



## SOFT POWER AND STRATEGIC INFLUENCE: CHINA'S BRI AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper examines China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a key component of its soft power strategy, analyzing its implications for regional dynamics in Southeast Asia and beyond. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a pivotal component of its soft power diplomacy, aiming to enhance economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and strategic influence across participating nations. This paper assesses the BRI's impact on regional dynamics, focusing on Southeast Asia, where China's economic investments and infrastructure development have reshaped regional perceptions and alliances. Through a mix of qualitative analysis and case studies, this research evaluates how China's BRI has influenced regional power structures, economic dependencies, and diplomatic alignments. The study reveals that while the BRI has bolstered China's soft power and strategic influence, it has also raised concerns about debt sustainability, sovereignty, and regional competition. The paper concludes by elaborating on the intricate nature of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its associated soft power strategy. It emphasizes the multifaceted implications this strategy has for regional stakeholders, taking into account the diverse political, economic, and cultural dimensions at play. Additionally, the paper proposes thoughtful policy considerations to effectively navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by China's expanding influence in the region.*

### **Key Words**

*Media Strategy, Partnership, Legitimacy, Narrative, Culture, Influence, Diplomacy*



## Introduction

The 21st century has brought significant changes in how countries exercise their authority. Nations no longer rely solely on military force or threats of economic sanctions to achieve their goals; instead, they are employing more sophisticated methods to win favor. This approach is known as "soft power." Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence the thoughts and actions of other cultures through values, education, foreign policy, and participation in global organizations. China's rapid transformation from a developing nation in Asia to a major global power has made its foreign policy strategies a crucial topic of discussion. Historically, China's foreign policy was primarily based on military strength. However, today, the country employs a combination of both hard and soft power tactics. China's aims include gaining the trust of the global community, reducing internal tensions, and making a positive impact on international platforms. This research study examines how China utilizes soft power, the tools it employs, the emphasis it places on cultural diplomacy, and how the global community responds to these efforts. The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990, who described it as the ability to attract rather than coerce others. Initial research mainly focused on Western nations, particularly the United States, and their influence through media and democratic values. With China's emerging economy, more attention has shifted to non-Western approaches to influence.

It has become apparent that China's soft power differs from that of Western nations. China leverages its rich history, strong sense of national identity, and development achievements. Research indicates that China showcases its culture and history to promote a peaceful image, while also providing education and training opportunities for foreign students. Initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes aim to facilitate the learning of the Chinese language. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents an economic strategy that encourages positive image-building. However, there are challenges associated with this approach. Concerns have been raised about information control and the country's strict regulations. Soft power is fundamentally the ability of a nation to influence others globally through charm and cultural appeal rather than through coercion. This study explores the role of soft power in China's efforts to foster relationships with other countries. China employs various strategies, including cultural exchange programs, economic initiatives, global media outreach, and language promotion, to shape its global image and present itself as a peaceful and rising power. This research analyzes the strengths and weaknesses China encounters in its soft power endeavors, including how strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative, Confucius programs, and enhanced media visibility aid the country in achieving its foreign policy objectives. The study highlights that China uses soft power to support its political and economic aims, strengthen its diplomatic relations with other nations, and assert its role as a responsible global power. Nevertheless, this approach faces certain obstacles, such as potential political influence, lack of transparency, and competition with other dominant nations.



### **Research Objectives**

The study has multiple aims:

- To understand the nature and growth of China's soft power strategy.
- To define the instruments of China, soft power diplomacy, and its attempts to use its influence universally.
- To assess where China's soft power plan has achieved and where it has faced obstruction.
- To inspect the significance of soft power on global diplomacy and international relations.

### **Research Questions**

Research Questions for this study are:

- What is soft Power, and how is it formulated in international relations?
- How does China implement soft Power as a component of its foreign policy?
- What are the critical ways in which China supervises its global reputation?
- How does the effectiveness of China's soft power diplomacy stay limited?

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology that is employed in this study is qualitative. The research is conducted with secondary data. The data is collected from journals encompassing academic knowledge, books, including knowledge about Chinese foreign policy, Reports from research institutes, Speeches and official documents. The research also engages the analytical approach, with the analysis of the data and the organization of the data.

### **Concept of Soft Power**

Soft Power refers to the ability of a state to impact others by making them like its culture, political ideas, or policies. This is different from hard power because hard power depends on force or money to get its goals. According to Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory, Joseph Nye established the idea of soft power in 1990. He argued that the traditional approaches of analyzing power were not complete. He defined: Hard Power is about using force or economic power to influence others to do your intentions. Soft Power is about influencing others and making them and aim to follow your Strategy. Smart power is about the combination of hard and soft power. (Gomichon, M., 2013). According to Joseph Nye, soft power is founded on three factors: the country's culture that is internationally approved, political values that match what people globally believe in, and a foreign policy that is responsible and proper. His theories completely changed the way people think about diplomacy. Today, instead of depending on military power alone, states also depend on ideas, culture, and identity. Soft Power uses different tools: Cultural Diplomacy: Actions, for example, festivals, movies, literature, music, and art that spread culture, Education: Providing scholarships and studying abroad to build long-term connections, Public Diplomacy: Engaging with people throughout the world to establish knowledge.

### **Soft Power vs Hard Power in Foreign Policy**

The concept of soft power emerged in political discourse during the late 20th century. Scholars and political and foreign policy experts in Western countries, especially in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), explain the idea of soft power in their different contexts. They argue that integrating soft power into foreign policy is a cost-effective and efficient way to achieve



national interests. Over the years, scholars in non-Western and developing countries such as China, Turkey, India, and Nigeria started de-Westernizing and indigenizing the idea of soft power. This made the concept of soft power possibly the most widely accepted concept among policy-makers and students of international relations. Soft Power is about convincing others to follow your Strategy without forcing them. Hard Power is about using force, punishment, or military power to get your requirements. Countries today need both kinds of power: Hard power protects a country's safety. Soft Power helps establish trust and stop conflicts. China has a strong military force, but it's also spreading messages of peacefulness and development to be seen as a positive force. This combination puts China in a very strong position in the world. (DeLisle, J. 2020).

### **China's Application of Soft Power Culture and Civilization Heritage**

Culture and Civilization Heritage, China has a long history and rich culture. From Confucianism to traditional Chinese medicine, poetry, painting, and vacations, China presents itself as a wise and peaceful state. Cultural performance, tourism, and international exchange help promote its image globally. The Olympics in Beijing introduced China as a modern and cultural country. (Nakano, R., & Zhu, Y., 2020). Confucius Language is a way of connecting with others. China has established above one hundred Confucius Institutes in universities across the world. The institutes provide Mandarin language courses, scholarships, and learning about Chinese culture. The institutes support people in learning about Chinese culture, provide research between countries, and build long-term relationships with future leaders. Many countries support the institutes, but critics say they show only one side of China's history.

### **Belt and Road Initiatives as Soft Power**

The Belt and Road Initiative, which started in 2013, focuses on enhancing world connectivity through the development of roads, railways, ports, and energy infrastructure in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Meanwhile, it is largely an economic plan; the BRI can also be used to enhance soft power by developing connections between the public and building goodwill by using the guidance of financial systems. On the other hand, some critics call BRI loans "how soft power can be misunderstood or viewed as used to exercise influence" (B. Duarte, P. A., & Ferreira-Pereira, L. C., 2022). Over the last three and a half decades, China's rapid advancement in development efforts has been accompanied by a conscious effort to project itself as a major frontrunner in the economy. Despite being a developing country (Huang, 2015), Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement in World Economic Forum (WEF) (Sharma, B. P., & Khatri, R. S., 2019). had hinted at China's growing interest in the development of trade and network among countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also one such development put forward to institutionalize China's soft power presence in the world and create harmony with the rest of the world. The Initiative has been placed as synonymous with a way of friendly cooperation, signaling the project as "Road for Peace" (Raghavan, P. S., 2019). China has placed a tremendous amount of effort into its "charm offensive" approach, with an estimated US\$10 billion spent every year on its global soft power presence (Kurlantzick, 2017). Under the project, China has placed initiatives in approaching regional connectivity in the South Asia region, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) being regarded as its flagship program. As it goes, of all the projects China has undertaken in the BRI,



its ventures in South Asia are considered as a China's soft power diplomacy and need strong cooperation (Bey, M., 2017).

### **Global Media and Information Outreach**

China's global media and information outreach, often termed the "going global" strategy, involves extensive investment (approx. USD 6.6 billion by 2009) to reshape its international image, promote state narratives, and counter Western media influence. This strategy combines traditional media (CGTN, Xinhua) with digital diplomacy (social media), targeted training for foreign journalists, and content partnerships, primarily focusing on developing countries in Africa and Latin America. The media in China has a tremendous influence on public opinion and Chinese politics. Several hundred broadcasters, more than 2,000 newspapers and magazines, and countless web-media compete fiercely for attention and over a lucrative advertising market. Simultaneously, the state is constantly reassessing the media policies and the control on the media in general, as well as on individual media practitioners. New technology has led to an enormous increase in access to information. China spends heavily on international media such as CGTN and online media to express its story to the world. The media focuses on Economic progress, Poverty minimization, and peacekeeping missions. China engages with the film industry to use entertainment media to tell its stories. The assistance in opposing the Western story and giving China a voice in global conversations.

### **China's Role in International Organizations**

China's rise to economic dominance over the past two decades has led many to predict its likely ascension as the heir apparent to the United States' global hegemony. This has led to several attempts at assessing Sino-East Asian relations to predict Chinese behavior. Contemporary literature has sought to explain Chinese foreign policy through cultural and historical interpretations derived from studying philosophies and traditions stemming from China's earlier dynasty periods of greatness (Johnston, 1995; Zhang, 2015). This points to a diverse interpretation, where on one end of the spectrum, China would be expected to be pacifist and defensive in nature (Fairbanks, 1974; Pillsbury, 1980; Adelman & Shih, 1993) while asserting a symbolic, but not actual authority over other countries (Kang, 1997). The other end of the spectrum posits that Chinese foreign policy closely paralleled the Western traditions of realpolitik behavior (Johnston, 1995), but that these patterns were conditioned by a concept of relationality in which China would exploit hierarchical relationships to maximize interests (Zhang, 2015). These latter interpretations allow researchers to assume that China will leverage positional advantages in IOs to reassert itself globally. China participates in some international organizations, including the United Nations, World Trade Organization, BRICS, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It makes a participation in Peacekeeping operations, Climate Change initiatives, and Humanitarian assistance. China, through its influence in engaging world standards and being regarded as an honest partner, uses its responsibility in these categories to create soft power.

### **International Skepticism and Trust Deficit**

Even though the Chinese government has tried to achieve a world impact through its soft power. Many countries are skeptical about the steps of the Chinese government, especially if they are financially dependent on it. The modern world sees the growing Power of the Asian superpower



as a threat rather than an opportunity. Fostering trust in international relations is a critically important yet challenging endeavor. Over recent decades, trust deficits among states have intensified and become more widespread, resulting in a systemic condition of pervasive mistrust. The United States (US)-People's Republic of China (PRC) rivalry has played a pivotal role in generating this pervasive mistrust, as states pursue hedging strategies to mitigate their actual or potential vulnerabilities and safeguard their autonomy. A trust-building strategy is needed to counteract the detrimental effects of pervasive mistrust and bolster multilateralism in order to address critical global challenges in the future. (Jisheng, S., 2025)

### **Perception of Authoritarian Governance**

China has a different form of government compared to the liberal democracy that is organized in the West. The critics of the Chinese model discuss that the fact that the press is not free and that the political scene is controlled means that the appeal of the Chinese model is limited. The fact is that the Chinese model is authoritarian, which means that it is challenging to use the soft power approach. (Liu, H., 2021). China focuses on the organizational aspects of the Chinese governance system and its relation to development. Compared to other developing countries like India, it has special positive features of career incentives promoting growth at the local level, the ability to take long-term decisions relatively quickly, and a unique blend of political centralization and decentralization of economic power and responsibility, which is conducive to central guidance and local business development. On the other hand, with a lack of sufficient downward (as opposed to upward) accountability and absence of institutionalized systems of scrutiny and challenge from below, mistakes or abuse of power are more difficult to check and correct quickly, political loyalty may often get a premium over performance at the upper levels, and there are insufficient checks on collusion between business and officials. The overall organizational system is prone to overreaction in times of crisis and thus only weakly resilient compared to systems where information flows from below are less controlled or choked.

### **Geopolitical Tensions and Strategic Competition**

China faces several rivalries, including its relationship with the US, the South China Sea, and its relationship with India. All these make it challenging for the cultural and soft power initiatives to have a positive impact. When there is competition, the knowledge between cultures and values does not reach the public. Soft Power operates on trust, and rivalries lead to mistrust and doubt. With Indo-Pacific being the stage for US-China strategic influence, Southeast Asia's geopolitical scenario is likely to be transformed considerably. By declaring India as a Net Security Provider, the US has backed its outreach in the region by officially adjoining the Pacific and Indian Oceans as the Indo-Pacific region. Major countries of the region, including China, Russia, India, and Pakistan, are in the phase of diversifying and reconfiguring their relationships. Within this scenario, Pakistan and India are likely to pursue the strategic interests that take them in opposite directions. While the US endows India with its strategic partner status, CPEC in Pakistan has emerged as a litmus test for China's BRI. The contestation is to have a direct bearing on the strategic matrix of South Asia generally and Pakistan particularly. This aims to account for the Sino-US strategic convergence and competition that is leading to a security dilemma in South Asia, with implications for Pakistan. The cooperation between the US and China is to enhance Pakistan's



security, both internal and external, while competition is to erode it. China formulates some policy options for Pakistan's decision-makers to ensure the security and socio-economic development of the country. (Taqi, M., et al., 2026).

### **The Limits of Soft Power in Chinese Diplomacy**

China's soft power, aimed at enhancing global influence through culture and economics, faces significant limits due to its authoritarian political structure, human rights issues, and rigid propaganda efforts. While investing in initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's, and Panda Diplomacy's, image struggles with a dissonance between its projected image and actions, leading to skepticism in democratic nations. Sometimes, China uses soft power in addition to economic and strategic pressure. People become doubtful if there are certain situations attached to loans or if they feel the information is being controlled by the government. Real soft power is when people want to follow a country, not when they are forced. China's biggest problem is moving from being a source of advantages. China's emergence as a global superpower is not solely attributed to its military might or economic prowess. In recent decades, the world has witnessed China's deliberate efforts to harness and project its soft power on a global scale. China's soft power has become a formidable force, shaping international perceptions, influencing cultural trends, and expanding its global reach. One of China's most significant soft power assets is its rich and millennia-old cultural heritage. From Confucianism to traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts, Chinese culture has captivated the imagination of people worldwide. The global appeal of Chinese cuisine, with its diverse regional flavors, has turned Chinese restaurants into ubiquitous fixtures in cities across the globe. Chinese cinema, led by directors like Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou, has earned international acclaim and brought Chinese storytelling to a global audience (Blanchard, 2012). Language also plays a pivotal role in China's soft power strategy. Mandarin Chinese is one of the most spoken languages globally, and the Chinese government has invested heavily in promoting its study worldwide. The economic landscape has also allowed it to wield soft power through economic diplomacy. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have extended China's influence by facilitating infrastructure development and trade partnerships across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Through these economic engagements, China has positioned itself as a partner for development, enhancing its soft power image (Wuthnow, 2008). Diplomacy is another avenue through which China projects its soft power. The Chinese government engages in diplomatic efforts, often offering foreign aid, participating in peacekeeping missions, and fostering international cooperation. This approach helps China build positive relationships and portrays itself as a responsible global actor. Media and technology are crucial tools in China's soft power arsenal (Rothman, 2011). State-run media outlets like Xinhua and CGTN have expanded their global presence, provided international news, and promoted China's perspective on global issues. Meanwhile, Chinese tech giants like Huawei and TikTok have achieved global prominence, showcasing China's technological innovation and creativity. China's political system and ideology, often referred to as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," have attracted some countries and individuals as an alternative to Western democracy and capitalism. China presents itself as a model of economic growth and stability, further enhancing its soft power. Cultural exchanges and educational opportunities for international students are vital components of China's soft power



strategy. Thousands of students from around the world come to study in China each year, fostering cross-cultural understanding and building personal connections that can last a lifetime. China's soft power has become a force to be reckoned with on the global stage. Its rich cultural heritage, economic prowess, diplomatic efforts, and technological advancements have enabled China to shape international narratives and build positive relationships worldwide. However, maintaining and expanding its soft power influence will depend on addressing challenges and striking a balance between its internal policies and global image projection. China's soft power journey continues to be a captivating story in the evolving landscape of international relations (Paradise, 2009). Despite its successes, China's soft power is not without challenges. Controversial policies, human rights concerns, and censorship practices have sparked criticism and led to negative perceptions in some quarters. Balancing its authoritarian tendencies with the promotion of its soft power ideals presents an ongoing challenge for China (McGiffert, 2009). China's approach to soft power diplomacy seeks to leverage its cultural, economic, and political assets to enhance its global standing and shape international norms.

### **Conclusion**

Soft power is becoming very important as a tool for how countries gain influence. The tools that China is recently using to gain influence are cultural Initiatives, language programs, economic initiatives, and connectivity. These are the tools that it is using to influence how people see it around the world. The challenge is that political mistrust limits the use of its power. China's soft power diplomacy is a multifaceted strategy that leverages its cultural, economic, and political assets to enhance its global influence and shape international politics. Understanding the mechanisms behind China's soft power provides insights into its evolving role in the global arena and the complex dynamics of international relations in the 21st century. As China continues to refine its soft power strategy, it will remain a central player in shaping the future of international politics. China's soft power diplomacy remains a dynamic and evolving strategy. As China continues to assert its presence on the world stage, it will need to address these challenges and controversies while building on its successes. The effectiveness of China's soft power will depend on its ability to align its actions with its soft power narratives, foster trust among international partners, and adapt to changing global dynamics. Ultimately, the impact of China's soft power diplomacy will shape its role in the international community and its relations with other nations in the years to come. To sum up, China's growing impact is changing the balance of world power. The use of soft power by China suggests that it aims to develop influence without the use of power. China intends to impact the world narrative and build new forms of relationships with other countries. China is recognized in the world, and its governance and tensions for the future are a concern. The concern that people have about China may lead to mistrust about its credibility. China's ability to influence others with its soft power depends on how it balances its own interests with the interests of the international community and how it secures trust instead of depending on others to depend on it.



## Recommendations

### 1. Increase Transparency and Fairness in Diplomatic and Development Projects

To strengthen credibility and trust in international relations, it is essential to improve the level of transparency and fairness in diplomatic initiatives and development projects. Governments and international organizations should ensure that agreements, funding mechanisms, and project implementation processes are clearly communicated to partner countries and local stakeholders. Transparent procurement systems, open reporting of project outcomes, and independent monitoring mechanisms can help prevent misunderstandings and suspicions of political or economic manipulation. In addition, diplomatic engagement should prioritize mutual benefit and equality among partners, particularly when working with developing countries. By promoting inclusive decision-making and consulting local communities before implementing development initiatives, countries can build stronger partnerships based on respect and cooperation. This approach will enhance the legitimacy of international development programs and strengthen long-term diplomatic relationships.

### 2. Promote Cultural Exchanges for Mutual Understanding

Cultural exchange programs should be designed to encourage two-way learning and dialogue, rather than simply promoting a single national perspective. Educational exchanges, academic collaborations, cultural festivals, and joint research programs should provide opportunities for participants to learn about each other's traditions, values, and social systems. Governments and cultural institutions should support scholarships, student exchange programs, and collaborative artistic initiatives that allow individuals from different societies to interact directly. These exchanges can help break stereotypes and foster deeper interpersonal connections between nations. Moreover, cultural diplomacy should emphasize mutual respect and cultural diversity, allowing both sides to share their heritage and perspectives. By moving beyond one-sided cultural promotion, these initiatives can contribute to genuine intercultural understanding and long-term international cooperation.

### 3. Improve Transparency and Academic Independence of Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes play an important role in promoting language education and cultural understanding. However, concerns regarding their governance, funding structures, and academic independence have led to criticism in several countries. To address these concerns, it is recommended that Confucius Institutes adopt greater transparency in their operations and partnerships with host universities. This can be achieved by clearly outlining funding sources, governance structures, and academic responsibilities. Host institutions should have a greater role in curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and program management to ensure academic freedom and intellectual independence. Gradually implementing reforms that promote openness and collaboration will help these institutes regain trust and maintain their role as valuable platforms for language education and cultural exchange. Transparent policies will also reduce political controversies and encourage wider international participation.

### 4. Strengthen Engagement in Humanitarian and Social Development Programs

Another important recommendation is to expand involvement in humanitarian initiatives and social development programs worldwide. By supporting projects in areas such as education, healthcare,



disaster relief, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability, countries can demonstrate their commitment to global welfare beyond political or economic interests. In addition to government-led initiatives, support should be extended to non-governmental organizations, community leaders, scholars, artists, and other cultural personalities who can contribute unique perspectives and narratives. These individuals often serve as influential ambassadors of cultural understanding and cooperation. Encouraging collaboration with local civil society organizations can also help ensure that humanitarian projects address the real needs of communities. By highlighting human stories and social contributions, nations can build a more positive international image and foster stronger people-to-people connections.

### **5. Expand the Use of Soft Power in Diverse Regions**

Soft power strategies should be expanded to include a wider range of regions, particularly small and developing countries that are often overlooked in global diplomacy. Instead of focusing only on strategically important or economically powerful states, diplomatic outreach should aim to build relationships across the entire international system. This can include educational scholarships, cultural exchange programs, media collaborations, and development partnerships in less prominent regions. Such initiatives help create long-term goodwill and strengthen diplomatic influence through cooperation rather than coercion. Furthermore, a balanced global approach to soft power ensures that smaller states feel valued and included in international cooperation frameworks. By engaging with a broader spectrum of countries, nations can enhance their global reputation, promote shared development goals, and contribute to a more inclusive international order.

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