Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

The First Soft-Power Superpower [1]

BEIJING --- During the 20 years since the demise of the Soviet Union, and after a unipolar moment for the United States, China has emerged as the newest superpower. All its predecessors at this exalted level, going back even before Rome, have established their positions by amassing formidable military strength. But China is going about matters differently.

Recognizing that it would require budget-wrecking spending to quickly catch up with the United States as a wielder of military strength, China is, at least for now, emphasizing soft power – trying to extend its influence through attraction rather than coercion.

Although it certainly retains the capability to strong-arm other nations with its economic weapons, China has become the world's most active exponent of public diplomacy. It has spent an estimated US$8 billion on its international broadcasting efforts, many millions more on its worldwide network of Confucius Institutes, and additional large sums on projects as significant as educational exchanges and as trivial as advertising on electronic billboards in New York's Times Square. Further, some of China's best universities are embracing public diplomacy as an academic discipline, training the country's next generation of experts in this field.

But what is China getting for all this money and effort? Public opinion polls from around the world indicate decidedly mixed results. In parts of Africa, where China has built roads and stadiums, its popularity has risen. Elsewhere, however, China is viewed warily as heavy-handed and insensitive to the political and economic lives of countries where it is expanding its presence.

In two weeks of discussions with Chinese public diplomacy practitioners and scholars in Beijing and Shanghai, I found no consensus about what China's public diplomacy strategy should be or what China wants from its public diplomacy efforts. The enthusiasm is there, but an overarching plan is not.

Part of this lack of coherence is due to China's slow acceptance of the realities of being a superpower. I heard complaints from many quarters about how unfairly China is being treated by the international news media, and claims that China is not receiving the respect that it deserves. When I said that mistreatment – real or imagined, deserved or not – is something superpowers must learn to live with, my Chinese colleagues did not seem to understand this facet of political reality.

Chinese public diplomacy leaders need a better appreciation of the give-and-take of superpower diplomacy. As a first step, they should understand that reciprocity is important if multilateral relationships are to take shape. If China wants to export its Confucius Institutes, it must allow the United States and others to set up comparable cultural centers (in comparable numbers) in China. If China wants to extend the reach of its international broadcasting, it must

allow other countries to have broadcast and online access to the Chinese public.

Such goals may seem far-fetched, given China's reluctance to allow substantive political debate within its borders, much less permit outsiders to contribute to any such debate. But more than anything else, China is determined to be a global player. Its embrace of public diplomacy, rather than endangering the world with another superpower arms race, is encouraging.

If the United States and other nations persist in engaging with China within the realm of public diplomacy, China might be nudged toward increased openness. This could enable the newest superpower to continue to rely on soft power.