Book era (Babones, 2017). Mao Zedong's rule was an anti-Confucian era. However, with the rise of Xi Jinping, Confucian ideology is at the forefront of current Chinese politics and education (Bol, 2015). Today, schools are teaching their students

about Confucius and *The Analects*, which is reminiscent of the Chinese civil service exams. The Chinese civil service examinations during China's dynastic era required the intense and lifelong study of Confucius' Analects in order to become officials. This emphasis on education and Confucian beliefs are a traditional and inherent part of Chinese society that had been eroding away, especially under Mao's leadership. With China's national rejuvenation, there are aspects of Confucius' moral system that are slowly reemerging.

Though the BRI might be viewed as an outlet of hard power, the propaganda and rhetoric China has used portrays it as a benevolent act by the Chinese government (China's Belt-and-Road Plans..., 2018). For countries like Pakistan, the investment is often viewed as aid, which has created a pro-Chinese sentiment in the area, hereby increasing China's soft power. *Ren*, or benevolence, is a core principle of Confucianism, which often relates to how a government should act towards its people. It is also influencing how China should interact with other nations. "Aid" programs, like the BRI are projected as benevolent acts on behalf of China, and this Confucian propaganda can be viewed as a tool to enhance the image of the Chinese government and Communist party in the view of its people.

The Belt and Road Initiative is Xi Jinping's modern version of the ancient Silk Road, which he has reiterated over and over again in his speeches. The original Silk Road was established under the Chinese Han Dynasty, which was the trade route that connected China to Europe and other countries allowing for the spread of consumer goods, different ideas and culture (China's Belt-and-Road Plans..., 2018). The Silk Road stimulated the expansion of China and Asia towards the West and vice versa. The route was a driving factor behind globalization and the interaction of markets, cultures and prized good; spices, jewels and silk were exchanged by China for gold and other products only available in the West (Chatzky & McBride, 2019). Traditional Chinese methods are emphasized in the modern day initiatives of Chinese politics and foreign policy that will help China become the center of the world stage, as it was before.

Confucianism prioritized the five relationships, out of which the relationship between the (single) emperor and his subject is of great importance (Confucius, Lau, 1979). This relationship was reiterated over and over again through *The Analects* and also through the centuries of dynastic rule in China. Confucianism allowed for the hierarchical structure between the different relationships which allowed for the justification of the autocratic ruler/emperor (Chan, 2018). The Communist Party and Xi Jinping's policies make their own position very strong and reiterate their authority. The more power that goes to a single party, the harder it is for anyone to object. China has purposefully stayed away from democratic phenomena and has endorsed its policies of soft power and of national rejuvenation, which solidify the Communist party's rule.

Rejuvenation and Global Dominance of the Chinese People through the BRI: A Confucianist Solution

Criticism of President Xi Jinping's efforts: Who benefits?

Critics of President Xi Jinping and the Communist party have reiterated that the party is trying to divert the focus away from their own "anti-Japanese" beliefs and using the revival of traditions to drive patriotism (The Communist Party..., 2017). The government control of media agencies allows the party to control the Communist Party's narrative and is perhaps spreading disinformation. The anti-corruption drive allows for the persecution of officials, which makes it easier for the government to get rid of opposition. China is also trying to influence the world through Confucius Institutes, when in reality, areas of rural China are suffering miserably. The means through which Xi Jinping and the Communist party are promoting ancient culture and utilizing Confucianism are all favoring the rise of the Communist Party by consolidating power into a single authority. In reality, who is truly benefitting from President Xi's efforts of national rejuvenation?

Though Confucius Institutes promote a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and language around the world, they have been victims of criticism from the different countries they are established in. Confucius Institutes are influenced by the Chinese government and this interferes with the academic integrity and freedom of universities or schools around the world. Confucius Institutes are a mechanism used by the government to present a modified, strategic narrative of China and the Communist party to foreign nations (Hartig, 2018). They are upcycling the truth in order to increase their attraction. Confucius Institutes are championed as a means of cultural exchange and education, but they in truth they serve a strategic objective (Hartig, 2018). CIs are a tool that are helping China fill the gap between how China is currently perceived by the world and how it wants to be seen. Furthermore, China has spent large amounts of fundings on foreign CIs to help promote soft power, when China's own educational system, rule of law and other institutions are underdeveloped, especially in rural areas (Hartig, 2018). Such criticism and truth is kept away tactically through the strictly monitored media.

With China's increasing economic growth and interaction with foreign countries, the importance of having an attractive international public image became very clear. *Xinhua* is the major media and newspaper agency that is allowed access to politically sensitive information, which can then "correctly" be relayed it to the world in the form of headlines (Hartig, 2018). In many countries in the West, people have an understanding of how some information might be propaganda. However, in less developed countries in Asia and Africa, *Xinhua* is comparatively more successful in promoting the ideal image of China. If the truth is being manipulated before it can be conveyed to the international population, then it is necessary to question the morality of President Xi Jinping's strategy that stems from Confucianism.

To further strengthen the Communist party, the Chinese government remains intolerant of democratic movements or foreign influence, as they threaten the party's

rule. Any aspects of a democracy like freedom of speech or free and fair elections can allow for a window for a coup (Chan, 2018). Since the government has control over all information and media presented, freedom of speech could undermine the utopian image the Communist Party is trying to project. Perhaps the Communist Party is using Confucianism and cultural revival, not to strengthen China as a nation, but to strengthen their own rule.

The anti-corruption efforts are evocative of traditional Confucian beliefs. Though the campaign has helped convict an increasing number of officials and reduced corruption, it has also been utilized by President Xi to eliminate rivals and promote loyalists to consolidate his power (Can Xi Jinping..., 2018). Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang are two of President Xi's political rivals who were high level officials that were convicted by the CCDI. The anti-corruption commission has been busy chasing politically significant officials, but corruption on the institutional level is still rampant (Disgraced Officials Zhou Yongkang..., 2015). With time, it will become evident whether the anti-graft campaign is a skin-deep or a permanent solution to the deep routed issue.

Conclusion

Though certain aspects of Xi Jinping's and the Communist party's policies are inspired by Confucian and traditional Chinese beliefs, it raises the question of who is really benefiting: China or President Xi Jinping and his party? Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive has been successful in the number of convictions and is growing. This drive has enhanced the trust of the people in the government, perhaps as a moral institution to look towards. Local emphasis on Confucian studies and Confucius Institutes around the world is reminiscent of the Chinese civil service exams, when men used to spend years understanding his teachings. The BRI is promoted by China's now global media giants as a benevolent act. However, all these tools are not only moving China towards world domination but are also setting the stage for the Communist Party and the likes of Xi Jinping to have concentrated and autocratic power. With time, it will become evident whether or not this revival of the love of Confucius is actually benefiting the people of China, which is the true responsibility according to Confucius.

Rejuvenation and Global Dominance of the Chinese People through the BRI: A Confucianist Solution

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