

Soft Power in Asia

Executive Summary

Introduction

In their new report, *Soft Power in Asia*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the East Asia Institute (EAI) provide an eye-opening look at how just months before China is set to take the world's center stage during the 2008 Summer Olympics to showcase its many economic advances, it still ranks below the United States as a multifaceted power in the opinion of its Asian neighbors.

The report, which is based on public opinion surveys in five East and Southeast Asian countries and the United States, reveals that perceptions of China's "soft power" – the ability to wield influence by indirect, non-military means – generally trail those of the United States and Japan. These perceptions persist despite China's strong economic relationships in Asia and around the world, and concerted efforts by Beijing to leverage the Olympic Games to bolster its public image. But, at the same time, sizeable majorities in all the countries surveyed agreed that hosting the Olympic Games will ultimately increase China's prestige.

The report also reveals that contrary to other polls taken since the U.S. invaded Iraq which reflected negative views of the United States, majorities of Asians in the surveyed countries still admire the U.S. on many fronts, including economic, diplomatic, cultural and educational. They also view the U.S. military presence in Asia as a stabilizing force, notably preventing an arms race between China and Japan. In an era in which Asia has turned swords into ploughshares (and silicon chips), public diplomacy and other forms of soft power are increasingly important.

Another unexpected finding of the report focuses on the complex relationship between the U.S. and China, one of the most important bilateral relationships of the 21st century. American feelings towards China have deteriorated since similar surveys were taken by The Chicago Council in 2004 and 2006 and a significant number of those questioned expressed general unease about the future of the relationship. In contrast, Chinese perceptions of the United States have grown noticeably warmer compared to the 2006 survey and Chinese demonstrate consistently positive attitudes towards U.S. influence in Asia.

The Chicago Council and EAI conducted more than 6,000 interviews in China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and the United States in January and February 2008, before the unrest in Tibet and the Sichuan earthquake placed a spotlight on events inside China. The survey asked between 40 and 60 questions in each country designed to gauge how citizens of these major Asian powers and the United States view each country's popular culture, commercial prowess and brands, intellectual influence and appeal, universities, diplomatic reputations, different political systems, and more.

The results were organized to produce indexes of the pillars of soft power: economic, cultural, human capital, diplomatic and political. The five indexes were averaged to produce an overall Soft Power Index. Change was measured on a few key questions that were also asked in a 2006 Chicago Council survey.

Key Findings of the Report

Overall poorer than expected perceptions of China's soft power indicate China has a long way to go to claim full recognition as a multifaceted power.

- Majorities or pluralities in every country¹ are at least “somewhat worried” that China could become a military threat to their country in the future.
- China trails the United States in perceptions of its diplomatic, political, and human capital power in Asia, though perceptions are more positive in Southeast Asia than East Asia. China is also seen as less effective than the United States in promoting its policies to people in Asia by all surveyed publics.
- On the question as to whether China builds trust and cooperation among Asian countries, it receives low ratings on a 0-10 scale from Americans (3.5), Japanese (4.6) and South Koreans (4.9), ranking China third or fourth among the group.
- But when asked whether China will increase its prestige by hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics all countries surveyed --- U.S. (49%), China (86%), Japan (56%), South Korea (82%), Indonesia (65%) and Vietnam (85%) --- agree that it would.
- On human rights and the rule of law, with the exception of Indonesians (6.8), China receives low ratings from Americans (2.7), Japanese (3.9), and South Koreans (4.5).

U.S. influence in the region extends well beyond the policy realm, with the survey finding that it also informs the thinking of Asians on economic, cultural and even human capital matters.

- The U.S. ranks at or near the top of every category in the Soft Power Index.
- Pluralities or majorities in China (44%), Japan (47%), South Korea (42%) and Indonesia (58%) all agree that U.S. influence in Asia has increased over the last 10 years. Majorities in China, Japan, Vietnam and South Korea see U.S. influence in Asia as positive.
- The United States is given the highest mean score for importance as a trade and investment partner by South Koreans (8.5 on a 0-10 scale), Japanese (8.0) and Vietnamese (8.0). Chinese give both the United States and the EU the same score (7.6), significantly ahead of Japan (6.7) and South Korea (6.8). Popular culture, one of the biggest U.S. exports, remains influential in Asia even amid signs of strong regional identity, the survey finds. Respondents give the influence of American movies, music, clothing and cuisine average ratings of 6.4 to 7.9, putting the U.S. first in the eyes of all countries except Vietnam and China (where it narrowly trails South Korea).

Chinese views of the United States are much more positive than American feelings towards China, which have steadily declined since 2004.

- Americans have very cool feelings toward China in both absolute and relative terms. On a 0-100 feeling scale, Americans give China a very low average rating of 35, down from 40 in 2006 and 44 in 2004.
- Chinese give the United States an average rating of 61 on the 0-100 scale of feelings, which is significantly warmer than the rating of 51 which it received in 2006. Like Americans, Chinese people believe that economic relations (trade and investment) with the U.S. are extremely important to their country’s economy (7.6).
- Americans do not think they share a way of life with the Chinese – 68% say they shared “no” or “little” values in common with Chinese, and 63% think it’s only “slightly” or “not at all important” for their children to study Chinese.
- Forty-four percent of Chinese would pick the U.S. as first choice for their children’s higher education; 82% believed it is “very important” for their children to learn English in order to succeed in the future, and on a 0-10 scale they express across-the-board admiration for the quality of American science and technology (8.8), the appeal of its popular culture (7.5), the American entrepreneurial spirit (7.9), and a political system that serves the needs of its people (7.4).

¹ The question was not asked in Vietnam