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MH370: Limits of China's Soft Power

By Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

Much of China's objective to be a great power would depend on how much soft power influence it wields on the global community. But as events following the disappearance of MH370 show, Beijing has still some way to go.

Commentary

AS THE dust begins to settle on the ill-fated MH370 flight, political calculations among the countries involved would start to feature increasingly in the post-disaster work that is expected to take months, if not years, to complete.

With 153 Chinese nationals onboard out of the 239 people, China's involvement and interest in the follow-up will be substantial. But given political sensitivities among regional countries over Chinese territorial ambitions, cooperation with Beijing is not likely to be straight-forward.

Salvaging face

Assuming the plane ended up in the Indian Ocean and there were no survivors, of immediate concern to China is to retrieve any debris from the plane, including bodies, which would then allow relatives and friends of the Chinese passengers onboard the plane some extent of closure. The hostile anti-Malaysia sentiments among the Chinese public is understandable, given the circumstances of the past few weeks, yet what is of greater concern to the Chinese government in Beijing would be the loss of face it has to deal with, especially among its highly vocal citizens.

The idea of face figures prominently in Chinese society and which the Chinese attach great significance to. Sociologists have pointed out that any loss of face among the Chinese is not just individually appropriated, but is also a threat to a larger collective community from which the individual derives his sense of identity and meaning. As such, the Chinese government – given its proclamation as the vanguard of the Chinese working class – would have to live up to its reputation to safeguard the interest of the Chinese people.

The fact the incident took place during the National People's Congress further heightens the political relevance of the matter, as seen by the almost immediate response by the Chinese government to set up a high-level Joint Ministerial Conference on the Security Protection of Chinese Overseas (JMC) to formulate its response strategy. Last week, vice foreign minister Zhang Yesui was sent to Kuala Lumpur as a special envoy of the

Chinese government to meet with his Malaysian counterparts as well as Prime Minister Najib Razak and to convey the Chinese government's views and position. This can be interpreted as a sign of Beijing underscoring its intentions to monitor the situation very carefully.

Managing public expectations

The furore levied against the Malaysian government cuts across the spectrum of Chinese society, not just among the relatives and friends in concern. Prominent Chinese personalities such as actress Zhang Ziyi, actor Chen Kun and famous TV show host Meng Fei have sharply criticised the Malaysians for their lack of transparency and ineffective handling of the incident. Scores of angry relatives were also allowed to protest at the Malaysian embassy in Beijing with the Chinese authorities unusually passive in its response - an obvious sign of the government's tacit support.

The tourism industry has also been hit hard as many Chinese are calling on one another to boycott Malaysia. Given that Chinese tourists represent the third-biggest source of visitors to Malaysia, behind only Singapore and Indonesia, any long term fallout between Beijing and Kuala Lumpur will affect Malaysia's tourism dollar. Already some mainland travel agencies have reported up to a 50 per cent drop in travel bookings to Malaysia while the China Youth Travel Service, which is founded by the Youth League of the Communist Party, has also suspended travel bookings with Malaysia Airlines, citing its concerns over passenger safety.

To be fair, a number of Chinese opinion-makers have warned their fellow Chinese citizens against further stoking the flames of anti-Malaysia sentiments, urging "rational patriotism" instead and the search for truth. The Chinese government, through its Foreign Ministry, has also demonstrated considerable resolve in keeping its bilateral relations with Malaysia on an even keel, refraining from using any strong language in its press statements that will upset its Malaysian counterparts.

Given relatively good ties between both countries over the past years, the Chinese government would want to ensure that it continues to maintain warm relations with Kuala Lumpur while ensuring that it is seen by its citizens to be standing up for their rights.

Western technology over Chinese territory

Despite China's growing regional influence, it would seem that at the end of the day, Western involvement and assistance is needed, especially when it comes to the use of technology in complex search missions. According to the *Straits Times*' China specialist Ching Cheong, what the MH370 incident revealed about China's power status in the region is not encouraging as countries were reluctant to share information with it.

Given Malaysia's influential position in ASEAN, it is likely that the Malaysian approach – looking to the West, instead of China – is representative of an overall ambivalence of the ASEAN community when it comes to working with China, especially when it concerns sharing of technical information that could possibly impinge on national security and intelligence-gathering capabilities.

The fact that China does not enjoy the trust of its neighbours also raises the question to what extent its global aspirations are viewed favourably by the rest of the region. In the case of MH370, China has contributed considerable assets in searching for the aircraft. Yet none of these assets possess the technological sophistication needed to undertake a mission as difficult as the current search for the missing airliner - a sign that China's much-vaunted military modernisation programme still has some way to go before it matches that of its Western counterparts.

Unless Beijing is concealing its true capabilities – something unimaginable in such circumstances - regional countries would still turn to the West, if not always, for leadership, at least for its technical competence and know-how, even on territory that China claims.

According to David Shambaugh at the Elliot School of International Affairs, China presently remains a "partial power" despite its global ambitions. Its international behaviour remains fraught with inconsistencies which will continue to play out on the world stage and its brand of soft power is insufficiently attractive. Given this, regional countries will continue to align themselves with China on their terms, and not on Beijing's.

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