



*Discussion Paper*  
*July 2022*

# China's Collapsing Global Image

*How Beijing's Unpopularity Is Undermining  
Its Strategic, Economic, and Diplomatic Goals*

Joshua Kurlantzick

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*This paper was made possible by the generous support of the Charles Koch Foundation.*

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# INTRODUCTION

In the past four years, China's global image, which had been positive or at least neutral in many parts of the globe for the prior two decades, has deteriorated extensively. This deterioration has occurred not only among leading democracies such as the United States and Japan, with whom China already had prickly relations, but also among developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe. China had enjoyed positive relations with states in these regions between the 1990s and late 2010s. In some parts of the world, China now has its worst public image in many decades.<sup>1</sup>

This negative perception is a sharp reversal from China's recent heyday, in which China launched a massive soft power campaign in many developing regions; vowed to be a different, less interventionist major power than the United States; and rolled out its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many developing countries, and even some publics in some rich democracies, responded to this charm offensive and viewed China relatively positively.<sup>2</sup> What's more, a growing number of countries took an interest in China's state capitalist developmental model after the 2008–9 financial crisis damaged the image of the United States' economic model.

There are multiple reasons for China's deteriorating global public image. China's overall rising authoritarianism at home, its cover-up of the initial COVID-19 outbreak, and its brutal repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang have hurt its perception among many foreign publics. China's continued zero-COVID strategy has cut it off from much of the world, undermined people-to-people relations with other states, and cast some doubt on the Chinese model of development—even among some Chinese citizens.<sup>3</sup> Under Xi Jinping, China's increasingly

belligerent “wolf warrior” diplomacy and economic coercion of other states, multinationals, and big Chinese private firms have further soured global views of Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps just as important, China’s soft power—its ability to persuade and appeal to other states through media, cultural diplomacy, and overseas aid—has declined in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

Though no level of negative public image and weak soft power could completely undermine the foreign policy aims of a global power and trading giant, they can complicate Beijing’s ability to achieve its goals. Those deficits are impeding China’s economic relations with trading partners, and it is losing some traditional support among trade groups in Asia, Europe, and North America. Worried about China’s belligerence, rising authoritarianism, and close links with Russia, some countries are working to reduce trade dependence on China altogether.

China’s poor public image hurts its strategic aims as well. Its unpopularity makes it challenging for Beijing to achieve strategic aims in democracies where politicians know how much their voters now dislike China. China’s image also has completely undermined its efforts to revive its once-effective soft power campaign, hurting its ability to portray a positive image via state media, diplomats, Confucius Institutes, and other soft power outlets.

This deterioration has significant implications for the United States and other major democracies, and hampers collaboration on global issues. Widely held negative views of China, along with Beijing’s increasing insularity as it focuses on its domestic politics and zero-COVID approach, make it harder for leading democracies to cooperate with Beijing on issues that, despite rising tensions with China, require cooperation. Most notably, addressing climate change and global public health, such as preparing for the next pandemic.

At the same time, China’s negative global image, with many countries becoming terrified of Beijing, provides strategic and economic opportunities for the United States and other partners. They can now more easily work together to create a range of informal coalitions against Beijing to limit China’s access to critical technology, impede it at international forums like the United Nations—where Beijing had been making gains—and constrain it with newly formed or closer military relationships, among other measures.<sup>6</sup> And, with China’s popularity plummeting, and multinationals encountering more challenges there, the United States and other leading democracies can become less dependent on China, making their companies and their overall economies more resilient to economic and diplomatic coercion from Beijing.

# FROM MR. POPULAR TO OUTCAST

Until the past five to seven years, China used an effective combination of soft power initiatives, more nuanced promotion of its developmental model, increasing aid outflows, support for ethnic Chinese in other countries, and modest, relatively humble diplomacy to build a positive public image in many parts of the globe.

## THE POPULAR ERA

In the mid to late 1990s, Beijing effectively used humble and modest formal diplomacy, other types of soft power, and a relatively restrained foreign policy to foster a positive image of itself among many countries in Asia and in other parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> China began expanding its information tools and tailoring its state media efforts to local markets in various countries during this period.<sup>8</sup> In 2000, Beijing launched China Central Television (CCTV) international, a global news channel broadcasting in English.<sup>9</sup>

Beijing also increased training programs for foreign officials, most of whom came from developing countries.<sup>10</sup> Programs on development focused on everything from combating poverty to attracting investment to improving agricultural yields, and regularly featured China's successes in these areas. Meanwhile, Chinese diplomats publicly repeated that Beijing would remain a humble, noninterventionist power, in contrast to the United States, and would support every country's path to development without imposing its own model. At the time, China was going through a moderately liberal phase at home under President Hu Jintao, and although it remained authoritarian, its severe abuses were less obvious to the world.



The central government in Beijing, as well as provincial governments, also provided new streams of scholarship funding to boost the number of foreign students coming to study at Chinese universities.<sup>11</sup> Most came from developing countries, including those in Southeast Asia, as studying in China was cheap or free. In the mid-2000s, three Southeast Asian states were among the top ten countries sending the most students to China.<sup>12</sup> The total population of foreign students in China would roughly quadruple to 442,000 between 2002 and 2016.<sup>13</sup> Foreign students who attended university in China became important conduits of favorable views of China back to their countries of origin.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, China was boosting its own outbound student population to Southeast Asian states such as Singapore and Western countries including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> China then launched the Confucius Institute project in 2004, a program for partnering with universities in Chinese language and cultural studies. It established many of the first institutes in developing countries. For wealthier universities in developed states, the money offered by the Confucius Institute Headquarters was not as significant, but opening one's doors to a Confucius Institute was an important signal of warmth toward China that could lead to other benefits. China was a growing source of foreign students, and these foreign students paid full tuition, leading universities in the United States and other countries to set up partner programs at Chinese universities. In the 2004–05 academic year, when the first Confucius Institute opened in the United States, roughly 62,500 Chinese students came to study in the United States.<sup>16</sup> By 2010, there were more than 157,000 Chinese nationals at U.S. universities.<sup>17</sup>

Beijing also expanded elite-to-elite diplomacy, particularly in Asia but also in Africa and Latin America, at a time of growing U.S. unpopularity due to the Iraq War in large part. Beijing stepped up visits of senior leaders and other top officials to many neighboring states, and welcomed more visits by officials from those states to China.<sup>18</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran of the Wilson Center found that the number of visits by top Chinese leaders to Southeast Asian states, and vice versa, roughly tripled between 1990 and 2007.<sup>19</sup>

During this era, Beijing also expanded foreign aid to Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and other regions.<sup>20</sup> From 2000 to 2012 China committed more than \$52 billion in aid to Africa alone, and Beijing increasingly became the main provider of physical and technological infrastructure to the continent.<sup>21</sup>

Those efforts were largely successful. A comprehensive 2005 poll, conducted by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, showed that majorities in several Southeast Asian countries—including regional giants Indonesia and the Philippines—viewed China’s influence as positive.<sup>22</sup> Data from the Asian Barometer, the most comprehensive project to measure public opinion across the region, offered similar findings. Views of China were relatively favorable in other developing regions, too. The Afrobarometer project, an undertaking similar to the Asian Barometer, found that in the mid-2000s more than 60 percent of people in Africa thought that China helped their country.<sup>23</sup>

But it was not only in neighboring states in Southeast Asia and developing countries in Africa and Latin America where views of China were positive in the late 2000s and early 2010s. A 2007 Pew study showed that publics in Britain, Canada, South Korea, Sweden, and many other richer countries had favorable images of China.

## *THE REVERSAL*

From these high points between the 1990s and mid-2010s, Beijing’s public image and overall soft power now has bottomed out, even as it has boosted its foreign assistance through the Belt and Road Initiative; billions spent on state television, radio, and other mass communication; and a wide range of efforts to expand its cultural diplomacy, visitor programs for foreigners, and scholarships for students to attend university in China.

The scale of China’s negative public image today is staggering—even more so given that the United States has not fully recovered the levels of global trust in its leadership and democracy that it enjoyed in earlier eras.<sup>24</sup> A 2021 Pew study of publics in seventeen different countries, including the United States, found that “unfavorable views of China are ... at or near historic highs. Large majorities in most of the advanced economies surveyed have broadly negative views of China.”<sup>25</sup>

This study contained a wide range of states, including many that have historically had warm perceptions of China. Indeed, it included countries such as France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, where, in the mid-2010s, only a minority of publics had unfavorable views of China.<sup>26</sup> In Southeast Asia, where China could have used its growing dominance of trade integration to bolster its image, a comprehensive annual survey released in early 2022 by the Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore found that overwhelming majorities of Southeast

Asians are “worried about [China’s] growing regional political and strategic influence.”<sup>27</sup>

Another poll conducted in 2020 by Sinophone Borderlands of people in thirteen European countries, including multiple Central and East European states, found that people in ten of the thirteen now had much more negative views of China than positive views.<sup>28</sup> China’s image in Central and Eastern Europe is only likely to deteriorate further because of its support for Russia in the Ukraine war, which has led to rising anti-Russia sentiment in the region.

Even in the Middle East and Africa, where China has invested massively in infrastructure, some countries’ perceptions of China have deteriorated.<sup>29</sup> As scholar Charles Dunst of the Center for Strategic and International Studies writes, “A majority of Filipinos, along with pluralities of Turks and Indians, hold an unfavorable view of China. Antipathy toward China is also on the rise in countries like Cambodia and Zimbabwe.”<sup>30</sup>

# WHY CHINA'S PUBLIC IMAGE HAS COLLAPSED

There is no one reason for China's plummeting global image. It stems from a combination of poor diplomacy, the increasing use of economic coercion, its failing soft power efforts, and its growing ties to Russia, among other factors.

## *ALIENATING DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS*

In recent years, China has shifted from a more modest diplomacy rooted in Deng Xiaoping's post-Tiananmen maxim for China to seem humble and bide its time, to its current form of aggressive, often belligerent, diplomacy.<sup>31</sup> This new diplomatic approach, combined with the growing use of state economic coercion against countries and foreign and domestic Chinese multinationals, certainly plays a central role in rising negative sentiments.

There were some signs of China's growing belligerence before the Xi era began in 2012–13, but overtly aggressive diplomacy has blossomed under him. Still, in 2010, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi unleashed a diatribe at Southeast Asian leaders at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Hanoi, providing a preview of the new approach Beijing intended to take.<sup>32</sup> "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact," Yang said, after ASEAN leaders complained bitterly about Beijing's policies in the South China Sea.<sup>33</sup>

This was still an exception in Chinese diplomacy at the time, however. In addition, the blandness of then-Chinese President Hu Jintao, who ruled in the consensus authoritarian style that had prevailed at the top of the Chinese leadership since Deng Xiaoping, probably served to make Beijing appear somewhat less threatening to other states.

But as Xi consolidated power domestically, eliminating potential opponents and ending consensus authoritarianism for what is now essentially one-man rule, he demonstrated, via speeches and actions, that he wanted China to reclaim its status as a dominant regional and global power and to promote its model to the world.<sup>34</sup> He openly voiced nationalist sentiments and, unlike leaders since the early Mao period, promoted a Chinese model of development. With Xi leading the way, Chinese diplomacy shifted dramatically toward the types of statements that Yang had made back in 2010. Other ministers and ambassadors, inculcated in China's increasingly nationalistic domestic politics and following Xi's example, began regularly venting prickly, nationalist, bombastic rhetoric at foreign states—even before the pandemic and the war in Ukraine further widened the divide between China and many leading democracies.<sup>35</sup>

In 2018, for instance, China's ambassador to Sweden blasted Swedish police for removing Chinese tourists trespassing in a hostel.<sup>36</sup> He began demanding an investigation and claimed that getting thrown out of a hostel was a "serious violation of the life, safety, and basic human rights of Chinese citizens."<sup>37</sup> That same year, as the journalist Peter Martin chronicled in *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Papua New Guinea, four Chinese diplomats reportedly tried to physically push their way past guards and into the house of Papua New Guinea's foreign minister.<sup>38</sup> They were apparently trying to enlist help in changing the joint communiqué that usually results from the summit, which contained a line about unfair trading practices.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, no joint communiqué was released, but the incident showed the aggression of some Chinese diplomats.

Under Xi, some of the most vitriolic diplomats have moved up quickly through the foreign ministry, showing other Chinese diplomats that acting this way is an avenue to promotion. Beijing promoted Zhao Lijian from the second-ranking diplomat in the Chinese mission in Islamabad, Pakistan, a relatively obscure job, to a high post in the foreign ministry's information department.<sup>40</sup> While in Pakistan, Zhao had become known for tweeting in enormous volumes.<sup>41</sup> Rather than affecting humility, Zhao used Twitter to hit hard at critics of China. He told other countries that "Xinjiang is none of your business," and claimed that many British citizens were "descendants of war criminals" after the UK government called on Hong Kong authorities to treat protestors there with restraint.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the pandemic and now the war in Ukraine, China's increasingly bold diplomats have verbally attacked foreign countries and spread disinformation about the origins of COVID-19, the U.S. response to the pandemic, and numerous other topics. In recent months, they also have spread Russian disinformation about the Ukraine war, while domestic media outlets suggest that Russia is the real victim.<sup>43</sup>

This signifies a further step in Chinese diplomats' use of disinformation, one in which Beijing acts to amplify the falsehoods of another major authoritarian power—one with whom it has become extremely close.<sup>44</sup> China's role in pushing Russian disinformation online is critical to the spreading of these falsehoods: many Russian outlets are being censored or banned by governments and tech platforms, but China's outlets are not.<sup>45</sup>

## *ECONOMIC COERCION*

At the same time, China has become increasingly blatant about its use of economic coercion against countries that criticize its foreign and domestic policies, while simultaneously, some aspects of BRI have proven highly problematic for recipient countries. Beijing has used coercion against dozens of states and multinationals that take critical stances on issues Beijing views as essential, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, or that critique Xi's leadership or demand investigations into the origins of COVID-19.

Recent analysis has also revealed that China negotiates foreign aid deals in ways far different from other donors, which is undermining the goodwill built in developing regions by BRI.<sup>46</sup> There are also mounting difficulties with the projects themselves. As a landmark study by the research institution AidData showed, "35% of the BRI infrastructure project portfolio has encountered major implementation problems"—issues which have contributed to a wave of cancelled projects.<sup>47</sup>

Australia provides an important example of China's attempted economic coercion. Following Australia's stated desire for a more transparent investigation into the origins of COVID-19, as well as the Morrison government's critiques of China's rights abuses, China retaliated with tariffs on a range of Australian exports, including barley. It also created non-tariff barriers to other products such as timber and coal, as the Lowy Institute has noted.<sup>48</sup> China is Australia's biggest trading partner, so Beijing could have assumed that this economic coercion would force Canberra to return to a more accommodating approach.

## FALTERING SOFT POWER

Beijing's rising authoritarianism, its isolation from the world, and its increasingly monomaniacal focus on Xi Jinping's campaign to restructure China's economy, solidify his third term, and entrench his rule, is also hurting China's image. China's authoritarianism—particularly in Hong Kong, where repression has been more widely exposed because of the city's media base—has proven a factor in Beijing's deteriorating image in democracies.

Meanwhile, China's zero-COVID strategy has virtually cut itself off from foreigners, and is hurting its soft power efforts. It has curtailed many of the student and visitor programs for foreigners that once helped boost its image abroad, particularly in developing states. There also has been a sharp drop in outbound Chinese tourists who had served as important people-to-people contacts with the world (and major sources of revenue for many countries in Europe, Asia, and other regions).<sup>49</sup> In late June, a top Chinese official suggested that Beijing could continue its zero-COVID policy, which is isolating it from the world, for another five years, although Chinese censors removed those comments from the Chinese internet, so it is unclear whether Beijing really will continue such a long zero-COVID period.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond visitor and student programs, and outbound tourism, China's other soft power tools are also failing compared to their performance in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. Beijing has tried to modernize China Global Television Network (CGTN), *Xinhua*, and China Radio International (CRI), its major state outlets, as well as *China Daily*, its major global English language print outlet. It sought, at least until recent years, to make these outlets relatively reputable. With *Al Jazeera* as a kind of model, Chinese state outlets hired respected local journalists and reporters from major global outlets. Beijing also boosted its state media's presence on Facebook and other social media.

In the early 2010s, it seemed like some of those brands, such as CGTN, had the potential to challenge channels such as CNN and the BBC, at the very least in developing regions where outlets like CGTN often focused their resources.

Yet other than *Xinhua*, which has the potential to become a global news leader and major soft power tool, most of these state outlets have failed to achieve high levels of viewership or listenership. Sarah Cook of Freedom House, who has closely studied Chinese media in the United States, believes that CGTN's actual viewership numbers in the United States lag even those of New Tang Dynasty TV, an independent

Chinese-language station available in far fewer U.S. households.<sup>51</sup> A comprehensive study of CGTN-Español, CGTN's Spanish-language channel, by Peilei Ye and Luis A. Albornoz, suggests that the network's "audience and visibility was still low."<sup>52</sup> The continuing climate of self-censorship at CGTN, which has only gotten worse as the war in Ukraine has polarized the world and seemed to make Chinese leadership more paranoid, further threatens to undermine whatever credibility remains from hiring reporters away from other established media organizations. (Many of those hires now have quit CGTN and other Chinese state media.)

The giant social media followings of Chinese state media also do not seem real. CGTN's English-language page now has more than 117 million Facebook followers globally, the most of any media company in the world.<sup>53</sup> Even *Global Times*, a hawkish, ultranationalist state media newspaper and online news outlet—a niche publication—has over sixty-five million followers on Facebook, more than the *New York Times*.<sup>54</sup> Yet the *New York Times*, a global news giant, gets roughly 240 million visits per month to its website, while *Global Times*, a minnow in terms of bureaus and total staff, gets about 30 million, a clear sign that its follower count could be inorganically inflated.<sup>55</sup> Many other Chinese state media's Facebook and Twitter accounts' content generate few comments online, raising suspicions about how many real followers they have. On Twitter, Beijing has used fake followers to retweet Chinese diplomats, according to the *Associated Press*.<sup>56</sup> Further, in an investigation, the business publication *Quartz* found that many Facebook followers of Chinese state media sites come from countries known for "running 'click farms' where companies can buy" Facebook likes, reposts, and followers.<sup>57</sup>



# THE RAMIFICATIONS OF CHINA'S NEGATIVE GLOBAL IMAGE AND COLLAPSE OF SOFT POWER

To be sure, China's deteriorating global image will never fully negate its ability to wield vast military and economic power in its own neighborhood or further abroad. China is already the dominant economic power in Asia, especially given the United States' refusal to join Asia-Pacific trade deals or make any binding concessions to Asian states in the Biden administration's proposed Indo-Pacific economic frameworks.<sup>58</sup> In the Taiwan Strait, China is increasingly shifting the balance of power and using land reclamation and a range of other tactics to move toward militarily dominating the South China Sea.<sup>59</sup> Its deteriorating public image, statist economics, and isolation are not going to fully stop its continued economic rise, or its military modernization, or Xi Jinping's consolidation of power at home. China's increasingly skillful use of "sharp power"—covert, often corrupt means to control media, academia, and other centers of discourse in foreign states, and to penetrate Chinese diaspora communities—will likely also remain unaffected.<sup>60</sup> This approach is becoming a central part of China's influence strategies abroad, from Australia to Thailand to New Zealand.<sup>61</sup> Even if China's popularity were to fall even further, it still would possess all of these economic, trade, strategic, and military tools.

## *LOSING BUSINESS ALLIES AND TRADE DEALS*

Yet Beijing's collapsing popularity does create roadblocks for its foreign policy aims, in realms from diplomacy to economics to global governance to strategy. For one, as Beijing becomes more of a pariah, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war, China is losing major trade supporters in other countries, such as Germany's major industrial groups, who helped foster economic ties in the past between the two

giant economies.<sup>62</sup> The industrial groups' disenchantment with China, and Germany's overall more hawkish foreign policy toward China, is having an effect. Recent data from the Rhodium Group shows German direct investment into China, which had been enormously attractive to German firms, is now slowing.<sup>63</sup> The *New York Times* reports that "A survey by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China found that the tone among European businesses in the country had soured since January [2022]."<sup>64</sup> Similar slowdowns in foreign direct investment into China are happening from the United States, some Asian democracies, and other European states beyond Germany, as their trade organizations increasingly divorce themselves from advocating for China, and as governments become more antagonistic toward Beijing. These advanced democracies also are inaugurating tougher policies toward Chinese inbound investment and generally adopting more hawkish foreign policies toward Beijing. The German Marshall Fund's Jonas Parello-Plesner notes that "systemic rivalry—a part of the EU's official vocabulary on China since March 2019 but sparingly used initially—now seems the defining prism for the relationship."<sup>65</sup>

China's growing belligerence, outspokenness, and use of coercion have worked in some industries and with some countries that are heavily dependent on Beijing. China has silenced some leading multinationals, who now avoid any criticism of the country, most notably Hollywood, but also the National Basketball Association, hotel chains, and major global tech companies.<sup>66</sup>

But with many other states and corporations, China's tougher approach is backfiring. Hollywood may have given in, but many foreign companies, alienated by Xi's increasing authoritarianism and statism, are growing wary about making new investments in China.

Increasingly, they are diversifying their manufacturing to other locations such as the Balkans, Central America, Thailand, and Vietnam, though so many major firms, like Apple, have centered such a large share of their manufacturing within China that this diversification can be difficult and time-consuming.<sup>67</sup>

Some countries, meanwhile, are already freezing major deals with Beijing as it becomes more isolationist, statist, aggressive, and close to Moscow. The European Union, which last year publicly slammed China's "authoritarian shift," has frozen a major planned bilateral investment deal with China, one that promised massive economic benefits for both sides.<sup>68</sup> That freeze occurred even before the war in Ukraine, and China and the EU are unlikely to revive the deal any time soon.<sup>69</sup> According to *Politico*, "Manfred Weber, who leads the European Parliament's biggest faction, the European People's Party, [has] said: 'When it comes to China, it is urgent and crucial that Europe actively works to unite our position with the U.S., to defend our common interests and firmly reject the aggression coming from Beijing against our allies around the world.'"<sup>70</sup>

With China refusing to back down from what it has called its "no limits" strategic partnership with Russia, European countries could take further steps to chill trade relations with China, too—just as the United States is increasingly decoupling its economy from that of China. European firms could shift manufacturing back to parts of Europe or to other locations, while European states could impose other types of trade pressure on China.<sup>71</sup> Brussels already has moved to prevent China from bidding on major infrastructure projects in the European Union's public procurement market.<sup>72</sup>

## FAILING AT COERCION

Other countries, enraged by Beijing's behavior, are realizing that they can stand up to its economic coercion, weakening Beijing's threats. Had China not been so aggressive, these states could never have realized they could reduce trade with Beijing.

Australia is a prime example of shifts in public opinion leading to changes in trade policies with China, and to strategies beyond dependence on bilateral trade with Beijing. As Ye Xue notes in the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, China's sanctions on Australia did not significantly harm the Australian economy, lowering Australia's overall exports to China by only 2 percent.<sup>73</sup> But they did prod the Australian government, and Australian industry, to aggressively cultivate new markets

as alternatives to China.<sup>74</sup> Ye Xue notes that the Australian industries most heavily targeted by Chinese coercion have, in the past two years, begun to make effective shifts to other markets. China, Ye Xue writes, “has only succeeded in making its market matter less to Australia and [lessening] the fear of trade as a weapon” against Canberra.”<sup>75</sup>

Lithuania, a much smaller and less powerful state than Australia, provides another example of how Beijing’s economic coercion led to a backlash against China. After Lithuania allowed Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, in November 2021 named after Taiwan and not Taipei—considered a major insult by China—China used both direct and indirect economic coercion to punish Lithuania. According to studies by Konstantinas Andrijauskas of Vilnius University, China started retaliating by imposing tariffs on Lithuanian goods, essentially an undeclared embargo.<sup>76</sup> It then tried to further pressure the Baltic state by informing non-Lithuanian European multinationals that China would not import their products because they contained Lithuanian components. This escalation, if utilized in other situations to punish foreign corporations that earned Beijing’s ire, could cause huge ramifications for multinationals and global supply chains.<sup>77</sup>

Still, Lithuania survived, despite having nowhere near the economic heft of Australia. As Andrijauskas notes in a study of the dispute:

China’s escalation of a bilateral dispute with Lithuania to the level of involving broader supply chains and pressuring other European states to isolate Lithuania has not worked so far for Beijing. Indeed, both the EU and the US expressed emphatic support for Lithuania. Brussels in particular initiated an Anti-Coercion Instrument and launched a case against China at the WTO. In the meantime, both Washington and Taipei have offered Vilnius additional economic support, including a \$600 million export credit agreement with the American Export–Import Bank<sup>78</sup> as well as ... a \$1 billion fund for bilateral joint ventures.<sup>79</sup>

## *LOSING POTENTIAL STRATEGIC PARTNERS*

A poor public image hinders China’s strategic aims as well. In democracies from the Philippines to Indonesia to Italy, politicians cannot build closer strategic ties with China once its image with their publics

becomes negative, or they risk the wrath of voters. To take one example, although Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte pushed hard early in his term as president to build closer links to Beijing and reduce Manila's dependence on the United States, China's belligerence, inability to complete major infrastructure deals, and increasing unpopularity among the Philippine public limited Duterte's room to maneuver.<sup>80</sup>

Beijing had an opportunity in the Philippines—Duterte was not alone in pushing for warmer ties early in his presidential term—but China blew that chance. As the prominent Philippine analyst Richard Heydarian notes, ordinary Filipinos were open to boosting strategic links with China early in Duterte's presidency: "The number of Filipinos preferring engagement over confrontation with Beijing dramatically increased from 43% in 2015 to a steady majority of 67% in 2017."<sup>81</sup>

Yet, Heydarian adds, China's aggressive diplomacy, continual expansion of its South China Sea claims, and inability to provide the Philippines with much aid or infrastructure led to a shift in public opinion: "Halfway into Duterte's presidency [i.e., around 2019], however, it ... became clear that China's promises of large-scale investments were largely illusory." Anti-China sentiments in the country skyrocketed and Duterte himself was forced to take a tougher rhetorical approach to Beijing's South China Sea actions and, ultimately, to continue and even bolster strategic links to the United States.<sup>82</sup>

Duterte's six-year term is now over. The new president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has also historically enjoyed warm ties with Beijing. But in the wake of shifting public opinion, Marcos Jr.'s ability to woo Beijing will be limited as well.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, as Heydarian notes, the Philippines and the United States seem on very strong ground now—the two recently conducted their largest-ever joint military exercises—and Marcos Jr. could have no choice but to continue this shift toward Washington given Beijing's unpopularity.<sup>84</sup>

### *CREATING INFORMAL AND FORMAL COALITIONS AGAINST CHINA*

Beyond the Philippines, countries terrified of Beijing's belligerence, power, and growing coercion are building informal coalitions against China in a wide range of areas. These range from control of semiconductor production and coalitions to stop major Chinese firms from building the next generation of wireless technology to new types of military relationships designed to constrain Beijing.<sup>85</sup> As political scientist

Michael Beckley notes, in response to China's bullying diplomacy, failing soft power, and growing use of coercion, "Many of the world's largest economies are collectively developing new trade, investment, and technology standards that implicitly discriminate against China."<sup>86</sup>

Growing fear of China controlling wireless networks, the critical pipelines of information of the current age, has led the United States to ban Huawei and many European states that considered allowing Huawei to erect their 5G broadband cellular systems to change course and choose other companies instead.<sup>87</sup> Even in parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, where Chinese telecommunications companies had made much greater inroads, fear of China has helped shift attitudes against Chinese-built telecoms infrastructure. States including Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, wooed heavily by Huawei, have chosen other 5G providers to build out their networks (some Southeast Asian states, such as Indonesia, have chosen Huawei).<sup>88</sup>

Overall, as many as 60 percent of countries in the global cellular market now have banned or imposed restrictions on Huawei, according to Beckley.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, countries in Asia are creating a range of more formalized strategic ties, from AUKUS (the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom) to the Quad (the United States, Australia, India, and Japan), to protect themselves against China's rising military might.<sup>90</sup>

### *UNDERMINING ANY POSSIBLE SOFT POWER TURNAROUND*

China's negative image is also undermining its soft power, making it harder to repair its negative reputation in the next five years. A lack of soft power in the zero-COVID era—visitor programs, journalism training programs, Confucius Institutes, programs for students to come to China—makes it harder for Beijing to spread its developmental model. Beijing's image has become so toxic that countries are closing Confucius Institutes, banning or reducing the reach of Chinese state media outlets, and limiting other potential sources of Chinese soft power.<sup>91</sup> Many universities in the United States and Europe have shut Confucius Institutes and also begun cutting links with sister programs in China, sometimes moving the sister programs to Taiwan instead.<sup>92</sup> The United States, Australia, and Europe also have begun closely scrutinizing foreign investment in their domestic media and information sectors, which will make it harder for Chinese firms to buy up media assets in other countries and shift their discourse to a more pro-China stance.

## *COSTING CHINA A CHANCE AT GLOBAL LEADERSHIP*

China remains vastly powerful, but its weak soft power and negative image are constraining its international influence and global leadership. Enjoying so little trust among other countries, and with Xi and other leaders remaining in China for years because of the zero-COVID policy, China has weakened its ability to lead on issues such as climate change, where it once seemed focused on taking a major global role. Its leadership is ebbing even as it invests heavily in clean energy and remains the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world.<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, having alienated so many countries in its region, China has weakened its ability to lead Asia on trade integration, though with the United States out of the picture, China could still be able to exert some leadership. Nonetheless, China's poor image has allowed other regional powers such as Japan to become more active in leading Asia-wide trade integration.

Its own domestic problems with COVID-19, its collapsing global image, and Xi's reticence to leave the country also are hurting Beijing's efforts to promote its developmental model. Other countries can look at China today and see that, while still achieving significant growth, its top leadership has ossified and is paralyzed about how to create a pandemic strategy that could allow it to escape lockdowns and isolation. They can even see, from the international news media, that citizens in Shanghai are so frustrated with China's unchanging zero-COVID strategy that Shanghainese are publicly criticizing the government, a rarity in China today.<sup>94</sup>

On public health in general, the global lack of trust in China and Beijing's own failures to move away from a zero-COVID strategy have undermined Beijing's efforts at leadership. Beijing's health leadership is failing even as China donates sizable amounts of vaccines, masks, and other supplies to other countries. It does not help, of course, that the Chinese vaccines, which are not mRNA vaccines, do not match the efficacy of Pfizer or Moderna mRNA vaccines.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, some countries, such as Malaysia, which initially received Chinese vaccines, have decided instead to rely on mRNA vaccines.<sup>96</sup>

# THE WAY FORWARD

China's plummeting global image, closer strategic ties with Russia, isolation from the world, and alienation of many countries all provide an opportunity for the United States and other democracies to respond. China's collapsing image potentially allows the United States and its partners to mitigate some of Beijing's more dangerous actions. Yet they must do so without creating an extremely dangerous Cold War II environment that explicitly pits democracies worldwide against autocracies.

To respond to China's image collapse, the United States and its partners should take the following steps to better understand and counter China's global influence efforts.

- The United States and its allies need to understand which Chinese soft power tools remain effective, and which are ineffective and unlikely to improve. Right now, opinion leaders in many countries anxiously talk about the spread of Chinese state media and other soft power tools. But they usually have no studies of state media's audience share, or how little audiences in various countries trust and follow CGTN, CRI, or other Chinese outlets, other than *Xinhua*, which has the potential to be a major source of influence for China. Funds from the U.S. Congress and other democratic actors to conduct research on Chinese state outlets and other Chinese information activities will be critical to understanding China's actual reach in the global media and information environment.<sup>97</sup>
- The United States and its allies should divulge China's increasing use of disinformation in its state media and other outlets, and take steps to address it. Unlike some Chinese state media and information tools,



disinformation can be highly effective. Officials from the United States and other countries should “pre-but” Chinese efforts at disinformation, as the Biden administration has done successfully with Russian disinformation before the war in Ukraine. They also should aggressively highlight China’s growing links to Russia and willingness to spread disinformation on behalf of the Kremlin. The United States also should use congressionally mandated funds to support independent media and digital literacy efforts in other countries; Taiwan and Finland are two states that have proven models for creating digital literacy programs for their citizens. And, independent media often have provided bulwarks against disinformation and have been some of the first to expose Chinese economic coercion.

- The United States and its allies should develop national screening mechanisms for foreign investment in media and information outlets in their countries to limit China’s covert media influence abroad through larger and less transparent investments in media and information outlets. The United States has a screening mechanism for foreign investment, but it does not always pay enough attention to media and information, and many democratic countries do not have such screening mechanisms. To be sure, other leading democracies, such as Australia and the European Union, have taken such measures or are debating them. But all countries concerned about China’s influence should use national foreign investment committees to assess investment in media and information, in the same way they would assess foreign investment in other sensitive sectors like semiconductors.
- The United States and its allies should focus critiques of China on Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Too often, leaders in the United States and many other countries have used broad invective to condemn China, making it seem like their problem is with the general Chinese public.<sup>98</sup> This stigmatization of Chinese people inside China and in countries around the world is counterproductive.<sup>99</sup> Instead, democracies should maintain the focus on the CCP and Xi himself.
- The United States and its allies should support countries, such as Australia and Lithuania, that face economic coercion and diplomatic bullying. U.S. officials and leaders from other democracies should rhetorically condemn those behaviors and use summits and other meetings, as well as social media, to highlight China’s growing economic and diplomatic bullying of countries. The United States and its

partners also should take steps to open their markets to products from countries that China is blocking in various ways. In less wealthy states facing Chinese coercion, the United States and its partners should be prepared to offer limited grants and loans, as the European Union has offered to Lithuania.<sup>100</sup>

- The United States and its partners should take advantage of Beijing's current unpopularity and policy missteps to build a new partnerships and deepen existing ones. These should include making the Quad into a more robust defense partnership, and potentially adding new members to it in the future. Taking advantage of China's policy missteps also should certainly include rebuilding troubled defense and strategic relationships with U.S. treaty allies in Southeast Asia, Thailand, and the Philippines, despite Thailand's semi-autocratic government and the Philippines' election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as its new president. On the economic side, it should include turning the nascent Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity into something beyond a talk shop—an agreement that ultimately provides U.S. market access to countries that sign up, in order to get them to agree to regional standards on digital trade, supply chains, and other issues. Providing U.S. market access would help bring more countries firmly into the agreement and would strengthen this partnership as a bulwark against China.
- The United States and its partners also should speed up efforts to limit China's access to critical advanced technologies like the most cutting-edge semiconductors and the machines that manufacture them, an effort Washington already has begun in collaboration with Japan, South Korea, and the Netherlands, among other countries. The United States should work with the European Union and its partners in Asia to prevent Huawei and other major Chinese firms from developing 5G infrastructure in European countries that have still not decided on a provider for their next-generation networks.<sup>101</sup> Washington also should step up research partnerships with allies in Europe, North America, and Asia on critical technologies like artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and other areas where China had gained some ground, while keeping Beijing out of these research partnerships.
- As China continues to bungle its diplomacy and cut itself off from the world with its zero-COVID strategies, the United States and its partners should reinvest in their own soft power strengths, including rebuilding Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, badly damaged

during the prior administration, and ensuring that they actually appoint ambassadors to key partners around the world. Although a wide range of leading U.S. officials have made trips to Asia in the past year, to show the value the United States places on a region where China is alienating many countries, currently, important U.S. partners like Thailand and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations still lack Senate-confirmed U.S. ambassadors.<sup>102</sup> Many Pacific islands, where China is making a major play for strategic and economic influence, pushing Pacific states to sign a range of agreements with Beijing, lack U.S. ambassadors and any kind of significant U.S. presence whatsoever. If China continues down its current path, it will only make it easier for democracies around the world to step up the pace of this coalition building amongst themselves. Yet as Martin shows in his book on Chinese diplomacy, Beijing has at moments in the past shifted diplomatic strategies dramatically. China could move away from bullying diplomacy and economic coercion and return to a softer approach.<sup>103</sup> Even today, China is trying to adapt its BRI, shifting its messaging to highlight the local benefits BRI projects bring to recipient countries. The United States and its partners should be prepared for the possibility, however slim, of Beijing backing away from its aggressive diplomacy, coercion, and rising xenophobia, and dialing back its relationship with Russia, which is already costing it enormously in its international reputation. In response, the United States and its partners, while not necessarily abandoning new relationships, should be prepared to try to work more closely again with China on critical global issues like climate change, trade, and pandemic disease, among others.

- Finally, leading democracies also should take steps to ensure that their democracies remain fair, free, and vital, if they hope to present a clear alternative to the Chinese model. They need to ensure peaceful transfers of power, free and fair voting environments, and legislatures capable of passing actual bills, among other efforts. How to achieve these ambitious goals are beyond the scope of this paper, but democracies should offer a vibrant alternative governance model to China.

# CONCLUSION

With Beijing performing so poorly on the global stage, there could be a temptation among democratic leaders to simply let Beijing keep making mistakes and celebrate how China has alienated countries. But they should not celebrate. They should take appropriate measures to understand what aspects of China's soft power are successful or not, to protect against bullying and economic coercion, to develop alternative markets, and to keep their own, increasingly troubled democracies functioning.

Beijing remains a major power. It has the ability to adapt and shift its foreign policies, and even though it has devalued its position as a global leader, its cooperation is still needed on many issues. Indeed, the United States and other partners must not abandon the idea that, despite all indications to the contrary, Beijing still will be able to take a global leadership role on some issues—even if it does so while becoming more authoritarian at home. Democratic states should leave open the opportunity that, even under Xi, China will still play a positive role in some aspects of the world economy, environment, and trading system.

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*Cover photo: Protesters rally in Sydney, Australia, on June 12, 2021, commemorating a confrontation about China's anti-extradition bill.*  
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