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Dragon in the Mirror: China's Image Makeover?

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

In a recent address to senior party officials, Xi Jinping said it was important for China to create a new image. He instructed the party's propaganda arm "to create a credible, lovable and respectable image of China". Beijing seems to have realised that it has a serious image problem.

COMMENTARY

ON 2 JUNE 2021, President Xi Jinping told senior Communist Party officials to expand China's circle of friends and stressed the importance of improving propaganda efforts. Beijing seems to have finally realised that its image and credibility in the region and beyond have reached rock bottom.

Numerous books and articles in the past had touched on Chinese soft power and growing sophistication of its diplomacy; from Africa to Europe to Latin America, China's prestige and influence was expanding. However, in recent years, publications on Chinese soft power have virtually declined. While the People's Republic of China has always had its share of critics, many Western media outlets were and remain biased towards it. The key factor behind the decline in China's soft power is to be found partly in Beijing.

Alarming Neighbours

China's image in the Southeast Asian region — its immediate neighbourhood — has weakened in recent years. China has territorial disputes with four of the 10 ASEAN countries, Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam while tensions with Indonesia, a non-claimant, have also risen due to overlapping economic zones.

The Chinese navy and coast guard have engaged in numerous confrontations with the Southeast Asian claimants and built several artificial islands to assert Beijing's claims. Beijing's strong-arm tactics have led to ASEAN countries closing ranks with a common position on the South China Sea. China's relations with Japan and India have reached their lowest point in decades.

In Europe public opinion on China has also worsened. While a BBC poll in 2010 concluded that China was on balance seen positively by 15 countries, Beijing is now viewed more with suspicion. In a 2020 survey covering 13 European nations conducted by a group of 14 research entities that included Chatham House and the Central European Institute for Asian Studies (CEIAS), China's approval rating was at an historic low.

Overall, views of China are predominantly negative. Factors contributing to this shift included China's confrontational diplomacy and the human rights situation. On the other hand, Russia has the most positive view of China.

While Germany and several other EU members have imposed tariffs on various Chinese products and demanded that China open its markets, trade with China is perceived predominantly positively in most countries surveyed, except France, the UK and Sweden. Beijing, on its part, hoped that massive trade between China and the West would make it more receptive towards Beijing and Chinese policies.

However, as the case of Australia shows, the US\$257 billion in two-way trade for the period 2019-2020 accounting for 29 percent of Australia's foreign trade has not stopped the two nations from plunging into a trade war. The COVID-19 pandemic and controversial allegations that China was not honest in disclosing the virus' origin was probably one of the worst disasters for Chinese soft power since the Mao era.

Eroding Soft Power

There is little argument that China's image is not in a good shape in many parts of the world. Can Beijing reverse this? While this will be hard, it is, however, not impossible.

China's image took on a positive trajectory after it reformed from a Maoist state spreading revolution to joining the mainstream global economy and eventually becoming a darling destination for foreign investors due to its huge markets.

While times are much different now, Beijing can still regain its claim of pursuing a peaceful rise. In 2002 China and ASEAN signed the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). After some years, China and the ASEAN countries agreed to upgrade the DOC to a Code of Conduct (COC), which is due to be signed in 2021.

If China was to reduce its expansionist activities in the South China Sea, this could lead to a substantial easing of tensions between China and ASEAN. This in turn will have a positive knock-on effect on relations with other powers with interests in the region such as the US, Japan and Australia.

Greater transparency on the part of Chinese companies and the opening of more

sectors of the Chinese economy to EU investees could go a long way at reducing tensions. As a German diplomat told the author: “The Chinese complain when we restrict Huawei in Europe. However, in China all telecommunications are run by the state.”

While the COVID-19 pandemic has somewhat dented China’s image, its massive donations of vaccines, ventilators and protective gear have improved it in some parts of the world. Will a powerful China be willing to find a negotiated solution? Will it open more sectors of its economy to foreign investment? While only time will tell, one thing is certain: It will be easier for China to prosper with friends around it not enemies.

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