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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

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Role of “Panda Diplomacy” in China’s Foreign Policy

Justyna Szczudlik

China’s “panda diplomacy”—loaning the animals to other countries—has become one of its key instruments to enhance its image. Chairman Xi Jinping eagerly uses the practice to alleviate tensions in bilateral ties and reduce partners’ concerns about his country’s activities. What is more, China utilises this instrument both to signal dissatisfaction with other countries’ policies and to highlight the importance of a given country to Chinese diplomacy, as well as to acquire capital and know-how through joint panda research.

Pandas are a symbol of China, since most of them live in the country. At the same time, they are treated by its leaders as a unique foreign policy tool. Under Xi, Chinese authorities have more often than under previous leader offered pandas to other states. China is not the only country to use animals in its diplomacy—Australia gives koalas, Sri Lanka offers elephants—but it seems to have developed this specific foreign policy instrument the best. Decisions about sending pandas are taken at a high level and often announced or implemented during Xi’s foreign visits and meetings. Transport of the pandas, often by chartered aircraft, is usually accompanied by media coverage. Chinese and host-country television broadcast the event and pandas with names associated with peace, development, security, or prosperity are welcomed and visited by high-level officials, even including heads of state or government.

Historical Background. Mao Zedong and China’s first prime minister, Zhou Enlai, are considered the creators of “panda diplomacy.” It dates to 1957–1959, when China began to give pandas to another country, in this case, to the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, the animals were sent to other countries, including North Korea. China at that time gave pandas to fellow socialist states. This corresponded to the Chinese foreign policy approach known as “leaning to one side,” which meant the USSR. In that sense, pandas were tools for confirming ideological proximity and strengthening relations within the socialist camp.

The change in the direction of “panda diplomacy” occurred after the outbreak of ideological disputes with the Soviet Union. Then, China based its foreign policy on, among other approaches, the “united front” strategy, which meant cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and European states against the Soviet Union. After President Richard Nixon’s historical visit to Beijing in 1972, China gave the U.S. two pandas—the first time the animals had been sent to a non-communist country. Japan was given the bears when bilateral ties were normalised. In 1973, pandas were sent to France, the first Western European country to establish diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China. In subsequent years, animals were given to the UK (1974), Portugal (1978), and Germany (1980, after Chancellor Helmut Schmidt’s visit to China).

Evolution of Goals and Implementation Modes. When, after assuming power as China’s leader, Deng Xiaoping in 1982 announced “an independent and peaceful foreign policy,” the goals and implementation of “panda diplomacy” changed as well. The old, mainly ideological goals, were replaced by more pragmatic aims. After the “opening and reform” policy was initiated, China needed sanguine external relations and foreign capital. The rules of “panda diplomacy” were modified. Instead of donating the animals, China began lending them according to a contract. The agreements are signed between the China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA) and a zoo in the host country. The loan period is usually 10–15 years.

Usually, China lends a couple of animals at an annual fee of about \$1 million. The host country is obliged not only to keep the animals but also to ensure the conditions of their care as specified by the Chinese side. Any cubs born while in the host-state belong to China and should return within two to four years after birth. This requirement is associated with the animals' declining population and China's efforts to protect them, which requires financial resources. The loaned animals also offer the opportunity for joint research on the species.

The loan programme does not extend to Taiwan because, the Chinese authorities argue, it is only possible between states. In 2008, China gave Taiwan two pandas. Previous attempts to do so in 2001 and 2005 were rebuffed when the pro-independence Taiwanese governments of the time did not accept the gifts. In 2008, Kuomintang, a nationalist party that has called for improved relations with the mainland, took power in Taiwan. Even though the pandas were accepted this time, a sign of China's political motivations behind the gift was seen in their names, which meant "unification," sparking protests in Taiwan.

"Panda Diplomacy" under Xi. Since assuming office in 2013, Xi has loaned pandas to Canada, Malaysia, Belgium, South Korea, and Germany. This year, agreements were concluded with Finland and Denmark. Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, lent pandas to eight countries during his 10-year tenure.

China uses "panda diplomacy" to emphasise the importance of a given state in Chinese foreign policy. One example is Malaysia, which received pandas in 2014 on the 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the countries. Malaysia is one of China's major allies in Asia and has a large Chinese minority (about 25% of its population). The Malaysian authorities' disputes with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea are not high on their agenda. Another example is Belgium, which received pandas during Xi's visit to Brussels in 2014. Although the animals were sent to a Belgian zoo, Xi's visit had an EU aspect—it was the first time a PRC chairman has visited EU institutions. As a follow-up to this visit, China published a new document about its policy towards the EU. In July 2017, during Xi's visit to Berlin, China handed pandas to Germany. The bears also are loaned to countries with which China has signed significant economic contracts.

The German example shows that "panda diplomacy" is used to mitigate tensions in bilateral relations. China-Germany ties deteriorated in 2016 after Chinese attempts to take over German high-tech companies. Germany along with other states tried to set up a pan-European investment-screening mechanism or institutions to block foreign investments in the EU.¹ Another example is South Korea, which received pandas in 2014 as a symbol of the improvement in ties under new President Park Geun-hye. This gesture might be more broadly seen as an attempt to curry favour with South Korean authorities and the public in the context of the U.S. "pivot" to Asia.

China sometimes uses "panda diplomacy" to express dissatisfaction with the policy of another country. Malaysia again serves as an example here. It received its pandas later than planned because China, under public pressure, was displeased with the investigation of a Malaysian airlines aircraft that disappeared in March 2014. Most passengers on flight MH370 to Beijing were Chinese. Some countries like India have not received pandas, and while viewed as important, they are also difficult partners for China.

"Panda diplomacy" also indirectly indicates a country perceived by the Chinese as prosperous and having scientific and research potential. This is why Finland, where pandas will be sent at the end of 2017, and Denmark, which signed an agreement during its prime minister's visit to China in May, are considered important.

Conclusions. "Panda diplomacy" is part of China's strategy to use soft tools in foreign policy. This instrument is significant given that the global panda population is small—only about 1,800 animals live in the wild and 300 in zoos. In its decisions about where to lend pandas, China signals the rank of its relations with a particular state. Undoubtedly, this is a gesture to reach long-term political and economic goals in bilateral relations. At the same time, China uses pandas to create an image of a peace-loving, environmentally friendly country that protects its natural heritage. China also highlights the loans as a win-win for it and the host country. Although host countries must bear rather high costs related to panda research and protection, the tremendous popularity of these animals means the zoos can also count on significant income. It is presumed "panda diplomacy" and other soft-power-related actions will be used extensively and with more significance with China's greater international activity, which often is viewed with mistrust.

¹ M. Przychodniak, "China's Plans to Strengthen Relations with Germany," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 65 (1005), 5 July 2017, www.pism.pl.