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Constraints on the Soft Power Efforts of Authoritarian States: The Case of the 2015 Military Parade in Beijing

Camilla T. N. SØRENSEN

Abstract: Is it possible for authoritarian states such as China, Russia, and Iran to combine the soft power narratives directed primarily towards an international audience with the narratives directed primarily towards a domestic audience that are aimed at maintaining regime security? To investigate this question, this article analyses the 2015 military parade in Beijing, using this case to highlight and discuss the constraints on Chinese leaders' efforts to project soft power. The key finding is that soft power will continue to be the weak link in China's pursuit of a great power position and status as long as what continues to count as "Chinese" is defined in opposition to hostile "others" and the humiliation narrative continues to function as the central identity marker in the party-led construction of national identity (the "us").

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Introduction

On 3 September 2015 China marked the 70th anniversary of "The Victory of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War" (中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利, *Zhongguo renmin kangri zhanzheng ji shijie fan faxisi zhanzheng shengli*) with a massive military parade involving thousands of Chinese troops from all military branches: the PLA, the PLA Navy, the PLA Air Force, and the Second Artillery Corps (Wang 2015). The tightly choreographed military march across Tiananmen Square had multiple objectives, with strong messages sent to several different audiences. The Chinese population was reminded that it was under the Chinese Communist Party's irreplaceable leadership that the Japanese were defeated and China had hence started moving forward on the road to national "rejuvenation" (复兴, *fuxing*) towards realising the "Chinese dream" (中国梦, *Zhongguo meng*) and reclaiming its rightful great power position and status. The international audience was reassured of China's peaceful intentions – China will not behave as other rising great powers in history have. On the contrary, China's rise will continue to be a "win-win" (双赢, *shuangying*) development for the world. The parade also had an important external military function, which was to show China's growing military strength and deter the United States and its allies from interfering in matters of China's core interests and territorial claims. Judging from the coverage of the parade in the Western media, it seems that the least successful aspect was the soft power efforts – it is difficult to reassure the world about a "peaceful rise" (和平崛起, *heping jueqi*) when at the same time displaying the newest and most advanced military hardware, such as the so-called "carrier killer" missile, the DF-21D, which has the potential to destroy US carrier strike groups, the centrepiece of American maritime power dominance. For example, the British newspaper *The Guardian* highlighted how the parade used military power to send a message about China's strength and invulnerability, and the American news channel CNN in their coverage emphasised how the parade allowed Xi Jinping to project China's growing power and influence in East Asia (Phillips 2015; Hunt, Jiang, and Ripley 2015).

This article analyses the 2015 military parade in Beijing and the messages that the Chinese leadership tried to send, using this case to highlight and discuss the constraints on Chinese leaders' efforts to

project soft power. The main argument is that for an authoritarian state such as China, the focus of the leadership is on maintaining regime security, and because nationalism is often used to rally and mobilise the population behind the state or, as in the case of China, behind the party, it complicates and often works against any soft power efforts. The historical nationalist narratives that are often built on hostile relations with other countries are not the kind of narratives that "shape the preferences of others through attraction," to cite Josephs Nye's (2004: x) definition of soft power. The analysis of the 2015 military parade hence demonstrates, first, how difficult it is for the Chinese leadership to reconcile the messages they want and need to send to different audiences within one common, credible, and attractive "China as a great power" story, and, second, how the messages to the domestic audience always take priority. Soft power, therefore, will continue to be the weak link in China's pursuit of a great power position and status as long as what continues to count as "Chinese" is defined in opposition to hostile "others" and the humiliation narrative continues to function as the central identity marker in the party-led construction of national identity (the "us"). In addition, the analysis underlines how Beijing's soft power efforts are also complicated by the fact that China is a rising power, which means that strong concerns about how the Chinese leaders will use their growing economic and military capabilities – the "China threat" fears – are unavoidable, as are intensified security dilemma dynamics.

The article proceeds in four main steps. First, the scene is set by a brief outline of the debate about and practice of soft power in China. Second, the theoretical argument and the derived analytical approach are presented in detail, specifying why and how it represents a useful framework for thinking about and analysing the constraints on the soft power efforts of authoritarian states. This is further clarified and explored in the analysis of the 2015 military parade in Beijing, which follows in the third section. The fourth and last part of the article presents and discusses important further perspectives on the complex contingent dynamics at play between, on the one hand, ongoing domestic trends and developments, especially in party–society relations, and, on the other hand, the Chinese leadership's ability to project soft power and generally to promote and manage China's international image.

Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics

In China, soft power (软实力, *ruan shili*) is primarily a top-down, party-led project. For years now, advancing China's soft power has been regarded as strategically important by Chinese international relations scholars, diplomats, and leaders. It is regarded as complementary to hard power and hence as part of "comprehensive national strength" (综合国力, *zonghe guoli*) (Li 2009b: 22–24). Therefore, the dominant view in China is that if China wants to be a great power and have great power influence, it must also be able to project and exercise soft power (Li 2009a: 2). Furthermore, successful soft power promotion and generally the promotion of an image internationally of China as a peaceful rising great power is regarded as a crucial part of the Chinese efforts to counter or ease the "China threat" fears, especially in the United States and in Asia that might otherwise trigger containment or balancing behaviour towards China (Zhao 2009: 248–249; Shambaugh 2013: 212–215). According to Li (2009b: 31), the Chinese view on the use of soft power is that it is primarily to refute the "China threat" thesis, and along similar lines Nye (2013) argues that China's soft power strategy is intended to make its hard power look less threatening.

Soft power is hence a popular concept in China. There has been a growing number of articles and books on soft power published in China over the past decade or so (Li 2009b: 24). In 2007 the former Chinese president Hu Jintao declared in his report to the 17th Party Congress that it was his objective to enhance China's soft power. His speech then further intensified the focus on soft power among Chinese international relations scholars and diplomats (Li 2009a: 1; Callahan 2015: 218). In China, soft power is generally framed in Nye's terms, defining Chinese soft power resources in terms of its long peaceful history; its rich culture and traditional value system; its strong ideology, including its successful economic development model; and its approach to state-to-state relations, which emphasises mutual respect and state sovereignty as prerequisites for a peaceful and harmonious international system (Zhao 2015: 2). Chinese officials, however, appear to be most comfortable discussing China's soft power and soft power strategy in the context of culture, often employing the term "cultural soft power" (文化软力, *wenhua ruanli*) and highlighting a long line of positive examples of China's historical adherence to peace and development (Edney 2015: 259; Wilson 2015: 295). In the

Chinese foreign policy strategy of "peaceful development" (和平发展, *heping fazhan*), reference is also made to China as being a benevolent great power in East Asia for hundreds of years (Callahan 2015: 219; Kang 2007).

The current Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has maintained the focus on advancing China's soft power. The latter was, for example, the subject of the 12th collective study session of the Chinese Communist Party's politburo in December 2013, where Xi said,

> [We] must pay attention to the shaping of our country's national image, focusing on bringing out the richness and profundity of Chinese history, the diversity in unity of our various peoples, the image of a great and civilised nation with a rich and harmonious culture [… ,] the image of a great nation contributing to humankind, and the image of a great socialist nation more open to the outside, of greater affinity, full of hope, and full of vitality. (*Xinhua* 2013, author's translation)

Further, Xi argued that strengthening China's "international discourse power" or "international speaking right" (国际话语权, *guoji huayuquan*) must be in focus, and that Chinese diplomats and scholars, along with Chinese people in general, need to focus on "telling Chinese stories well, transmitting China's voice (中国声音, *Zhongguo shengyin*) well, and interpreting Chinese characteristics (中国特色, *Zhongguo tese*) well" (*Xinhua* 2013, author's translation). "Interpreting Chinese characteristics well" relates to the growing Chinese efforts to project soft power through its international CCTV 24-hour English-language news channel, the Confucius Institutes installed all over the world, the English and other foreign-language editions of such newspapers as *China Daily* and the *Global Times*, and the work underway to set up radio stations broadcasting favourable views of China internationally (Rawnsley 2015: 276–278). Furthermore, China's soft power strategy includes promoting "mega-events" and cultural exchanges (Zhang 2012: 623–626). The aim is to balance what Beijing sees as negative coverage by Western media of developments in and around China and give the Chinese version, thereby helping the international audience understand the "real China" (真实的中国, *zhenshi de Zhongguo*) (Hartig 2015: 251).

Under Xi Jinping, the focus is still to advance the image of China as a peaceful great power, but in addition also as a responsible, constructive, and increasingly proactive great power that contributes

positively to the management and solution of international challenges and conflicts. Through several speeches given recently, Xi and other Chinese foreign policy leaders have articulated a new strategic direction for Chinese foreign policy known as "striving for achievement" (奋发有为, *fen fa you wei*) (e.g. Xi 2013). They also used other Chinese phrases to highlight the turn towards a more proactive foreign policy strategy, such as "be more active" (更加积极, *gengjia jiji*), "take greater initiative" (更加主动, *gengjia zhudong*), and "actively go in" (积极进取, *jiji jinqu*) (e.g. PRC 2014). Put together, this indicates a gradual development of a new thinking and a new approach in China's foreign policy strategy under Xi and points to a movement away from the foreign policy guidelines put in place by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s known under the broader framing of "hide capabilities and keep a low profile" (韬光养晦, *tao guang yang hui*) (Sørensen 2015). This emphasis on presenting China as a responsible, constructive, and increasingly proactive great power could be seen as a way to counteract the criticism, especially from the United States, of China as a free-rider in international politics and security and as an aspect of Chinese soft power efforts (Saunders 2014: 168–169). However, the emphasis in Chinese foreign policy statements under Xi Jinping on China's "core interests" (核心利益, *kexin liyi*) and the more assertive and belligerent Chinese foreign policy behaviour, especially in relation to the territorial disputes in the region, has negatively impacted Beijing's wider soft power and public diplomacy campaigns and resulted in what Callahan (2015) recently termed "the negative soft power of the China dream."

Despite all the interests and efforts, soft power is still assessed broadly in China as the weak link in China's pursuit of a great power position and status (Zhao 2015: 1–2). The main arguments put forward are that the Chinese political system itself and the above-mentioned fact that soft power in China is a top-down, party-led project whose focus is on China's history, culture, and ideology as the main soft power resources severely constrain Chinese efforts to develop concepts and ideas that are understandable and attractive to Western societies that embrace liberal values (Li 2009b: 28–30; 36–38). This relates to how the party-led presentations of China often lack credibility and come across more as party propaganda, which does not persuade or attract as planned – except maybe in relation to other authoritarian regimes and developing countries around the

world, where China's rise does not represent so much a threat as an alternative model of political and economic development (Hartig 2015: 254; Hernandez 2016). An illustration of this is the mixed reaction to China's most visible soft power initiative – the Confucius Institutes, which the Hanban, an executive body affiliated with China's Ministry of Education, has established around the world since 2004. The Confucius Institutes are committed to providing Chinese language and cultural teaching resources and services worldwide and to contributing to the building of a harmonious world (Hanban 2016). They are, however, undoubtedly under a high level of control by the Chinese state and in Western countries have been met with accusations of spying, pushing China's political and economic agenda in the host country, carrying out censorship, and controlling Chinese citizens abroad, whereas their reception in most developing countries has been more positive (Zanardi 2016: 435). Also indicating the growing Chinese awareness of the intrinsic constraints of the top-down, party-led approach to soft power and the burden that the traditional Chinese political propaganda institutions put on the success of China's soft power efforts are recent moves to re-brand and modernise these institutions – for example, the Propaganda Department, which is in overall control of China's soft power policies and resources, has recently been re-named the Communication Department (Zanardi 2016: 442). Furthermore, the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping has increasingly been trying to mobilise the Chinese population, especially younger Chinese who are studying overseas, to also take on the role of public diplomats (Buckley 2016). However, indicating how uncertain the Chinese leaders are about whether the Chinese students can be trusted to "tell the Chinese stories well," these efforts are combined with a reinforced patriotic campaign in the Chinese education system stressing the accomplishments of the party and its irreplaceable role leading China's progress and development. According to a new directive issued by the party organisation of the Ministry of Education, patriotic education needs to suffuse each stage and aspect of schooling, through textbooks, student assessments, museum visits, and the Internet, in order to "organically instal the patriotic spirit into all subjects" (Buckley 2016; *Xinhua* 2016a, author's translation). The directive further highlights that students must be instructed more thoroughly to "always follow the party" and to "establish and maintain correct views of history, the nation, state, and

culture" (Buckley 2016; *Xinhua* 2016a, author's translation). Similar orders were reflected in the new media policy launched by Xi Jinping in February 2016, with his visits to several Chinese media institutions, including *Xinhua News Agency* and *China Central Television* (CCTV), and an accompanying speech, in which he stressed that the party is in strict control of all Chinese media platforms, including the ones operating outside China, and that the media institutions have to fall in line with the party leadership and play an important role in transmitting China's – the party's – voice abroad and correctly guiding international public opinion. In the speech, Xi Jinping again called for China's international communication capacity to be strengthened in order to increase the country's international discourse power and to tell Chinese stories well (cf. *Xinhua* 2016b; Bandurski 2016).

The promotion of Chinese soft power has no doubt been given higher priority among Chinese international relations scholars, diplomats, and leaders over the past decade. However, it is also clear that domestic politics, and specifically Chinese leaders' concerns about maintaining domestic political control, strongly influence and constrain their soft power efforts. The specific character of the constraints will be further examined and discussed in the analysis of the 2015 military parade in Beijing that follows the presentation of the theoretical argument and the derived analytical approach in the next section.

Authoritarian States and Soft Power

China is not the only authoritarian state that has increasingly embraced the idea of soft power over the last two decades, but how can authoritarian states such as China, Russia, and Iran wield soft power in their relations with other countries and societies? The main concern, or puzzle, here is whether it is possible for authoritarian states to combine the soft power narratives directed primarily towards an international audience with the narratives directed primarily towards a domestic audience and aimed at maintaining regime security.

Soft power as defined by Joseph Nye – the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion – concentrates on the positive attractive aspects of soft power as a foreign policy tool that has its roots in a vibrant civil society and an attractive political culture, so it seems incompatible with authoritarian states. In

Nye's neo-liberal conceptualisation of soft power, a state cannot successfully wield soft power until it unleashes the full talent of its civil society (Nye 2013; Barr, Feklyunina, and Theys 2015). Nye's understanding of soft power therefore appears limited in its analytical gain for authoritarian states, and there is a need to look further than Nye's rather Western-centric understanding of soft power in order to investigate the ways in which authoritarian states engage in promoting and managing their international image and projecting soft power, in addition to the challenges faced by those states in so doing.

The theoretical argument put forward in this section starts with the observation that the concerns about staying in control and maintaining power are paramount for leaders in authoritarian states (cf. e.g. Köllner and Kailitz 2013). That is, for an authoritarian state such as China the focus of the leadership is on ensuring regime security. Regime security primarily relies on the foundation of regime legitimacy and national cohesion, and a "secure regime" generally refers to the condition whereby governing elites are not challenged on these two foundational bases (cf. e.g. Jackson 2010: 187; Edney 2015: 261). Consequently, the projection of soft power by leaders in authoritarian states is subordinate to their domestic concerns. Since nationalism is often used to rally and mobilise the population in support of the leadership – to enhance regime legitimacy and national cohesion – it complicates and often works against any of their soft power efforts. That is, leaders in authoritarian states tend to target their narratives – their presentations of the history and culture and what characterises and differentiates the state or the nation (i.e. the national identity or the "us") – towards the domestic audience. The challenge is that there is often a need to construct a hostile world – meaning, a hostile "other." In other words, there is a need to negatively portray other countries in order to successfully exploit nationalism – the sense and certain use of national identity and historical memory – to mobilise the domestic audience. This further implies that soft power narratives must not question domestic national cohesion, lest the leadership risk becoming vulnerable to ideological threats domestically. The domestic narratives take priority; the soft power narratives are subject to those narratives and therefore have to be adjusted accordingly – this aspect is even more crucial when the leadership is becoming increasingly insecure and vulnerable domestically.

Summing up the argument, the projection of soft power by authoritarian states is contingent upon – and constrained by – domestic politics. Furthermore, the content of the soft power narratives is also contingent upon domestic politics: if the focus is on attracting other countries and societies, there is a need to project a positive record of your own historical engagement and role in the international system, but the historical nationalist narratives designed to maintain the domestic legitimacy of the leadership and uphold national cohesion often present a negative historical engagement with a hostile world. The point is that the use of the historical nationalist narratives – and the degree of hostility of the "other" in these – will vary with the degree of insecurity and vulnerability felt by the leadership. Consequently, the argument on authoritarian states and soft power presented above underlines the need for including concerns about regime security and hence the complex contingent domestic/international dynamics at play when investigating soft power beyond the liberal democratic West. This relates to the call for further research into the "de-Westernisation" of the soft power concept, as put forward in the conclusion.

Adding to the argument above, whether or not an authoritarian state's position and status in the international system is changing also makes a difference for its projection of soft power. If such a state is "rising" – meaning, its relative economic and military capabilities are growing – this implies that it will face strong concerns and even anxiety, especially from its neighbours, about how it will use these developing capabilities: what are its intentions? This seems unavoidable, as do intensified security dilemma dynamics. This is even more salient when the rising power is a non-democratic state where there is little transparency regarding debates among and decisions by the political and military elite, and where decisions, such as whether to go to war, are less influenced by domestic constituents than they would be in non-authoritarian states.

In the analysis of the 2015 military parade in Beijing in the following section, the argument on authoritarian states and soft power presented above will be further clarified and explored. The analytical approach is to identify the different messages and the different narratives that the Chinese leadership tried to send; to place these in the domestic and international contexts – meaning, in relation to the domestic and international challenges facing the Chinese leadership;

and to analyse their relative weight and their relative success in reaching their target audiences, which leads to the discussion of the complex contingent domestic/international dynamics at play.

The 2015 Military Parade in Beijing: Strong Messages to Different Audiences

On 3 September 2015, China marked the 70th anniversary of "The Victory of the Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War" with the greatest military parade in Chinese history: 12,000 soldiers marched across Tiananmen Square backed by a huge display of new military hardware. The parade was designed to serve multiple objectives and send strong messages to different audiences.

A main objective of the parade was to strengthen national pride and fortify the "right" (read: party-constructed) version of historical consciousness. The Chinese population was to be reminded that it was under the Chinese Communist Party's irreplaceable leadership that their nation repelled Japanese invasion, reunified, and finally got on the right track to regain its national dignity and reclaim its rightful great power position and status. In the days before and following the parade, there were many reminders in the Chinese press and on Chinese television of the hundred years of humiliation and the Japanese wartime atrocities (cf. CCTV 2015). The main message was that the century of humiliation was over and that this was made possible only by the strong leadership and guidance of the party. The parade therefore worked as a clear reminder to the Chinese population of the key element of the party's legitimacy, which ultimately comes from its claim to have guided China's rise: only by maintaining a strong party can China continue on this road of national "rejuvenation" (Wang 2014; Dittmer 2010). The link between the development of the party and that of the Chinese nation is emphasised and strengthened in this way, but with a focus on the national "rejuvenation" as the goal and on a strong party as the prerequisite for achieving this goal. At the parade, Xi Jinping took on his role as the strong party leader, in full command of the PLA with a strong hold on the nation. As Xi ended his speech at the parade, he emphasised,

> Having created a splendid civilisation of over 5,000 years, the Chinese nation will certainly usher in an even brighter future. Going forward, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, we, people of all ethnicities across the country, should take Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of the Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development as our guide to action. We should follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, pursue the four-pronged comprehensive strategy, promote patriotism and the great spirit of resisting aggression, and forge ahead as one to reach our goals. (Xi 2015)

The above quote also demonstrates that the focus is increasingly directed towards the historical struggle of the Chinese nation more than the more narrow history of the Chinese communist revolution and hence the party – the story is broadened with more references to national heroes, not only revolutionary heroes, and to the nationalist (Kuomintang), not only the communist, resistance to the Japanese. An earlier quote from the parade speech provides more evidence of this shift in strategy:

> I pay high tribute to all the veterans, comrades, patriots, and officers in China who took part in the War of Resistance and all the Chinese at home and abroad who contributed significantly to the victory of the war. […] In defiance of aggression, the unyielding Chinese people fought gallantly and finally won total victory against the Japanese militarist aggressors, thus preserving China's 5,000-year-old civilisation and upholding the cause of peace of mankind. This remarkable feat made by the Chinese nation was rare in the history of war. (Xi 2015)

In relation to this growing emphasis being put on a national victory, it is also interesting to note that not only communist but also nationalist veterans were invited to see the parade. This is arguably part of the party's efforts to strengthen and broaden its legitimacy and try to reach all groups and parts of China, an endeavour that comes in the context of growing social and ethnic tensions and conflicts in Chinese society – all groups and parts of China have to unite and work together under the strong leadership of the party in order to realise the "Chinese dream." To make this credible, the world has to be presented as hostile – China's national "rejuvenation" is taking place in the context of a resurgence of Japanese militarism and intensified US efforts to contain China, to prevent its rise, to keep it weak, just as

the colonial powers of the past did. Therefore all Chinese – the Chinese nation – have to rally behind the party and together confront these hostile outside forces.

The challenge is how to combine the need to present the world in this way with the wish to project a positive image and increase the attractiveness of China to the world. This is even more difficult because the parade comes at a time of more assertive Chinese behaviour both at home and abroad that supports the image of China as an opaque and erratic authoritarian (rising) power that is less and less inclined to tolerate opposition, whether internationally or domestically, to its goals and interests. In his speech at the parade, Xi clearly sought to present a positive image of China as a great power that has made positive contributions to peace and development in the world, saying,

> In the interest of peace, China will remain committed to peaceful development. We Chinese love peace. No matter how much stronger it may become, China will never seek hegemony or expansion. (Xi 2015)

He continued,

> It [China] will never inflict its past suffering on any other nation. The Chinese people are resolved to pursue friendly relations with all other countries […] and make [a] greater contribution to mankind. (Xi 2015)

In addition, Xi Jinping's announcement at the parade that 300,000 Chinese military personnel would be cut was presented as a sign of China's peaceful intentions and efforts to uphold world peace, stressing how China's rise will continue to be a "win-win" development for the world (Xi 2015).

The reception and coverage of the parade in the Western media show how Xi Jinping's efforts to present a positive great power image and hence enhance Chinese soft power were not successful. The biggest Western newspapers and news channels directed their main focus on what was shown more than on what was said – for example, which state leaders attended, highlighting that there were no state leaders from Western countries, including the United States and Japan, while the Russian president Vladimir Putin and Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir were in attendance. This information was further used to support the dominant Western media discourse of how a

militarily stronger and more assertive China increasingly confronts the US-led liberal world order (e.g. Phillips 2015; Hunt, Jiang, and Ripley 2015). By contrast, the Chinese media coverage of the parade in general terms pointed to the attendance of foreign state leaders and foreign military branches as proof that China had now strongly integrated into, and become respected as a great power by, the international community (e.g. *Xinhua* 2015). Western media coverage also heavily emphasised all the new military hardware shown in the parade, even specifying in which conflict situations it could potentially be put to use (e.g. Hunt, Jiang, and Ripley 2015). This links to the third main objective of the parade – strategic deterrence.

The parade also had a core external military function, which was to deter potential foreign adversaries who might otherwise interfere with or interrupt China's road to national "rejuvenation." That is one reason why so much advanced military hardware was on display and why so much of it was missiles – some of China's most potent weapons, which could pose the greatest threats to the United States and its allies in the event of conflict. It is what authoritative PLA sources refer to as "strategic deterrence" (战略威慑, *zhanlue weishe*), where Beijing seeks to awe its potential adversaries into submission or at least grudging acquiescence regarding Beijing's core interests and territorial claims (Chase and Chan 2016; Lanteigne 2016: 107–116). In order to get strategic deterrence to work, Beijing has to reveal armaments that its likely opponents – the United States and its allies – would take seriously. Hence the need to show "big sticks" – among the many new things revealed, as part of an "Antiship Ballistic Missile Formation" was the so-called "carrier killer" missile, the DF-21D. Announced as an "assassin's mace" at the parade, this missile has the potential to disable ships including US carrier strike groups, the centrepiece of American sea power. Also paraded for the first time was the DF-26, which is China's first missile capable of striking Guam with a conventional warhead from a homeland-based launcher. At the parade all the major missiles were labelled with their English abbreviations in big white letters, which was likely done to help guarantee that their presence would not be overlooked and that their deterrence message would be sent. From Beijing's perspective, its regional security environment has deteriorated in the past few years, where territorial and maritime boundary disputes with many regional countries, including Vietnam and the Philippines, have intensified. Under the

"rebalance to Asia" heading, the United States has increased its military assets forward-deployed in the region and improved its security ties with many countries, especially those in active disputes with China. This is likely an important reason why Xi Jinping did not want to wait to display the newest Chinese military hardware until 2019, which would have been following the cycle of big military parades in China every 10 years, but was inclined to show strength and resolve now amid the deteriorating regional security environment. In sum, while playing to a domestic audience, Xi also aimed to send a clear message across the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Pacific saying that China had arrived as a great military power and that its interests and claims must be taken seriously.

The problem, or the challenge, for the Chinese leaders is that due to the military purpose of the parade – to enhance China's strategic deterrence – the display of all the new military hardware and generally of China's growing military strength backfired, especially because of the growing tension with neighbouring countries and the United States: rather than deterring others from challenging China, the parade underscored the military threat posed by China and affirmed the increasingly negative perceptions of Beijing's intentions. Hence, the parade clearly worked against any soft power efforts and messages, and again it seems that China's hard power is serving to undermine its soft power.

There were several strong messages that the Chinese leadership aimed to send using the parade as the platform. In line with the theoretical argument on authoritarian states and soft power presented above, it is clear that the message to the domestic audience had the highest priority. The focus of the Chinese leadership was to bolster regime security. Regarding the context, the current Chinese leadership is facing many huge and complex domestic challenges, with stagnating economic growth, rising social inequality and tensions, and rising ethnic conflicts being among the most acute (e.g. Leibold 2013). According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in recent years the annual number of major protests in China has exceeded 100,000 (Tanner 2014). The party's legitimacy rests primarily on two pillars: One is the party's promise to deliver high economic growth, social stability, and improved living conditions for all. This has run into difficulties as the Chinese economy struggles. Therefore, the second pillar, the party's promise to regain China's great power position and

status, is being emphasised even more strongly, as evidenced by the parade, whose main message was that the party will lead the Chinese nation on the road to "rejuvenation" in defiance of outside efforts to prevent this. The aim is to direct the anger and frustration growing in the Chinese population outside and shift its focus away from domestic problems and the weakness of the leadership to deal with these towards foreign threats and foreign causes of the problems. Nationalism – and an "us" vs. a hostile "other" constellation – is used to rally and mobilise the population behind the party recalling the historical nationalist narratives emphasising anti-Japanese, anti-American, and anti-Western emotions. This follows the distinction that has historically been drawn in the Chinese civilisational discourse between a morally superior China and a barbarian "other" (Wilson 2015: 288). That is, the Chinese leaders are actively constructing a rather hostile relation between "China" and "the world" to promote regime security. Part of this is also the stronger emphasis in Chinese foreign policy statements under Xi Jinping on the protection and promotion of China's "core interests" and "rightful territorial claims," which plays into the development of more assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour, especially in the South and East China Seas. Such rhetoric and foreign policy behaviour undermines any efforts at achieving soft power; moreover, given the display of China's new military hardware in the parade itself, any statements about China's peaceful intentions, "win-win" development, and so on, do not present themselves as credible. Instead, the result is what Hartig (2015: 254–255) terms an obvious perception gap, where the narrative that Beijing wants to project of China as a peaceful developing country that aims to construct a harmonious world is confronted with an international audience that mainly perceives China as an increasingly belligerent rising power bullying its neighbours in East Asia.

Conclusion

Meeting and managing the challenges to regime security takes first priority for the Chinese leaders. The point is, however, that the Chinese leaders' efforts to boost both the party's legitimacy and national cohesion decreases the room to manoeuvre for Chinese foreign policy and has strong negative consequences for China's international image and its soft power efforts. It is difficult, if not impossible, to

reconcile the different messages and keep them within one common, credible, and attractive "China as a great power" story (Hartig 2015: 249). The efforts to reassure the rest of the world that China's rise will not pose a threat to peace and stability and that other countries will actually benefit from China's growing power and influence seem impossible in the context of growing nationalism; stricter party control over all aspects of society, including over Chinese students and media outside of China; military modernisation; and growing tension with regional neighbours over territorial issues.

The need to construct a rather hostile relation between "China" and "the world" in the context of growing regime security challenges and a more insecure Chinese leadership is also reflected in the way that the Chinese leadership in recent years has increasingly warned the Chinese people about "hostile forces" that seek to undermine stability and national cohesion. Hence, since 2011 in Chinese leaders' speeches and in official documents, as well as in articles by Chinese scholars, there has been an growing emphasis on the urgent need to guard "cultural security" (文化安全, *wenhua anquan*), which involves shielding Chinese culture, values, and ideology from foreign threats (Edney 2015: 264–266). At the Sixth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee in late 2011, which focused specifically on the issue of cultural system reform, the need to protect national cultural security was highlighted as an important task that is becoming more difficult (CCP Central Committee 2011). Further, China's 12th Five-Year Plan states,

> Facing increasing global ideological and cultural struggles, it is increasingly urgent to strengthen national cultural capabilities and international competitiveness, to resist the cultural infiltration of foreign hostile forces, and to protect national cultural security. (CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council 2012, author's translation)

This also comes in the context of the wave of colour revolutions in other authoritarian states, which clearly has put the Chinese leadership on high alert with regards to preventing similar frustration and anger from growing in China and having the people mobilise against the leadership (Wilson 2015: 290). Consequently, there has also been an aggressive effort by the Chinese leadership in recent years to crack down on any form of dissidence and to get new societal actors, dynamics, and organisations under control and co-opted into the party-

state structure. A new law, "The Management of Foreign Non-Governmental Organisations' Activities Within Mainland China" (中华人民共和国境外非政府组织境内活动管理法, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingwai feizhangfu zuzhi jingnei huodong guanlifa*), adopted at the 12th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress in late April 2016, makes it more difficult for foreign non-governmental organisations to continue their presence and work in China. They will be facing more uncertainty, control, and restrictions (*Xinhua* 2016c; BBC 2016). This so-called FNGO law should also be seen in the context of a more insecure Chinese leadership seeking to strengthen its hold on Chinese society. Again, the new regulations and efforts to exercise more control over developments in Chinese society are legitimised by referring to a China that finds itself in the middle of an overall ideological and cultural struggle, whereby foreign forces – the "other" – have hostile intentions and seek to make use of subversive and illegitimate methods in order to impose Western ideology and values and ultimately to Westernise – "imperialise" in the Leninist-Maoist vocabulary – China and split it up. Therefore, the entire Chinese nation should rally behind the party in order to resist this (e.g. *Huanqiu* 2016).

While the Chinese leadership is seeking to build favour and attractiveness in the international system, they are more concerned with regime security challenges and safeguarding their legitimacy and national cohesion at home, and because nationalism is often used to mobilise the population, it complicates and often works against any soft power efforts. The key is that "Chinese" continue to be defined in opposition to hostile "others" and that the humiliation narrative continues to function as the central identity marker in the party-led construction of national identity (the "us"). In many ways, China still does not have a stable national identity, and the Chinese leaders' focus is on stabilising the one that best ensures regime security – and that is surely not the same one that promotes a positive image of China outside China. Primarily due to the complex contingent dynamics at play between, on the one hand, ongoing domestic trends and developments, especially in party–society relations, and, on the other hand, the Chinese leadership's ability to project soft power and generally to promote and manage China's international image, soft power will continue to be the weak link in China's pursuit of a great power position and status.

Soft power is about the non-coercive ability to change the preferences of others, to make them want what you want purely by the force of attraction and persuasion. This is not an easy task for authoritarian states. The analysis of the 2015 military parade in Beijing shows the complex, contingent domestic/international dynamics at play when authoritarian states engage in the promotion and management of their international image and attempt to project soft power. On a more theoretical note, the above analysis underlines that especially when dealing with authoritarian states, it is necessary to "de-Westernise" the understanding of soft power and not simply approach soft power as a matter of examining the soft power resources of the states (cf. also Edney 2015: 269). It also requires examining the threat and risk assessments that lie behind the soft power strategies of authoritarian states. Regime security is the central concern for leaders in authoritarian states, and therefore addressing regime security issues always takes priority, even if that works to undermine soft power aims and efforts. Furthermore, soft power in authoritarian states also has to be seen as part of a controlled and deliberate strategy that is both externally and internally directed with an explicit focus on dealing with perceived external and internal challenges and threats to regime legitimacy and national cohesion. As argued in the theoretical section above, the priority, content, and direction of the soft power narratives in authoritarian states will vary with the degree of domestic insecurity and vulnerability felt by the leadership. This again underlines the qualitative difference between the threat and risk assessments that influence how leaders in authoritarian states approach and practise soft power and those that influence Western liberal democracies (cf. also Edney 2015: 269; Callahan 2015: 225).

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