

Opinion **Chinese politics & policy**

China is building soft power as Trump burns bridges

After years of struggling to match the global popularity of the US, Japan and South Korea, Beijing's image is improving

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As I write, the World Snooker Championship is coming to a climax in Sheffield — with 22-year-old Wu Yize battling Britain's Shaun Murphy for supremacy. If Wu wins he will be the second Chinese player to be crowned world champion, following the victory of Zhao Xintong last year.

In a surprising twist of fate, China and Britain have emerged as the two centres of world snooker excellence. Sheffield, once the steelmaking capital of the world, has become the snooker capital. Wu moved there aged 16 with his father and lived in a windowless flat, as he honed his game. There are now said to be some 150mn snooker fans in China. Peter Wilson, the UK ambassador in Beijing, has installed a snooker table in his living room as a tribute to this unlikely bond.

China's emergence as a snooker superpower is a small sign that the country is beginning to develop "soft power" — the cultural cachet that can burnish a nation's global image.

For many years, modern forms of soft power have eluded China. Japan had manga. South Korea had K-pop. These phenomena emerged from within society rather than by government decree — which may be one reason why China, under the suffocating rule of the Communist Party, struggled to compete. But things are changing. It is not just the snooker. TikTok is a wildly successful Chinese app that has helped to create cultural memes with international resonance. The city of Chongqing is now gaining global attention because of its "cyberpunk" architecture, with railways passing through buildings. The phrase "a very Chinese time in my life" has gone viral on TikTok and Instagram. It can mean anything from wearing slippers indoors to drinking hot water.

The relationship between soft power and geopolitics is hard to pin down — but it definitely exists. The US and the west triumphed in the cold war, partly because American society seemed so much more attractive and dynamic than its Soviet rival. The yearning for Levi's jeans and rock music behind the Iron Curtain was real and it mattered. So, it is potentially significant that China is developing soft power, just as Donald Trump is burning through America's stock of global goodwill.

A survey of elite opinion in south-east Asia, released last month, asked respondents who south-east Asian nations should align with, if forced to choose between America and China. For the second time in the eight-year history of the survey, a slim majority opted for China. A poll taken earlier this year showed significant majorities in Germany, France, Britain and Canada saying that it is "better to depend on China than the US" — a remarkable result for traditional American allies.

The rivalry between the US and China is increasingly about which nation will do most to shape the world's economic and technological future. Will third countries adopt Chinese or American tech standards? Will Chinese EVs come to dominate the global auto market?

A country's global image can powerfully influence those choices. The sales of Teslas plunged in Europe in 2025, which many have attributed to the close association of the company's founder, Elon Musk, with Donald Trump. My local Tesla dealership in west London shut down recently and is now a showroom for the fast-growing Chinese car brands, Omoda and Jaecoo.

American policymakers often insist that adopting Chinese tech can expose people to Chinese espionage. A few years ago, the US went all out to persuade its global allies not to adopt 5G wireless from Huawei, a Chinese provider. This campaign was fairly successful. Britain, for example, reversed its decision to go with Huawei. But it is questionable whether similar American campaigns would now succeed.

The main argument that the US made against Huawei was that adopting their technology would open countries to surveillance and to economic coercion. But we now live in a world in which economic coercion is a mainstay of American statecraft and EU officials are told to take burner phones to the US.

Beijing, meanwhile, is buffing up its soft power. Many Europeans can now travel there without visas. China's DeepSeek has made its AI model open source, which has led to its rapid adoption around the world. And last week, China dropped tariffs on imports from almost all African countries. That made for a striking contrast with Washington's announcement that it intends to impose 25 per cent tariffs on EU vehicles.

The US has long regarded India as a crucial partner in the battle to contain Chinese influence. But Trump seems to be going out of his way to alienate the Modi government — imposing heavy tariffs on India, praising Pakistan and recently sharing social media comments that described India as a "hellhole". In March, the Modi government announced that it will now allow fast-track approval for tech investments with minority Chinese ownership in seven strategic sectors.

The irony is that US warnings about the dangers of economic dependence on China have some merit. Beijing has shown itself willing and able to use its dominance of rare earths and critical mineral production as a geopolitical weapon. To combat China's growing economic power around the world, the US will need to create international partnerships. That will require rebuilding America's stock of soft power. Otherwise Trump may find himself well and truly snookered by Xi.

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This article has been corrected to clarify that the survey of elite opinion in south-east Asia last month found a slim majority in favour of China for the second time in the history of the poll, not the first time as originally stated.

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