A Relational Approach to Public Diplomacy in a Multipolar World: 
Understanding the U.S. – China—Russia Relationship 
Concerning Libya through the People’s Daily Newspaper 

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The role of public diplomacy in international relations changed significantly at the end of the Cold War. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States and Russia cut their public diplomacy budgets significantly. China, on the other hand, increased its public diplomacy spending to craft a more nuanced strategy that included using museum exhibits and building Chinese-language schools all over the world (Kurlantzick, 2006). In 2005, Russia also introduced an extensive public diplomacy campaign to improve its image abroad by promoting Russian culture to non-Russians, launching international broadcasting network, opening up the Kremlin, and promoting Russian language (Feklyukina, 2008). By engaging in comprehensive and elaborate public diplomacy campaigns, both Russia and China ultimately seek to boost their soft power to create and maintain economic ties, foster good relations with international organizations, encourage understanding, and improve their images abroad.

While both Russia and the United States still invest heavily in international broadcasting, a public diplomacy tool that was effective in a bipolar world of the Cold War, such an approach is no longer sufficient. In fact, scholars and practitioners argue that in a modern multipolar world a different approach to public diplomacy is needed, the one that is based on relationship building and shared values created through mass and interpersonal communication. Seib (2009) and Feklyukina (2008) have suggested that the reason behind the limited success of Russian and American public diplomacy efforts is the failure to acknowledge the existence of the multipolar world with new rising powers such as China.
Since the late 1980s, policy changes in China have gradually transformed the economic system of the country. In 2010, China has become the second largest economy in the world, the largest source of surplus labor, and the largest recipient of FDI (foreign direct investment) (Goldstein, 2005). China increasingly exerts a quiet influence in international affairs and its relationship with the U.S and Russia has a far-reaching impact on the global peace and development.

China’s growing economic and military power is a principle cause of change in the Asia region. As the economic power of China expands, Chinese foreign policy has also been gradually adjusting to its new role in the current international system. China actively seeks to participate in international institutions and international affairs, especially in the reformation of the current international financial system. To build an international image of China, its government has been investing billions of dollars in Africa and Asia to pump up its soft power, and at the same time trying to ease international fears about its rising power.

The fear of rising Chinese power is often discussed by scholars and politicians in connection to its relationship with Russia – a strategic partnership that has major ramifications for the Eurasian balance of power and for American interests in the region (Cohen, 2001). While China and Russia enjoyed over 60 years of diplomatic relations, new public diplomacy efforts have created an unprecedented strategic cooperation between two countries. This partnership exists despite their disputes over adjacent territories and was significantly accelerated by unilateral actions of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 (Cohen, 2001; Shambaugh, 2005). Furthermore, while Russia and China heavily invest in their international image, outsourcing many tactics to U.S. public relations firms, the United States’ public diplomacy efforts are mostly focused on the Middle East and the war on terror. This situation creates an environment
in which Russian and Chinese image cultivation efforts are likely to succeed. However, image cultivation is a short-term oriented communication process that cannot withstand political shake-ups. In order for public diplomacy to have a long-term effect is must be based on relationship building.

The purpose of this paper is to examine one small part of the performance of public diplomacy in a multipolar world. The research team, comprised of members from China, Russia and United States, proposes an alternative framework for theorizing about the role of public relations and public diplomacy in international relations. A review of the public relations literature that addresses public diplomacy shows that the practice often involves one-way communication whereby one nation uses image cultivation to build a favorable image with publics who live in another country. While this is indeed a common practice of public diplomacy, this paper argues that public diplomacy is a relationship building function that ultimately will create more commonalities among nations. When the focus is on creating shared values then public relations/public diplomacy practice and theory can transcend the limitations of image cultivation.

Most public diplomacy research studies dyads of national relationships. Scholars have traditionally examined the interactions and programs from one nation directed toward another nation (Anderson, 2003; Zhang, 2006). Yet, in the 21st century, as economic and political situations evolve, the study of national dyads may miss the rich interplay of multiple relationships influencing public diplomacy. This paper precedes from the idea that the China-U.S. relationship involves, whether explicitly or implicitly, Russia. Any progress toward understanding the China-U.S. relationship must consider their individual historic and current relationships with Russia. In English, there is an expression, two is company, three is a crowd. In
21st century public diplomacy, three may be emerging as the foundational relationship and thus a triangle of interactions should drive public relations theory development into public diplomacy.

To explore this multipolar public diplomacy relationship, the first section reviews the literature exploring public diplomacy in the public relations literature. The second section provides a brief discussion of current relationships among China, Russia and the United States. Building on the case of 2011 Libyan conflict as an event that prompted all three nations to publicly position themselves in response to the crisis, the third section explores how the People’s Daily newspaper portrayed the interplay of relationships between China, Russia and the United States in the Libyan crisis. The People’s Daily provides insight into how member of the public diplomacy triangle, China, viewed not only its position in the resolving the crisis but how it viewed the other two nations’ positions in relation to its own. The language used in newspaper accounts and the portrayal of Chinese official responses is treated as a text of public diplomacy. The method for this study is semantic network analysis. It allowed the research team to look for linguistic relationships constructed by the People’s Daily newspaper to position China as a peaceful, rising power in the region and position China in relation to the US and Russia. The last section of the paper reflects on the findings of the study and identifies next steps in formulating a relational approach to public diplomacy in a multipolar world.

**Public Diplomacy and Public Relations**

The term public diplomacy has been explored in the Communication literature for over 20 years and it is a natural fit to be studied within the theoretical domain of international public relations. There are two main themes in the literature that address public relations and public diplomacy. The first theme is premised on the idea that governments attempt to cultivate a certain image of their nation for international publics and that public relations helps to build and
promote that image. The second theme of public diplomacy is guided by the Excellence theory of public relations (Grunig, 1992). Each theme and a few key articles that illustrate the line research will be briefly reviewed below. The section concludes with a discussion of relationship management, soft power and balance in international public diplomacy as alternative ways to understand new ways of thinking about public relations and public diplomacy.

**Public Diplomacy as Mediated Image Cultivation**

Understanding public diplomacy as image cultivation first requires an understanding about how people come to know about other nations. Kenneth Boulding’s book, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, explicates the power of the image in how humans make meaning. Boulding suggests images, what he calls subjective knowledge, govern individual and societal behavior. How people act is largely dependent on the images that they have in their minds. Images come from a variety of message sources including family, friends, experiences, and the media. Messages have meaning when they produce some type of change in the individual’s image.

What happens when a message is directed toward an image? Boulding (1956) argues that one of three things can happen. First, the message can produce no change on the current image. The second thing that can happen is that the message provides additional information to the existing image. Third, in rare cases, some messages can encourage revolutionary change in a person’s image. Images, however, are fairly resistant to change.

Based on Boulding’s (1956) conception of the image all societies have a stock of images, created by language and discourse, that come to represent organizations and nation-states. “The basic bond of any society, culture, subculture, or organization is a ‘public image’” (Boulding, 1956, p. 64). Citizens “carry around” particular images (or conceptions) of their own nation in
relations to other nations. For instance, Canadians’ image of their country in often in relation to
the United States (Hall, 2000). Welch and Shevchenko (2010) reported that the image of the
United States in international relations is similar to a notion of a reference group, to which
images of other countries are compared. Chinese, for example, compare their achievements to
those of Japan, the United States, and Russia; while Russians judge their accomplishments
relative to those of the United States (Welch & Shevchenko, 2010). These individually held
images embody specific values and ideologies that provide people with interpretative
frameworks. People in one nation make attributions about those living in other nations even
when they have not visited a particular country. When individuals discuss their personal images
of how they see the world with others, they contribute to the creation of public images.

According to Boulding, public images of nation-states emanate from a “universe of
discourse” (Boulding, 1956, p. 15). Nations throughout history have consciously attempted to
alter national images for both domestic and international audiences. Images are important
because it is through these personal images of “other” nations and of their own nation that people
make judgments about events in far away places (Kunczik, 1990). Personal experience and
mediated messages provide the backbone of images of other nations. Images are especially
powerful when someone has not visited a nation. Media images then provide the basic images for
individuals and nations to judge the actions and accomplishments of other countries. Media
images constructed by state owned media provide insight into how a government wants to be
viewed in relation to other national actors.

Public Diplomacy within the Excellence Theory of Public Relations

A second line of research attempts to link J. E. Grunig’s Excellence theory of public
relations with public diplomacy. Signitzer and Coombs (1992) discussed how public diplomacy
and public relations share similar assumptions. Using Peisert’s four models of cultural communication, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) showed convergence between the goals of diplomacy and the goals of public relations. Signitzer and Coombs also argued that both communication functions share similar methodologies. L’Etang (1998) also showed, albeit from a critical perspective, that the fields of diplomacy and asymmetric/symmetric public relations are linked both historically and theoretically together.

Yun (2006) tested the applicability of the Excellence Study to see if public relations theories were transferable to public diplomacy practices. Yun’s study examined the theoretical fit of public diplomacy and Excellence theory. Using data from public diplomacy practices collected from a sample of 113 embassies in Washington, DC, Yun showed that public relations and public diplomacy theory and practice are indeed compatible.

Signitzer and Wasmer (2006) revisited the idea of symmetry in public diplomacy based on the 1992 Excellence study. The authors, agreeing with L’Etang, suggested that no single framework is best to capture the complex nature and ethics of influencing publics in other nations. For Signitzer and Coombs (1992), Yun (2006), and Signitzer and Wasmer (2006), public diplomacy can be enacted in a symmetrical process.

What is missing from both the image cultivation and the symmetrical theory is a recognition of the multiple, complex, ongoing relationships that have become the reality of 21st century public diplomacy. A more appropriate theoretical framework might be the relationship building literature in public relations.

**Relationship Building as a Framework for Public Diplomacy**

Twenty years ago, Ferguson (1986) proposed that public relations should be studied and practiced as a relationship management function. Her conference paper, although never
published, has become the foundation for one of the most recent theoretical shifts in public relations research. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) explicated the concept of relationships from a variety of research literatures. Broom and the students in his graduate seminar tied the concept back to interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, inter-organizational research (IOR), and systems theory. Broom et al. identified the antecedents, concepts, and consequences of organization–public relationships. At the heart of this article is the conceptualization of ways to study relationships in public relations.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000) and Ledingham (2003, 2006) extended Broom et al.’s work by quantifying various relationships and relationship outcomes. Ledingham and Bruning’s (2000) edited book, Public relationships as relationship management, featured some of the most important researchers in public relations. Over the past 13 years Ledingham, Bruning and others have measured various parts of “relationships” and have continued to refine relationship management theory. We believe that relationship management theory provides one key to understanding the multipolar relationships among nations in post cold war public diplomacy efforts.

Public diplomacy has been traditionally regarded as a powerful weapon in the bipolar world of the Cold War. Both the Soviet Bloc and the West were extensively engaged in public diplomacy activities to achieve their political goals (Staar, 1986). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the need and importance of public diplomacy for peaceful conflict resolution became almost obsolete. The interest toward public diplomacy has been revived after the tragedy of 9/11 and growing terrorist threats around the globe. The declared war on terrorism became a new goal for American public diplomacy (Dizard, 2004). However, the traditional tools of public diplomacy utilized during the Cold War were no longer sufficient in a globalized and multipolar
world. Furthermore, new technology and the Internet necessitated a closer look at the communication part of public diplomacy, retraction from one-way communication, and consideration of the alternative ways of conducting public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008). The limited success of American public diplomacy initiatives in the Muslim world may be attributed to the failure of the U.S. to acknowledge the existence of a multipolar world with several rising powers.

Among the first scholars to propose an alternative approach to public diplomacy were Taylor (2009), who proposed a relational approach to public diplomacy, and Fitzpatrick (2007) who suggested that application of such public relations theories as relationship management to public diplomacy could facilitate its theory building. Both scholars argued that relationship building rather than image cultivation must be the focus of public diplomacy. Indeed, relationship building can be not only an important outcome of public diplomacy activities but also an important instrument in achieving political goals in multipolar world. Foreign governments invest time and resources to build relationship with other nations’ people and governments. Specifically, using public relations and public diplomacy tools such relationships with other nations can balance out pressures from powerful countries such as the United States and its unilateral decisions (e.g. war in Iraq). Looking at the complex relationship between China, the United States and Russia, this paper argues that to achieve balance of power (and to avoid hegemonic rule) it is important to rely on public diplomacy as a tool of soft balancing.

**Balance of Power and Soft Balancing**

Balance of power refers to the situation in international relations when there is parity or stability between competing forces (Fry, Goldstein & Langhorn, 2004). In ideal world, balance of power prevents any one nation from becoming sufficiently strong to enforce its will upon the rest (Waltz, 1979). At the end of the Cold War, bipolar world scholars and politicians argued
about the new world order and what it should be: a hegemony or multipolarity (Ikenberry, 2001). However, the U.S. primacy was defined in the twenty first century, which rested on the consideration that other states should cooperate with the United States in their global governance (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). To achieve this, the U.S. needed the support of other powerful states such as Russia and China. However, both Russia and China, who enjoyed impressive economic and political growth in the last decade, had a different vision.

According to Pape (2005), when the balance of power cannot be achieved in a pure form, particularly when the world has one military and economic superpower, rising powers and other nations can resort to “soft balancing”. In this case, soft balancing refers to “actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies” (Pape, 2005, p. 10). These actions may include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, or economic strengthening. According to Pape (2005), soft balancing has been a prominent feature of the post-Cold War world. For example, soft balancing has been a feature of international opposition to the United States against the war in Iraq. Furthermore, Pape (2005) argued that the Bush administration’s national security strategy of aggressive unilateralism is the principle cause of soft balancing existence. Pape (2005) suggested that soft balancing is an important strategy for what he called “second-ranked powers” or countries whose economic and political advancement put them into the category of rising powers. Russia and China are such examples.

Welch and Shevchenko (2010) argued that because Russia and China have not been happy with the U.S. primacy in the world order, they attempt to redefine it and are motivated by a consistent objective to restore both countries’ great power status. Therefore, Russia and China are called status seekers and strive to counterbalance U.S. global influence. According to Welch
and Shevchenko (2010), both Russia and China will be more willing to cooperate with the United States if their unique status will be recognized. The status-seeking actions are often symbolic and have a goal of altering one’s perception. Hosting the Olympic Games by China in 2008 and Russia in 2014 is an example of such symbolic actions that arguably serve as an indicator of their rising global power.

The status-seeking actions can also take the form of soft balancing against the U.S. primacy. According to the logic of soft balancing, China and Russia (along with other rising powers, e.g. India, Brazil) need to band together in order to solve the coordination problems they face in dealing with the expansionist unipolar U.S. (Pape, 2005). The need, when convenient to both Russia and China’s individual goals to cooperate may press the US into different behaviours. However, for successful and effective soft balancing the lesser major powers need to solve first their collective action problem. In other words, they need to agree on goals and strategies. For example, China could increase economic and political ties with Russia, or Russia could continue supporting the nuclear program in Iran, negating any U.S. efforts in this area (Pape, 2005). Although soft balancing has nothing to do with military power, it often has an indirect effect on military prospects of competing states.

One of the tools of soft balancing can be building relationships with other rising powers to counteract the U.S. dominance. Cooperation between Russia and China in important matters can cause a change in the existing world order. A good example is the situation with Libya and divided UN Security Council Resolution on it. In fact, the Russia’s and China’s position on the issue already created grounds for multi-polarity (Kipp, 2011). By examining the positions of Russia, China, and the United States on the crisis in Libya, one can examine the soft balancing in actions of status seeking countries such as China and Russia.
The Multipolar Relationships among China-US-Russia

To understand a relationship building function of public diplomacy in soft balancing, this section describes and analyzes the intricate web of hostility and cooperation between China and the U.S., China and Russia, and Russia and the U.S. This triangulate relationship was tested during the unrest in Libya and demonstrated that China and Russia may have a stronger relationship because they opposed the United States and other Western nations in the ratification of UN Security Council Resolution regarding Libya.

China-U.S. Relationship

In 1978, China and the U.S. established an official diplomatic relationship. Chinese presidential visits in 1985 and 1997 opened up a new era in the Sino-U.S. relationship. However, in 1999, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade severely damaged the bilateral relationship again. This bombing triggered nationwide protests in China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People’s Republic of China, 2010). During George W. Bush’s first term the relations between U.S. and China steadily improved. However, during his second term frictions between Washington and Beijing started to increase (Dumbaugh, 2006). In 2011, President Hu Jingtao visited the United States to promote bilateral relationship and long-term cooperation. Yet, the Sino-American relationship can still be described as complex and multi-faceted.

In the post-Cold War era, security concerns, trade and human rights issues are major challenges for Sino-American relationship. In terms of security, Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue that can potentially lead to a conflict (Friedberg, 2005). China’s expanding military budget also concerns Washington. In addition, the official disputes over the trade balance and currency values of RMB raise concerns on both sides. Finally, the Chinese government is unhappy with the Washington’s accusations of human rights violations in China;
Beijing classifies this topic as a domestic issue not open to international discussion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People’s Republic of China, 2010). A general trend of a rising China causes fear and anxiety in the U.S., while many Chinese are also concerned with the U.S. hindering China’s economic and political progress (Lampton, 2001).

At the same time, China and the U.S. are closely bonded by mutual interests. On the one hand, China is the U.S.’s second-largest trading partner, third-largest export market and the biggest source of imports. China owns a total amount of $900 billion of U.S. Treasury securities, which makes China the largest foreign holder of U.S. debt (Morrison, 2010). The U.S. also needs China as an engine of economic growth. A growing China would provide markets for American technology, goods and capital. On the other hand, China needs technology, capital, markets and a peaceful international environment to continue its current pace of growth. To achieve this goal, China needs to cooperate with the U.S. while modifying aspects of the current international economic system (Lampton, 2001).

Many observers argue that the most significant bilateral international relationship in the decades to come is the one between China and the U.S. (Friedberg, 2005). A stable cooperation between the U.S. and China could provide sustainable worldwide economic growth, peaceful resolutions of longstanding regional disputes and management of global problems such as terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Yet, when considering the China-U.S. relationship, they are not sitting at a table for two.

**U.S. – Russia Relationship**

The United States and Russia have a long history of diplomatic relations. Throughout its history, the cooperation between these countries has been developing with different degrees of success (Pifer, 2009). The two countries collaborated during the WWII, but later engaged in a
long and exhausting Cold War. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia became its largest and strongest successor. The first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin, opened doors to the West and attempted to build a fruitful relationship with the United States (Pifer, 2009). Furthermore, Russia became an invaluable ally to the United States in the war on terror, but was disappointed with the U.S. decision to build a missile defense system in Eastern Europe (Lucas, 2008). The relationship between Russia and the United States further was complicated by continuous attempts to extend NATO up to Russian borders and offer membership to Russia’s former allies, Ukraine and Georgia (Lucas, 2008).

In 2009, President Obama launched the so-called reset on U.S.-Russia relations. Furthermore, the reset facilitated increased trade and investment as well as created a favorable public opinion toward each country. Despite all of the achievements in U.S.-Russia relations, American unilateralism remains one of the biggest issues. Particularly, America’s unilateral decisions to invade Iraq, to nominate Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership and to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya, all caused a lost of trust between two countries. According to Haas (2002), American unilateralism provoked the formation of counter alliances. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has on many occasions implied that if other countries of the West do not correct the American tendency toward unilateralism, then Russia and other rising powers will seek allies in a different direction. One such direction for Russia is to collaborate with its Eastern neighbour – China.

**China-Russia Relationship**

Just as Russia feels ignored and isolated by American unilateralism, China shares similar sentiments about the current world order. The rising economic and political power of China makes China an important ally not only for Russia but also for the United States. The bilateral
relationship between China and Russia reached its apex in the Cold War era. The close Sino-Soviet relationship split in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1990s, Russian president Boris Yeltsin adopted pro-western policies while eagerly seeking a balance between the West and alignment with China. In the post-Cold War world the China-Russia relationship improved significantly (Hitt et al., 2004). In 1998, China, Russia and India formed a strategic Asian triangle.

When Putin assumed office in 1999, China and Russia reached a settlement for their shared 4,300 kilometre border. Trade between the two nations also increased. Both sides support the non-interference with domestic politics, specifically with regards to Taiwan and Chechnya. China supports Russia’s effort to military control Chechnya, while Russia firmly backs China’s position on Taiwan. China and Russia became allies on the issues of Iran and Iraq and collaborated in their efforts to limit the U.S. influence in Central Asia. In 2001, China and Russia signed the Treaty of Good-Neighbourlines, Friendship and Cooperation (Wishnick, 2001). This treaty put the Sino-Russian relationship at a new level and extended their collaborations. The treaty also specifies that the Siberian pipeline will be built from Russia’s Nakhodka to China’s Daqing. The 2,400 kilometre pipeline will transport millions of tons of oil to China, fuelling China’s economic development.

Although the political collaboration between China and Russia has gradually became closer, their economic relations remained relatively stagnated. Russia placed a strict visa policy on Chinese immigrants, which also halted the development of bilateral trade. Trade between the two countries tends to focus on natural resources, aircrafts, energy and military equipment.

The Sino-Russian relationship has achieved significant improvements over the years. There are, however, unresolved issues to the long-term development of this bilateral relationship.
The lagging economic cooperation created tension on both sides. Further, the Chinese migration to the Russian Far East, described by Russian media as “quiet expansion” also inflamed social tension in the area (Wishnick, 2001). Chinese and Russian interests also diverge on issues such as conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, Japan’s role in Asia, and relationships with Central Asia.

In their calculation of the post-Cold War foreign policy, China and Russia developed their relationship with the U.S. in mind. The partnership between China and Russia is a collaborated response to the U.S. hegemony. China’s and Russia’s interests coincide on a number of issues related to U.S. foreign policy. Over the years, American policies on national missile defense (NMD), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, and Kosovo intervention drew China and Russia together and pushed the two countries into a strategic partnership and military cooperation (Wishnick, 2001). The two countries embarked on their joint efforts to shape a more inclusive multipolar international system. Some commentators argued that China, Russia and U.S. form a strategic triangle that emphasizes the balance of power (Dittmer, 2000). This triangle exerts considerable influence on the international system and will continue to be an important part of the geopolitical landscape in the 21st century. The uprising in Libya during Spring 2011 provides a relevant case study to explore how, and if, a relational triangular model of public diplomacy may be evolving.

**A Test to the China-U.S.-Russia Relationship: 2011 Libya’s Uprising**

There are many ways to potentially examine the three-way relationship among China, Russia and the U.S. The research team decided to test one small part of the relationship from a Chinese perspective. This topic would be the most valuable to the International conference “The Future of U.S.-Chinese Media Communication and Public Diplomacy in a Post-Crisis World”
attendees and it allowed the research team to use a rare database (China Core Newspapers Full-Text Database) now available through university libraries.

The situation in Libya during spring 2011 provided an excellent opportunity to study how the three countries engaged in public diplomacy and media relations. China and Russia opposed any international intervention in Libya and the United States participated as a member of the NATO-led coalition supporting the rebels.

Libya is an appropriate case study because it had enacted different relationships with China, Russia and the U.S. The relationship between Russia and Libya has a long history. Russia has a web of interests in Libya, starting from arms sales to the investments in oil industry (Kipp, 2011). For example, in 2010, Russia and Libya signed a $1.8 billion arms deal that included 20 fighter jets and air defense system (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 1, 2011). In addition, The Moscow Times (February 22, 2011) reported that early this year Gazprom, the Russian oil and gas giant, acquired 33 percent of the Italian gas company Eni’s share of Libya's “Elephant oil and gas production field” for $179 million. However, the outbreak of civil war in Libya jeopardized Russia’s profits and forced Gazprom to evacuate technicians from high-profile investment projects in Libya, including railroad specialists and representatives of Gazprom (Kipp, 2011). Furthermore, on April 7, Gazprom announced that it was suspending indefinitely its projects in Libya because of the continued instability in the country (Kommersant, April 7, 2011).

It came as no surprise when Russia, along with China, abstained during the vote on UN Security Council Resolution. These two powers were joined by Brazil, India and Germany in their abstention. Domestically, Russia had a mixed reaction to the situation in Libya. President Dmitry Medvedev responded to the action by urging the international community to cooperate in
ending the conflict but stated: “We will not participate in any of the no-fly zone operations [in Libya], we will not send any troops, if, God forbid, this operation goes on the ground, which I cannot rule out.” He went further and put responsibility for the tragedy in Libya on the shoulders of the Gaddafi government (RIA Novosti, March 21, 2011). However, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was not positive in his response to the no-fly zone. Speaking at the Votkinsk missile production facility, he characterized the Western military intervention as “deficient” and smacking of “a medieval call to crusade” (RIA Novosti, March 22, 2011).

According to Kipp (2011), the situation in Libya and “the Great Arab Revolution” from Moscow’s perspective confirmed the end of the unipolar international order and the emergence of multi-polarity. As a result of continuing unrest in Libya, Russia has offered itself as a mediator in the conflict. Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergei Lavrov, told the media that Russia would not support a new Security Council resolution, because it would lead to further escalation of the civil war and further interference from the outside in Libya. However, Moscow would support a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire, a stop to all violence, and for the two Libyan sides to start negotiations immediately (Socor, 2011).

China made similar diplomatic moves. Being a new member of the U.N. Security Council it did not use its veto right against the “no-fly zone” resolution. It was reported that China had held discussions with representatives from both sides and made diplomatic calls to negotiate the end to the fighting.

During the summer of 2011, armed conflict in Libya continued. The rebels lost ground and then with NATO support, gained ground. The battle lines moved back and forth. The rebels formed a group, the National Transitional Council (NTC), and set up a parallel government in areas that they controlled. Gaddafi vowed to never leave Libya. In June, 30 nations formed the
Libya Contact Group. The Contact Group on Libya included members of NATO, the European Union and the Arab League. Russia and China refused to participate and both called for an end to the NATO bombings that supported the NTC. The Contact Group met in Istanbul in mid July 2011 and agreed to recognize the NTC as the legitimate representatives of the people of Libya.

**Research Questions**

This paper emphasizes a relational approach to public diplomacy, and highlights a multi-polar perspective. The multi-polar perspective argues that to understand China’s public diplomacy, it is important to examine how China understands and interprets international relations, especially the role of other superpowers such as the U.S. and Russia. Mass media is an efficient choice when it comes to influence public attitudes and opinions. This case study examines how Chinese government used its media outlet, the *People’s Daily*, for image building and subtle conveying the essence of China’s public diplomacy strategy. The research team treated the *People’s Daily* as a window to understand how one member of the triangle (China) viewed its role in the Libyan crisis and how it viewed itself in relation to the other nations. Semantic network analysis allowed the research team to make sense of how actors discuss the world according to their worldviews and beliefs (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How did the *People’s Daily* cover the relationship of major countries and organizations involved in the Libyan conflict?

This paper seeks to understand public diplomacy from a relational approach. By understanding how one nation linguistically positions its stance on the world stage, especially in a crisis, we can gain insight into its motivations underlying public diplomacy efforts. Ego-network analysis in semantic network analysis helps to reveal what words tend to co-occur with
focal words (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010). This method helps to map a network of words within which the focal word is most likely to appear together or close by.

RQ2: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: China?

RQ3: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: USA?

RQ4: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: Russia?

Finally, it is useful to examine how the three ego-networks (China, USA and Russia) are connected within this structure. In other words, attention should be directed to understanding how the three ego-networks link together and what words help to connect the three networks. Patterns will emerge that tell a deeper story about perceived relationships in the resolution of the Libyan crisis. Will the words connect to similar words or do they share a significant amount of overlap? Therefore, the last proposed question is:

RQ5: How do the three ego-networks connect together?

Method of the Study

Semantic Network Analysis

Semantic network analysis helps to illustrate positions and principles shared among different perspectives, documents and actors. The idea is that when nation states address issues that are of international interest, different public diplomacy strategies may affect governments’ use of language and framing strategies. For countries such as China, where some media such as the People’s Daily are directly controlled by the ruling political party, the government’s position may be directly reflected in the news coverage. Even in countries such as the U.S., where there is greater diversity in terms of international news, mainstream news agencies often base news stories on the government’s press releases or official statements (Entman, 2004).
The ultimate study of the three-part public diplomacy triangle should include an analysis of the state or dominant media outlets in each of the three countries. This would create a robust model of public diplomacy and allow for the testing of hypotheses. However, this paper served as a pilot project and studied how the Chinese mainstream news agency covered the Libyan crisis. The *People’s Daily* was chosen because it is considered a “mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee” (Huang, 2003, p. 449), and is directly controlled by the CCP. The *People’s Daily* directly reports to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The People’s Daily has over 70 agencies around the world. Besides publishing domestically, the *People’s Daily* also circulates in over 80 countries and regions (*People’s Daily*, 2011). The *People’s Daily* is an important channel for China’s public diplomacy because it actively initiates public diplomacy programs. In recent years, the *People’s Daily* organized international conferences and exchange programs such as “China-Japan Culture Study Conference”, “China and East Asian Communication and Media Exchange Conference”, and “China, South Korea and Japan Media Conference”. Since 2000, the *People’s Daily* annually initiates exchange programs with media practitioners from over 50 countries (*People’s Daily*, 2011).

**Sample**

The search function of the China Core Newspapers Full-Text Database was used to download the sample. The key words: Libya (Libya in Chinese) was used. The search was restricted within the period from January 1, 2011 to May 30, 2011. The search results indicate that there was no coverage about Libya in January 2011. Overall, Between February 2011 and May 2011, there were a total of 72 articles about Libya in *People’s Daily*. There were 20 articles during February, 40 articles during March, 8 articles during April, and 3 articles in May 2011. A preliminary examination of these articles detected four major themes: 1) How the Chinese
government and Chinese army helped Chinese workers evacuate from Libya; 2) Analysis of international politics and interests in Libya; 3) Statements of Chinese government officials in the Libya crisis; and 4) Description of situation in Libya (See Table 1). Among the four themes, themes 2 and 3 deal with China’s position in this international crisis, and shed important insights on the understanding of China’s public diplomacy. Therefore, the 33 articles that fell into themes 2 and 3 were further analyzed. To focus on China’s description of its relationship with the U.S. and Russia, a further examination of the 33 articles helped to identify 17 articles focusing on the U.S. policy and two articles discussing the reaction of Russia to the crisis.

Research Procedures

In this study, semantic network analysis is applied to examine the co-occurrences of certain words. When there is a strong link among words, their chance of co-occurrence rises (the value range from zero on up) (Danowski, 1993). Given the multilanguage context of the current study, following Kwon et al. (2009), this study utilized ZIPF software (Elbirt, 2006) for analysis. ZIPF bases its algorithm on the co-occurrence model and can adapt to a multilingual context. Of the two matrixes produced by ZIPF, this study used the binary matrix because this matrix is insensitive to co-occurrence results caused by grammatically structural differences between languages.

The first step in this research design was to adjust the original texts for analysis. The revision included several steps. First, date, number, suffix, pronoun, conjunction and connectives were removed from the texts, thus only leaving nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Second, for languages that have tense and gender, different tense and gender of the same word are replaced by the present tense and the original form of the word. In addition, different expressions of the same words are unified. For example, country, nation and state are regarded as the same words.
Fourth, the title and article number are removed. Finally, the texts were saved as text using UTF-8 unicode format to be fed into ZIPF (See Table 2).

In the second step texts are processed by ZIPF to create the co-occurrence matrices. The created matrices were then run through UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) to create visualization of the networks of words and calculate the centralities of each word. This method demonstrates which words are linked and detects relationships amongst words and topics.

**Results and Discussion**

RQ1 inquired about the ways in which the *People’s Daily* covered the relationships of the major countries and organizations involved in the Libya issue. After running the analysis through ZIPF, the words were listed according to their frequency. The total number of distinctive words analyzed was 1043. Among these words, Libya (166 times), U.S. (106 times), Muammar Gaddafi (58 times), European Union (43 times), and nations (23 times) were the five most frequently used words.

The relationships among countries can be seen through the semantic structure of the text. The analysis shows that Libya is clearly at the centre of attention of many countries. China is one of these countries solely linked with Libya (see Graph 1). Overall, the structure suggests that China is one of the many countries that expressed concerns over the Libya issue, while the United States is a centre that closely connected with European countries and the Middle East. Finally, Russia is portrayed as a country that has many interests in the regions of Middle East and North Africa.

It appears that media coverage of the Libyan conflict was frequently discussed in relation to China, Russia, U.S., as well as Romania, South Korea, Czech Republic, Italy, Australia, and Germany. Notably, China holds a relatively isolated place within the network, being linked
directly only to Libya. Discussions of Russia, on the other hand, are often linked to Middle East, North African countries, Libya, and NATO. Such semantic network makes intuitive sense, as Russia has broader interests and concerns in the situation with Libya. Aside from wide economic and political interests in the region, Russia takes an issue with the expansion of NATO and appropriateness of its role in the Libyan conflict. The fact that the UN did not appear on the network as one of the most frequent words in the semantic structure suggests that the conflict was mostly discussed in relation to NATO members, which is led by the U.S.

When looking at the position of the United States in this semantic network, one can see that U.S. is most often linked to Iraq, Israel, Russia and NATO, without any direct connection to China. When combined with the text, the connection between Russia, the U.S. and NATO becomes clearer through Russia criticizing U.S. and NATO military action.

It is interesting to point out that in this network China does not play an important role. Russia is portrayed as a country that has many interests in the regions of Middle East and North Africa. China is only one of many countries that expressed concerns over the Libyan conflict. In general, China appears to be missing from the general discussion of the conflict in Libya while Russia and the U.S. appear to be leading the different positions on Libyan conflict. The People’s Daily did not devote significant space placing China in the middle of rhetorical battle over U.S.-led NATO intervention in Libya. Yet, China has interests.

To learn more about how the People’s Daily positioned the official Chinese stance on Libya, RQ2 inquired about the structure of the ego-network surrounding the word: China. The analysis found that words closely linked with China included: concerned, turmoil, stop fire, deputation, resolution, Libyan issue, and freeze [of assets]. This structure (see Graph 2) demonstrated how China proposed solutions to the Libyan conflict and illustrated China’s calls
for a cease fire. Through the use of words such as deputation (the act of representing another group), China positioned itself as a neutral party that has both the power and the means to negotiate peace and cease fire. By taking the position of non-intervention, China capitalized on the momentum to build up its soft power by communicating the message that it stands closely with the international community to resolve the conflict in Libya. China also showed concerns over the social turmoil in Libya. Through *People’s Daily*, the Chinese government conveyed their preferences for peaceful resolution to the Libyan issue. When compared with the Russian position, China did not position itself as the opposite of the U.S. and NATO. Instead, it positioned itself as one of the members of the international community that was concerned by the bloodshed and its frozen assets in the region. China wanted to be seen by the world as the country that actively seeks a solution. This position is consistent with China’s policy described as the “peaceful rise”.

State controlled media outlets not only construct the image of the government that they serve, but also construct the images of other nations in relation to the home country. RQ3 inquired about the structure of the ego-network of the word: United States. The analysis (see Graph 3) showed that the *People’s Daily* connected a much larger group of words to the US. For example terms such as military, invasion, anti-American sentiment, crisis, death, step down, cold, exploit, interests, turmoil were all closely linked with the U.S. The *People’s Daily* showed that U.S. was deeply embedded in the Libyan crisis. A close examination of the textual data suggests that these words fell into four themes: 1) military action (history, invasion, crisis), 2) the social consequence of U.S.’s military action (e.g., social turmoil), 3) the United States’ motivation (e.g., global power, exploit, etc.), and 4) the reaction from the international community (e.g., anti-American sentiment).
The *People’s Daily* did not forget Russia in its consideration of the Libyan crisis. Indeed, Russia was frequently discussed in relations to Libyan crisis. RQ4 inquired about the structure of the ego-network of the word: Russia. The analysis (see Graph 4) showed that many discussions of Russia were closely linked with words such as Libya, global, NATO, military, Middle East, and Northern African Countries. This structure suggests that China perceives Russia to have considerable geopolitical interests in the region. China believes that the Russian position on the Libyan crisis is motivated by the desire to prevent and condemn any U.S. unilateral actions in the region. As Russia tries to restore its superpower status (hence the word “global”), its foreign policy not only includes cooperation with U.S. but also it’s counterbalancing in the regions like the Middle East and North Africa. It is interesting that China, as another status-seeking country, was not semantically connected to Russia in the *People’s Daily* news coverage of the Libyan crisis. It appears that both China and Russia used their diplomatic tools to earn score in the international arena, using however very different approaches. Russia was portrayed as counterbalancing the U.S. influence, whereas China was portrayed as neutral and isolated power seeking peaceful conflict resolution.

The semantic analysis showed how the three different nations were featured in the news stories in the *People’s Daily*. Final RQ 5 explored how the three ego-networks (see Graph 5) were connected and sought to identify which words help to connect the three networks. The findings suggest that the ego-network analysis of the three nodes show that *People’s Daily* clearly portrayed the US, Russia and China as having three different positions. The U.S. is clearly located in the centre of the issue, and is connected with words such as war, crisis, military actions, and anti-American sentiment. Russia connects with Northern African Countries, NATO, military and Libya. Russia is in a position of protesting U.S.’s action and the *People’s Daily*
suggests that Russia’s policy is motivated by its own interests. The People’s Daily coverage creates a different position for China. In its coverage, China is concerned with the Libyan issue, and worked with the international community to reach resolution to peacefully solve the Libya issue. The words that connect U.S. with China are: Libya, Libyan issue, concern, freeze, resolution, Ghaddafi, and turmoil. Based on the content of the full texts, China is concerned by the actions taken by the U.S., and is concerned by the social consequences of such actions. The words that connect Russia with the U.S. revolve around Russian interest in the region: Northern African Countries, NATO, Global, Military and Libya. In reference to the content of the full text, it shows that Russia is concerned by the military actions taken by the U.S. and other NATO countries. The structure also shows Russia has a tight relationship with Northern African countries. Indeed, the major word that connects China and Russia is Libya. When interpreting this structure in the context of the full coverage, it shows China and Russia share common ground in their attitude towards the Libyan issue, and their positions are distinctively different from that of the United States. The implications of these findings for understanding a relational approach to public diplomacy are discussed next.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Given the importance of the media coverage as a means of public diplomacy, this study examined the semantic structure of how the “mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee” discussed the Libyan issue. The analysis attempted to achieve two-fold of goals. First, the analysis demonstrates the public diplomacy of the Chinese government, and the image it attempts to build. Second, the analysis shows how public diplomacy strategies reflect the media coverage of this international issue.
The findings of this pilot study demonstrate that the semantic network of the coverage from *People’s Daily* is highly consistent with the guidelines of China’s public diplomacy: it wants to be seen as a peaceful rising power. This study illustrates the value of semantic studies to understanding the underlying worldview and purpose of media texts.

Further, this study confirms the powerful influence of public diplomatic policy on semantic relationships and the spatial structure of language. Evidence from the newspaper indicates that China’s public diplomacy follows a model of mixed motives. The diplomacy strategy attempts to provide public information, and build an image of China as a peacefully rising power in the international arena.

This study also reveals the value of the multipolar approach to understand public diplomacy. In the Libya issue, the Chinese media framed Russia as another important antagonist to the U.S. that had a key role to play in resolving the crisis. In the coverage, China assumed the role of a responsive and active member of the international community and actively sought peaceful solutions to the Libya issue. On the one hand, China shows no direct conflict with the U.S. and NATO but portrays Russia in its old role as an adversary to the U.S. On the other hand, China is on the side of Russia in terms of criticizing the military actions taken by U.S. and NATO. It is clear that multipolar thinking, whether implicitly or explicitly, directed the strategic position of China. Future studies should compare the strategic position of the three countries, and examine if the multipolar approach also significantly influences the U.S. and Russia’s public diplomacy efforts.
Reference


Monitor, 8, 60.


Table 1. Coverage on People’s Daily

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<td>本报开罗4月13日电（记者黄培昭）多哈消息：旨在协调各方对利比亚行动的“利比亚联络小组”会议4月13日首次在卡塔尔首都多哈举行，会议由卡塔尔和英国联合主持。据报道，有20多个国家和组织的代表出席会议，其中包括联合国秘书长潘基文、北约秘书长拉斯穆森、英国外交大臣黑格和美国、德国、西班牙以及部分阿拉伯国家的代表等。</td>
<td>协调 利比亚 行动 利比亚 联络小组 会议 卡塔尔 多哈 举行 会议 卡塔尔 英国 主持 国家 组织 代表 会议 秘书长潘基文 北约 秘书长 拉斯穆森 英国 外交大臣 黑格 美国 德国 西班牙 阿拉伯 国家 代表</td>
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Graph 1. Network of Major Countries and Organizations.
Graph 2. Ego-network of China.
Graph 3. Ego-network of USA.
Graph 4: Ego-network of Russia.
Graph 5. Ego-networks of China, USA and Russia.