

# China's strategy to strengthen soft power in the Asia-Pacific region

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**Abstract.** The article examines research personnel training as part of China's strategy to expand its 'soft power' in the Asia-Pacific region and the world as a whole. The research methodology is based on a series of neoliberal and neorealist approaches of the international relations theory. As part of the research, a comparative analysis of the innovative development indicators in the Human Capital and Research area was carried out when assessing the global innovation index for such countries as China, Russia and the United States. The results of the article demonstrate that strengthening the training of China's research personnel is an essential component of China's strategy to strengthen its 'soft power'. The educational sphere, the activities of research institutes in large companies of the country and the think tanks of the PRC have been studied. The creation and improvement of those institutions make it possible to promote research activities in connection with the current goals of the Chinese policy, and ensure that research personnel in the strategic planning of China's 'soft power' is involved.

**Keywords:** development strategy, soft power strategy, People's Republic of China, Asia-Pacific region, human capital, research personnel

## 1 Introduction

It is one of the most significant processes in the modern world for the spread of influence between subjects claiming the status of global leaders. World powers are striving to expand their area of influence and, as a consequence, acquire new resources and opportunities. The branches of their activities have a different scale (subregional, regional and global), forms and methods of their influence (use of 'soft', 'hard', 'normative' and other forces), strategies and areas of their development (economic, political, cultural, educational, etc.). The combination of these factors determines the status of a global leader and the stability of its position in a global context.

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The People's Republic of China (PRC, China) is one of the universally recognised and stably established in the modern global system of world powers. This status is due to the leadership of the PRC in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR), and, in general, in the global economy, which it has been claiming since 2020 [1]. Also widely studied are the areas of China's policy to ensure its national security [2-4] and the comprehensive dissemination of its 'soft power' [5-7]. Russian and overseas researchers considered various areas of China's 'soft power' noting such components as awareness-building efforts and media activities, various components of public diplomacy (preventive, sports, etc.), the promotion of science and education, which involves the involvement of young people and research personnel from other states.

Against the backdrop of all the research of the last question, it is worth noting that today it contains gaps in its research. So, if the issues of education and training of teachers are disclosed quite widely in the framework of research papers and even thesis papers [8, 9], then research personnel training, which is implemented as a priority within the APR, is insufficiently studied.

## 2 Materials and methods

The methodological basis of the research is the integrated application of the neoliberal and neorealist approaches of the theory of international relations. The principles of the neorealist approach create the priority of such a state entity as the PRC in international politics in general and within the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, it determines the importance of expanding its regional influence, which is one of the Chinese national security components. The concepts of neoliberalism determine the consideration of 'soft power' as an important tool for expanding China's influence and the need to develop its individual areas. Such a strategy gives impetus to the development of the economy and is aimed at improving the quality of life of the population, thereby shaping the middle class. The issues of creation of the middle class are very relevant and are widely studied at the international level [10].

As methods of the article used are both general scientific methods of analysis, synthesis, differentiation and comparison, as well as applied methods of political science, such as the analysis of regulatory documents and information materials, the analysis of statistical indicators, which will provide an opportunity to demonstrate the priority of the Asia-Pacific region as an object of China's 'soft power' and the importance of work on the promotion of research personnel training.

## 3 Results

The China's 'soft power' strengthening strategy is one of the components determined by the country's leadership to ensure the country's national security and ensure its status as a world power and a global leader. The central areas of focus for its implementation were formulated during the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in 2007. In its course, 'soft power' was associated with the development and spread of the Chinese culture [11]. Today, this cultural sector includes areas of advancement of education, research and technology advancement as well as training of research personnel and experts, work with the media etc.

The significance of the development of education and research in the context of strengthening China's 'soft power', primarily in the Asia-Pacific region, which is its priority strategically important region, can be confirmed by statistical data. Thus, according to the

report of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the majority (59.95%) of foreign students studying in China were those from Asia. Gradation by country makes the connection with the Asia-Pacific region even more obvious. Thus, the leader in providing students to China is the Republic of Korea (more than 50,000 people). It is followed by Thailand, Pakistan, India, USA, RF, Indonesia, Laos, Japan, etc. [12].

It is obvious that not all students belong to the category of research personnel. However, the potential of their further scientific activities and training at the postgraduate level makes this area of China's 'soft power' important in the context of the issue considered in the article. This is also confirmed by the three-tier education system adopted in the course of reforming the Chinese education system: bachelor-master-doctor. The last two levels are in China at the postgraduate level.

Overall, as of 2018, more than 250,000 foreign students were educated in China (most of which are from the Asia-Pacific countries). Of these, 85,000 belonged to the postgraduate level, 25,000 studied under the doctoral programme and about 60,000 under the Master's degree programme [11]. The fact that the PRC is focused on purposefully engaging foreign students, who will then become research personnel and make up the expert community of their states, is evidence of the fact that funding and scholarships are provided to such students. Also, there are nine joint Chinese-foreign universities in the PRC and about 2,500 joint educational programmes are being implemented [13].

Another area in the research personnel training development as a component of the 'soft power' of the PRC is opening branches of its universities abroad and encouraging the education of its students and graduate students in other countries. To date, branches have been opened in such APR countries as Laos, Russia, the USA, and Malaysia. As of 2018, the number of Chinese studying abroad was more than 650,000 [14]. The top ten countries, in which Chinese citizens study, also include many Asia-Pacific countries, such as the USA, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Kazakhstan, Japan etc.

In 2012, at the CPC Congress, 'soft power' was defined as an integral part of China's foreign policy; and in 2013, Xi Jinping outlined the need to create Chinese think tanks aimed at increasing China's global influence. The country's universities, that train their research personnel and involve foreign specialists, provide the basis for the operation of those centres. Thus, in order to involve foreign highly qualified (including scientific) specialists in China, the State Administration for Relations with Government Experts was established [15], the main purpose of which is to work with overseas experts in priority areas for the development of the PRC.

Another option for training research personnel in their own country is research institutes created on the basis of large enterprises in China. Of the total number of all graduate students, about 2,400 people study under master's and doctoral programmes at such research institutes [16]. Along with the development of training within universities and the work of think tanks, this also ensures the promotion in the country of research personnel who can create a strategy for strengthening its 'soft power' and implement it in the global space, first of all, within the Asia-Pacific region.

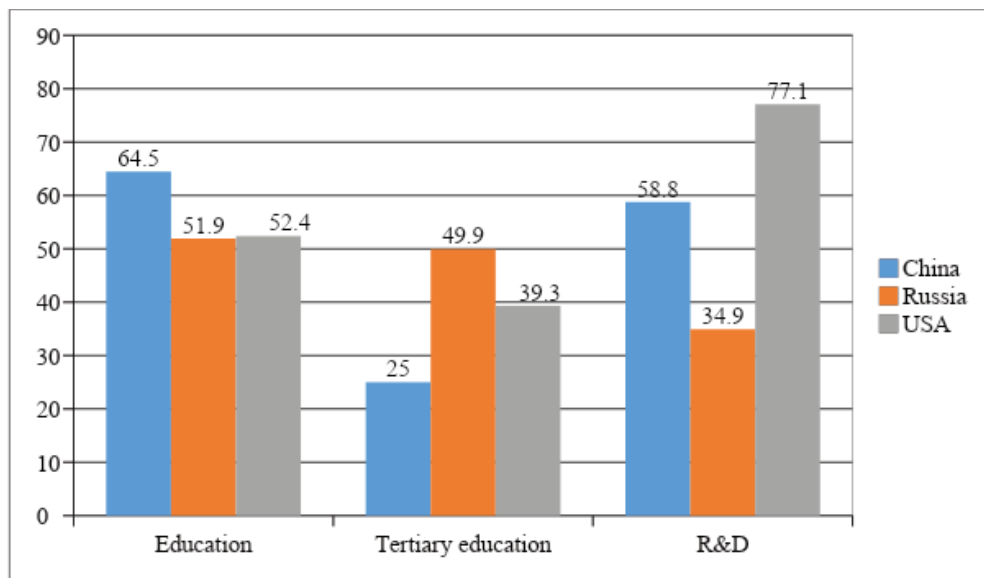
All this makes it possible to ramp up the country's potential, strengthen its position in the global market, develop the economy and strengthen the global leadership. In confirmation, the Russian research results have revealed the relationship between the level of managerial potential and the managerial level of leadership. The ability to make effective managerial decisions largely determines the level of professional competencies, so this issue needs to be given special attention in the modern education [17].

## 4 Discussion

The academic study of China's 'soft power' is a fairly popular area of research. Russian, Chinese and Western authors generally agree that today China has a well-shaped strategy to strengthen its 'soft power' and is purposefully working to roll it out to the states of the modern world. As the Chinese scholar Yang Fang writes, for example: '...the Chinese soft power is currently on the rise, primarily in Southeast Asia...'

At the same time, the authors allow mutual assessments of concepts and note, for example, like a Chinese researcher, that 'judging by the standard Nye rating, China can hardly lay claim to soft power resources' [18]. At the same time, J. Nye himself spoke about China's 'soft power' and endows it with this resource along with the United States and noting its effectiveness [18].

As part of the issue under consideration, it is of considerable interest to compare the indicators of innovative development in the area of Human Capital and Research when assessing the global innovation index (GII) for the countries of China, Russia and the United States in 2020 [19].



**Fig. 1.** Analysis of innovative development indicators in the area of Human Capital and Research.

By comparing the values of the integrated index Education, we can see that China has the best innovative positions and, accordingly, the best rating is 12, while Russia ranks 46th, and the USA rank 45th. In terms of Higher Education, China, with a rating of 83, lags far behind Russia, which ranks 17th. Finally, in the Research and Development area, China is in the middle position with a rating of 16 (USA – 2, Russia – 33).

Regarding such a component of China's 'soft power' as the research personnel training, it is worth noting that many researchers recognise its importance but shape a different contextual area and assessment of this area. Most of the works give a positive assessment of the educational processes in China [8, 14]. However, the level of postgraduate studies, which provides the most training for research personnel, is defined as an insignificant component of those processes. For example, V.V. Kuznetsova and O.A. Mashkina note the reduction in the share of graduate students (masters and doctors) in the total number of Chinese studying abroad [9] observed when compared with the early 2000s including those in Russia and the United States.

In assessing the work of think tanks, the prospects and priority of this area in the current policy of the Chinese leadership can be recorded. However, negative assessments can be observed in this context as well. So, A. Landelun writes about the problems in training the scientific and technical innovative personnel [20].

In general, it is worth noting that the discussion on training the research personnel in the PRC as an area of 'soft power' is segmental in nature and, as a rule, takes place in the context of addressing another issue (educational, expert, etc.).

## 5 Conclusion

In general, it should be noted that strengthening China's research personnel training is an important and relevant component of China's strategy to strengthen its 'soft power', primarily in the Asia-Pacific region. It includes a number of components. The first of these is the educational sector, within which the research personnel are trained on the basis of postgraduate programmes and allows involving foreign students to these programmes and, on the contrary, sending Chinese students to other states. In addition, training the personnel is associated with the activities of research institutes in large companies of the country, the promotion of think tanks and the PRC expert community as a whole. It allows the development of research activities in its direct connection with the current goals of Chinese policy, and ensures the participation of research personnel in the strategic planning of strengthening China's soft power.

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