

**CHINA'S SOFT POWER PROJECTION IN SOUTH ASIA: A
CASE STUDY OF BANGLADESH, SRI LANKA, AND NEPAL**

By

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Ziyad Alam

DEDICATION

I dedicate my research work to my respectable and beloved Father, whom I called “The Iron-Man of our Family”.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|--------------|--|
| AIIB | Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank |
| AAGC | Asia Africa Growth Corridor |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| BRI | Belt and Road Initiative |
| BCIM | Bangladesh China India Myanmar |
| CC | Confucius Classrooms |
| CPEC | China-Pakistan Economic Corridor |
| CICC | China International Commercial Court |
| CDB | Chinese Development Bank |
| CRI | China Radio International |
| CGTN | China Global Television Network |
| EXIM | Exports Imports |
| FDI | Foreign Direct Investment |
| FY | Fiscal Year |
| GDI | Global Development Initiative |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| G20 | Group of Twenty |
| HADR | Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief |
| IOR | Indian Ocean Region |
| IMEC | India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| MSR | Maritime Silk Road |
| NDB | New Development Bank |
| ORF | Observer Research Foundation |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SCO | Shanghai Cooperation Organization |
| SRF | Silk Road Fund |
| SREB | Silk Road Economic Belt |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| SAFP | South Asia Foreign Policy |
| SEZs | Special Economic Zones |
| TAR | Tibetan Autonomous Region |
| THEC | Trans Himalayan Economic Corridor |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNESCAP-SSWA | United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific- South and South-West Asia |
| US | United States |

ABSTRACT

China's rise as a dominant actor at the regional as well as at the international level has been accompanied by the country's calculated drive to build and maintain a soft image. These conscious efforts resulted in assuming a high place by the concept of "soft power" in China's foreign policy. Moreover, this also resulted in using all the available soft power means to achieve the desired foreign policy objectives, including the use of the economy as a tool for enhancing its soft power image. This research work highlights that China is using different strategies to enhance its soft power influence in South Asia and beyond. The case study of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal highlights the use of soft means of power to boost its influence in these countries through attraction rather than coercion. This study applies and utilizes the conceptual framework of soft power to understand the complexities of China's calculated drive for projecting its soft power in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Furthermore, this study is qualitative, using an exploratory method of research, to explore and understand China's soft power projection in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Key Words: Soft Power, South Asia, China, Economic Cooperation, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

China's rise over the past two decades has shaped the geopolitical landscape of regional and international politics. China swiftly transformed its economy from a low-cost factory to the world to a global leader in international politics and economy by assuming the leadership of highly advanced technologies. Its economy has been amazingly doing well since market-oriented reforms were introduced in 1979¹. This transformation of China's economic rise led to the use of its economy as a tool for achieving its foreign policy goals. However, China's rise as a dominant actor at the regional as well as at the international level has been accompanied by the country's calculated drive to build and maintain its soft image. These conscious efforts resulted in assuming a high place by the concept of soft power in China's foreign policy².

The term soft power was coined by Joseph S Nye by using the phrase "soft power" in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* published in April 1990. Nye introduces the concept of soft power as "getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them."³ Despite being considered a Western concept the idea of soft power dates back to Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. Some even relate it to Chinese strategist Sun Tzu who states that "a good and perfect plan is to win the war against your enemy without causing any physical damage". Even Joseph Nye in his book *The Power to Lead* describes Sun Tzu as a smart warrior who understands the application and importance of soft power⁴. As a result, China's contemporary foreign policy considers soft power as a significant tool to enhance its soft image.

China's soft power gives significant importance to the use of economic resources to project its influence. Although Nye's concept of soft power did not consider the economy as a pillar of soft power, however major portion of the current literature proves that contemporary

¹Linda Y. Yueh, "The Rise of China," *Leish Studies in International Affairs* 18 (2007): 35–43.

²Parma SinhaPalit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, June 8, 2010.

³Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/joe_nye_wielding_soft_power.pdf.

⁴Whyte Leon, "Sun Tzu and the Art of Soft Power?," *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/sun-tzu-and-the-art-of-soft-power/>.

international relations increasingly rely on economic resources for enhancing soft power⁵. Various scholarly views support China's version of soft power which is termed as soft power with Chinese characteristics. This includes the use of the economy to support economic development, enhance trade relations, and provide grants and loans to less developed and developing countries.

Furthermore, China's expansion of soft power is not only driven by its economic development but also by its massive economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South Asia. China is also involved in South Asian countries bilaterally and multilaterally through various institutional setups, diplomatic channels, Chinese large cultural centers, infrastructure development, language institutions, foreign direct investment, and economic cooperation. China is following the win-win model of engagements with South Asian countries to avoid internal and military interference. It follows the principle of coexistence and harmonious society for the development of all nations.

Institutional crafting is giving China the edge to expend its influence. The institutions that help China to project its soft power include the China-led Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), which provides loans to Asian countries without prior attached strings policy. India which opposes most of the BRI projects is the largest loan taker from the AIIB⁶. Other institutional setups include the Chinese Development Bank, New Development Bank, and Silk Road Fund. China is also using organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to bring in close contact with the two arch-rival countries of South Asia that is Pakistan and India. China is systematically trying to use its institutions, diplomatic channels, and China-led organizations to engage with smaller South Asian states to project its soft power and increase its influence in the region.

Moreover, China through its soft power means is influencing the behavior of countries that joined China's economic initiatives or tend to join it, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the inception of China's Belt and Road Initiative, 147 countries have joined or are willing

⁵Daniele Carminati, "The Economics of Soft Power: Reliance on Economic Resources and Instrumentality in Economic Gains," *Economic and Political Studies*, January 25, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2020.1865620>.

⁶Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward," in *In Hindsight, Insight, and Foresight: Thinking About Security in the Indo-Pacific*, 1st ed. (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2020), 161–78, <https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/10-Anwar-25thA.pdf>.

to join China's BRI⁷. This enhanced China's ranking on the global soft power index by scoring 40.85/100 in 2015 (30th influential power based on soft power) and 51.25/100 in 2019⁸. However, China is currently standing among the top four countries of the world by scoring 64.2/100 as of 2022⁹(the 4th most influential state based on soft power). Likewise, China's soft power strategy in South Asia is a success story of soft power projection.

The strategies China is opting for soft power projection in South Asian countries, primarily Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal vary from cultural to economic. These three countries which are currently under study are considered as the backyard of India¹⁰, the most powerful South Asian state. China is targeting these countries to project its soft power and tilt its behavior towards China. Because of this, China's foreign policy is intimately linked to its use of soft power to carry out its massive initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The geopolitical and geo-economic aspirations of China's economic growth have also prompted Chinese officials to employ soft power diplomacy throughout South Asia, particularly in India's backyard¹¹.

The strategies China has opted to influence the behavior of the three states of South Asia that is Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are economic rather than military. First of all, China is engaging these countries through economic cooperation by providing loans, grants, and emergency-based economic assistance. China is investing huge amounts of economic resources in these countries as part of its soft power strategy. Under the umbrella of economic cooperation China is investing in infrastructure development which is the need of the hour for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal's development¹². Also, China is pouring foreign direct investment into these countries to build up their economies and boost their development. Additionally, through cultural influence/diplomacy China is engaged in cultural integration in various countries enhancing its soft power image. China has also setup various cultural centers in South Asian

⁷James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁸The Soft Power 30, "Overall Ranking 2019," 2019, https://softpower30.com/country/china/?country_years=2017,2018,2019.

⁹David Haigh, "Global Soft Power Index" (Brand Finance, 2022), <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/>.

¹⁰Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia" (The Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), 38, <https://www.cfr.org/report/china-and-belt-and-road-initiative-south-asia>.

¹¹Grace Natasya and Paween Rungtaweechai, "Is China Truly Friendly?: Case of China's 'Good Neighbor' Policy toward Nepal," *Politics, Economy, and Security in Changing Indo-Pacific Region*, 2018, 55–62, <https://doi.org/10.5220/0010273000002309>.

¹²Aditi Chakrovorty, "China's Soft Power in Bangladesh: A Comparative Studies," *American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2020): 128–40, <https://doi.org/10.20448/801.51.128.140>.

countries to promote its people-to-people contacts, tourism, and student cultural exchange and scholarship programs. Along with these Chinese language centers are mushrooming in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, including in various other countries of the region as well¹³.

Furthermore, China is actively engaged in diplomatic practices to enhance its soft image. China's diplomacy about its soft power can be classified into four; soft-power oriented diplomacy, political diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy. In addition, China is using large institutional setups to boost its diplomatic engagements and its influence with South Asian countries. The institutional setups like the AIIB, SCO, CDB, etc. help China uplift to influence more softly. China's led institutional setups are meant to portray China's vision of a harmonious society where the participating states can win by working under the Chinese vision of a win-win model.

However, the three states of South Asia which include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal unveil that they are planked by the two competing major powers China and India. Apart from India's opposition to China's soft power projection in South Asia other states have also shown concerns. Yet, the nature of the response differs from country to country. Although, most of the South Asian countries are part of China's economic initiatives, except India and Bhutan¹⁴. India is not only the biggest actor in South Asia, but also the only state that is most connected geographically with other South Asian states. India is closest to the two island nations (the Maldives and Sri Lanka) and shares borders with four countries of the South Asian region: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan¹⁵. Moreover, India has always sought to maintain diplomatic leverage over South Asian countries through various ways and means, including financial support. However, the involvement of China in South Asia by projecting its soft power is creating fear of losing its grip over the small South Asian countries, especially in India's backyard countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) where its influence is traditional and many folded.

¹³Natasya and Rungtaweechai, "Is China Truly Friendly?: Case of China's 'Good Neighbor' Policy toward Nepal."

¹⁴Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward," *Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies*, 2020, <https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/10-Anwar-25thA.pdf>.

¹⁵Rajiv Kumar and Manjeeta Singh, "India's Role in South Asia Trade and Investment Integration," *Asia Development Bank*, no. 32 (July 2009), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28506/wp32-india-role-south-asia-trade.pdf>.

Apart from India, Bhutan is also skeptical of China's soft power projection in South Asia. Bhutan had refused to join China's grand initiative of BRI and shares common concerns with India. Furthermore, Maldives has introduced the "India First" policy to enjoy the perks and privileges of India's "Neighborhood First Policy" and sidelined China's economic initiatives in Maldives¹⁶. Other states have also shown concerns over China's growing influence in South Asian countries, which can checkmate China's soft power projection in South Asia.

In short, the study considers China's soft power projection in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The study also highlights the various means and ways of China's soft power, including the use of economic tools to portray its soft power influence in South Asian countries. It also takes into account the concerns of various South Asian countries about China's growing soft power projection in South Asia. The theoretical lens of soft power enables the researcher to focus on China's soft power engagements rather than Chinese military engagements with South Asian states.

THE STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

China's economic rise, along with strategic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has given it the ability to use its economic might as a tool of soft power to achieve its foreign policy goals. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in China's interactions with South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, where China's diplomatic and economic advances are changing the geopolitical environment of the region. Though China's diplomatic and economic reach has the potential to promote regional cooperation and development, it also raises questions about how it may affect the interests and sovereignty of South Asian governments, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. China's growing involvement in South Asia by using all the available means of soft power warrants scrutiny, especially regarding its use of soft power strategies. Understanding the nature, extent, and implications of China's soft power projection in the region is crucial. Furthermore, it is essential to analyze how China's soft power policies impact the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia.

¹⁶Press Trust of India, "Maldives Committed to 'India First' Policy: Male to New Delhi," *Hindustan Times*, January 11, 2018, https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/maldives-committed-to-india-first-policy-male-to-new-delhi/story-uvWplzYARSuYTisa5NyyZL_amp.html.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To find the ways China is expanding its soft power influence in South Asia.
- To examine the strategies China is exercising to enhance its influence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.
- To identify South Asian countries' responses to China's soft power influence in South Asia.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How China is expanding its soft power influence in South Asia?
2. What are the soft power strategies China is using to enhance its influence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal?
3. How South Asian countries are responding to China's soft power projection in South Asia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the topic under research is available but lacks coherence. The relevant and reliable material has been gathered from reliable sources and an overview of the relevant literature is given in the material that follows. However, the available literature is divided into different themes to make a more nuanced understanding of the topic under research.

Soft Power

Joshua Kurlantzick in his book "Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World" (2007) discussed in great detail the emergence of China's soft power. The book highlights how Chinese leadership transformed China from a state of isolation after the Tiananmen Square accident. Chinese leadership policies not only make China prosperous at home but also at the global level through its soft power strategies, which Kurlantzick in his books terms as China's Charm Offensive. The book also discusses the decline of the soft power of the United States after 9/11 and Beijing's rise of soft power, initially through economic means of attraction. It also discusses the various tools of Beijing's soft power budding around the world, for instance, culture, economy, diplomacy, and educational policies are considered by Kurlantzick as being part of China's Charm strategy. Although Kurlantzick's work concerning Beijing's soft power is

the most comprehensive effort, however it did not cover the major changes that occurred after 2007, especially Beijing's biggest economic initiative, the BRI, and its aftermath¹⁷.

Joseph S. Nye Jr. in his famous book “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” thoroughly discusses the concept of Soft Power. In this book, he discussed in great detail the changing nature of power (hard) in world political affairs. The book argues about the sources of soft power, which according to Nye consists of political values, culture, and a country's foreign policies. Although this book is more focused on America’s foreign policy choices, its culture, values, and diplomacy regarding America’s soft power, however, it also presents a nuanced understanding of the concept of soft power in international relations and its sources and the use of these sources in the framework of power and influence¹⁸.

China Soft Power Strategies

Aditi Chakrovorty thoroughly discusses China’s growing soft power influence in South Asia specifically in Bangladesh in her research paper “China’s Soft Power in Bangladesh: A Comparative Studies” (2020) published by the American Journal of social sciences and Humanities. Chakrovorty takes into account how China is using its cultural, diplomatic, economic, and foreign policy tools to enhance its soft power in Bangladesh and how this is impacting India’s position in Bangladesh. It also highlights Bangladesh's successful foreign relations strategy of maintaining a balanced relationship between the two major powers. The paper discusses different perspectives on creating a Chinese positives image in South Asia and beyond. It considers and discusses in detail the diplomatic perspective, economic perspective, and cultural perspective. It also provides a deep insight into the China-India-Bangladesh paradox of influencing Bangladesh. Both the big powers of China and India are trying to Bangladesh to take either side and maintain an image of responsible power in South Asian politics¹⁹.

Parama Sinha Palit highlights China’s soft power in South Asia in his research paper “China’s Soft Power in South Asia” (2010). The paper discusses in detail China’s soft power, especially in smaller South Asian countries. The paper divides South Asian countries into two categories “India” and “non-India”. India is considered the biggest and most powerful state in

¹⁷Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New York: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁸Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*.

¹⁹Chakrovorty, “China’s Soft Power in Bangladesh.”

South Asian politics as compared to the non-Indian categories of states. The paper also highlights that for China's soft power projection in South Asia, the only state facing challenge and in reaction challenging China's soft power projection is India. The literature primarily focuses on China's soft power projection in the non-India categories of states. It also takes into account various Chinese strategies that are helping China to foot its presence in South Asia. These include cultural diplomacy and economic engagements to "prosper together" and build a benign image of a trustworthy power in South Asia²⁰.

Grace Natasya and Paween Rungtaweechai discuss the use of infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and cultural diplomacy as tools of China's "good neighborhood" policy to enhance its soft power in South Asia, especially in Nepal in their research paper "Is China Truly Friendly?: Case of China's "Good Neighbor" Policy toward Nepal" (2018). It explains in a very detailed manner how China is using its economic assistance and cultural diplomacy to achieve its desired foreign policy goals in South Asia. It takes the example of Nepal and the implementation of China's good neighbor policy. The paper highlights that due to China's economic initiatives in South Asia under BRI China is more profitable and more strategic and it dominates smaller South Asian countries politically, culturally, and economically. The paper also discusses different strategies China is using to enhance its soft power influence in the region. The paper considers China's large cultural centers, infrastructure development, language institutions, foreign direct investment, and economic cooperation as the means for achieving its foreign policy goals²¹.

Responses to China's Influence

Manjari Chatterjee Miller highlights the most important discourse about China's BRI in South Asia in his discussion paper "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia" (2022) published by the Council on Foreign Relations. The discussion paper separately discusses BRI in Pakistan, India, and all the small South Asian states. The paper debates the Chinese growing influence in South Asia and India's refusal to become part of the BRI in South Asia. It also examines why the small South Asian states are tilted towards China's BRI in South Asia to avoid India's dominant role in South Asian affairs. Small South Asian powers consider BRI in South

²⁰Palit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," June 8, 2010.

²¹Natasya and Rungtaweechai, "Is China Truly Friendly?: Case of China's 'Good Neighbor' Policy toward Nepal."

Asia as an alternative to India's traditional hegemonic role. The paper also deals with the opposition faced by China's budding influence in South Asia. However, the papers have research gaps as well, including India's concerns about Chinese influence in South Asia and the possible implications of China's weight age for India's hegemonic role in South Asia²².

Deep Pal systematically takes into account Chinese growing influence in the document titled "China's Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries" (2021). He examined the growing influence of China in South Asia and Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe. In South Asia, Pal studies four case states to observe Chinese influence. These are Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. According to the document, China's economic and political footprints have increased over the years and for that matter, there has been growing attention in the U.S. as well as other developing democratic nations. The paper highlights China's goals in detail due to its deep influence in South Asia. Apart from China's main asset of influence which is the economy the paper also discusses that the tools of influence are diversifying with each passing day. It also states that countries in partnership with China in South Asia are facing the problem of their teething, due to which they fall into the Chinese sphere of influence. It also observes India's prominent role in South Asia. From a Western perspective, the document believes that India is still more of a strategic significance for the West than China. Although the document is comprehensive, it does not cover all the states of South Asia, where China has a strong influence. It also ignores the most important actor (India) of South Asia in terms of Chinese influence and its implications for it²³.

Christian Wagner highlights the role of China and India in South Asia in his research paper "The Role of India and China in South Asia" (2016) India since its independence perceived itself as the dominant and regional power in South Asia. India perceived its neighbors as part of its sphere of influence. The paper discusses that India sees South Asia security as part of its national security over the years. Yet the Chinese regional connectivity and developmental projects in South Asia are increasing their influence in the region. This results in a competition where India and China are seeking to gain geopolitical and geo-economic interests in South Asia.

²²Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

²³Deep Pal, "China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-south-asia-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85552>.

To gain a deeper understanding of the nature of cooperation and rivalry between China and India, the research work examines four example states. These states include Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The paper also focuses on three areas of cooperation and competition which include security, economy, and politics²⁴.

BRI, Chinese Economic Initiatives and Soft Power

Jan P. Voon and Xinpeng Xu in their research paper “Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China’s soft power: preliminary evidence” (2019) highlight that BRI which is commonly perceived as an institution for regional connectivity and boosting trade relations, yet it also help China increase its global image and soft power. The paper discusses that today many international relations scholars perceive China’s soft power or its image as the greatest strategic threat. The paper also states that the so-called “China threat theory” has been replaced by its increasing soft power at the international level. It considers China’s BRI as a grand public diplomacy plan by China to integrate China internally as well as with the rest of the world. It helped many developing countries to build infrastructural networks by closely working with China under the Belt and Road Initiative²⁵.

Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Md Ziaul Haque Sheikh focused on the Belt and Road Initiative in their research paper “Impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative on regional stability in South Asia” (2021). The paper examines critically Chinese investments under BRI in five South Asian states. These states include Bangladesh, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. According to the research work done by Ahmed and Haque China is providing alternatives to its BRI partners in South Asia to minimize India’s dominance. The paper also highlights that as India proclaims to be the dominant power of South Asia, there is now greater competition between India and China to gain influence. The paper also argues that after declining the offer to join BRI, India tried to exert pressure on the smaller South Asian countries to avoid BRI. Based on Ayson’s model the paper categorized regional stability in South Asia into five different categories. A major conflict can be avoided, authority can be distributed steadily, institutions and norms can be upheld, internal politics can remain stable, and the economy and

²⁴Christian Wagner, “The Role of India and China in South Asia,” *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 307–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2016.1184790>.

²⁵Jan P. Voon and Xinpeng Xu, “Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China’s Soft Power: Preliminary Evidence,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Accounting & Economics* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 120–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16081625.2020.1686841>.

finances can remain stable. This is an extensive research study that uses China and India as its main study variables²⁶.

Daniele Carminati in his research article “The economics of soft power: reliance on economic resources and instrumentality in economic gains” (2020) explains soft power in a very detailed manner. The paper discusses that the concept of soft power has witnessed changes over the period by absorbing economic power. Carminati highlighted that soft power cannot achieve its desired results without an economy. The paper takes China’s BRI as a case study to present the soft-economic power nexus. It criticizes Nye’s soft power as “too soft” to achieve tangible outcomes. This paper examines a lot of literature that proves that contemporary international relations increasingly rely on economic resources to enhance their soft power. Yet this paper didn’t consider China’s soft power at regional levels by taking the case study of a specific region/country²⁷.

RESEARCH GAP

The rise of China and its growing influence in international politics is a well-known phenomenon. However, after thoroughly analyzing the literature it is observed that there is limited literature on the topic under research, particularly in terms of the troika of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The researcher also finds that there is a very limited application of the “soft power” concept concerning Chinese economic influence and its notion of soft power in South Asia by using the economy as a tool of its foreign policy to enhance its soft power in the region. The researcher also finds that there exists a gap in the available literature on China’s soft power projection in South Asia, particularly taking a case study of those countries that fall under the diplomatic influence of India.

Furthermore, most of the literature is focused on China’s economic rise and its global implications from a realist perspective. Yet this study attempts to fill the gap by observing Chinese soft power influence in South Asia from the conceptual lens of soft power to achieve

²⁶Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Md Ziaul Haque Sheikh, “Impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative on Regional Stability in South Asia,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 271–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2021.2001985>.

²⁷Carminati, “The Economics of Soft Power: Reliance on Economic Resources and Instrumentality in Economic Gains.”

different results from the existing literature. Therefore, this study applies the theoretical framework of soft power to examine Chinese influence at a regional level in South Asia and its possible implications for India's regional dominant role over the smaller South Asian countries. It also uncovers the concerns of the South Asian countries over Chinese soft power projection in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

CORE ARGUMENT

The economic rise of China has enabled the country to leverage its economic power to strengthen its soft power at both regional and global level. In South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, China's strategies for building soft power diverge from the Western notion of soft power, leading to an increase in Chinese influence in the region. This growing influence is challenging India's dominant regional role in South Asia, while simultaneously enhancing China's image and soft power posture as a reliable regional power in these countries. Therefore, it is essential to investigate whether China's distinct approach to soft power projection is effectively magnifying its soft power in the region, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical concept of Soft Power is applied to this research work China's Soft Power Projection in South Asia: A Case Study of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal by examining how China is using its cultural, economic, public, and diplomatic resources to influence the perceptions and behaviors of South Asian countries by projecting soft power.

The concept of soft power was put forward by Joseph S. Nye to counter the argument that American power is in decline. He defined soft power as "it is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies²⁸." Nye considers the role of soft power as significant for setting the agenda and attracting other states in international politics, by not employing threatening military force or through economic sanctions but by soft means to co-opt leaders and individuals.

²⁸Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*.

Soft power also refers to the second face of power, which is the capacity to persuade people to do what they want without using force²⁹. In contrast to the hard form of power, the idea of soft power was presented and introduced as an alternative. The capacity to influence other governments' priorities through non-coercive ways is the basic foundation of soft power in international affairs. Three categories comprise Joseph S. Nye's soft ways of acquiring soft power. According to Joseph Nye, a state's foreign policy, culture, and political principles are the factors that contribute to soft power³⁰.

In the realm of international relations, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power serves as a guiding framework for understanding how nations wield influence through attraction, persuasion, and co-option rather than coercion. China's engagement with South Asia, particularly through initiatives targeting Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, exemplifies the strategic implementation of soft power principles to achieve diplomatic objectives and enhance regional influence. Cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and public engagement emerge as key mechanisms through which China endeavors to project soft power in the region, leveraging its cultural heritage, economic prowess, and diplomatic outreach.

At the core of China's soft power strategy in South Asia lays cultural diplomacy, embodying Nye's notion that the attractiveness of a nation's culture and values can shape preferences and behavior on the global stage. By promoting Chinese language, arts, and traditions through initiatives like the Confucius Institutes and cultural exchange programs, China seeks to cultivate cultural affinity and forge bonds of mutual understanding with South Asian societies. Such endeavors not only facilitate people-to-people connections but also foster a positive perception of China as a cultural ally and partner in the region, aligning with Nye's assertion that soft power emanates from the attractiveness of a nation's culture and values.

Furthermore, China's economic engagement in South Asia epitomizes the instrumentalization of soft power to achieve strategic objectives and enhance regional influence. Through investments in infrastructure projects, development assistance, and trade agreements, China positions itself as a catalyst for economic growth and development in Bangladesh, Sri

²⁹Nye.

³⁰Carminati, "The Economics of Soft Power: Reliance on Economic Resources and Instrumentality in Economic Gains."

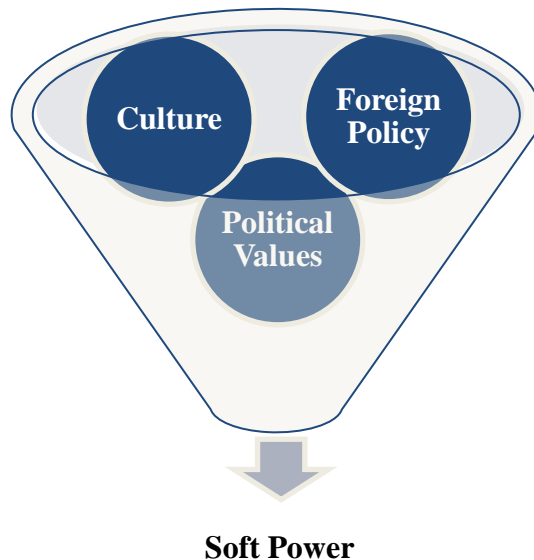
Lanka, and Nepal. This economic interdependence not only bolsters China's economic interests but also engenders a sense of gratitude and reciprocity among South Asian nations, aligning with Nye's contention that soft power operates through the ability to shape preferences and behavior based on attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Thus, the implementation of soft power principles in China's engagement with South Asia underscores the nuanced interplay between culture, economics, and diplomacy in shaping regional dynamics and enhancing China's influence in the broader Indo-Pacific context.

Nonetheless, modern research studies of International Relations view soft power as reliant on a state's financial capacity to achieve the desired results. In today's international relations, soft power is reliant on financial resources³¹. A significant amount of work on modern international relations examines the interaction between soft and economic power.

Keeping in view the developments in and the enhancement of soft power sources in contemporary international relations the researcher considers China's economic initiatives as tools of its foreign policy to achieve its desired outcomes in South Asia by enhancing its soft power. Besides cultural and diplomatic tools China is using economic cooperation and trade agreements as a way to enhance its influence in the complex interdependent world, especially its soft power in South Asia. For example, China has signed trade and investment agreements with several South Asian countries, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, etc. These agreements not only promote economic ties between China and these countries but also enhance China's image as a reliable partner in the region.

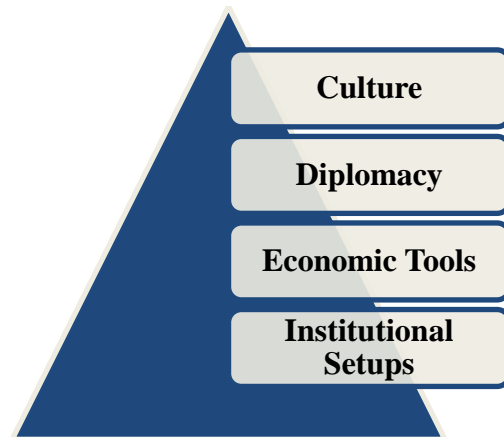
³¹Carminati.

The Concept of Soft Power



Source: Based on Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power

China's conceived notion of Soft Power

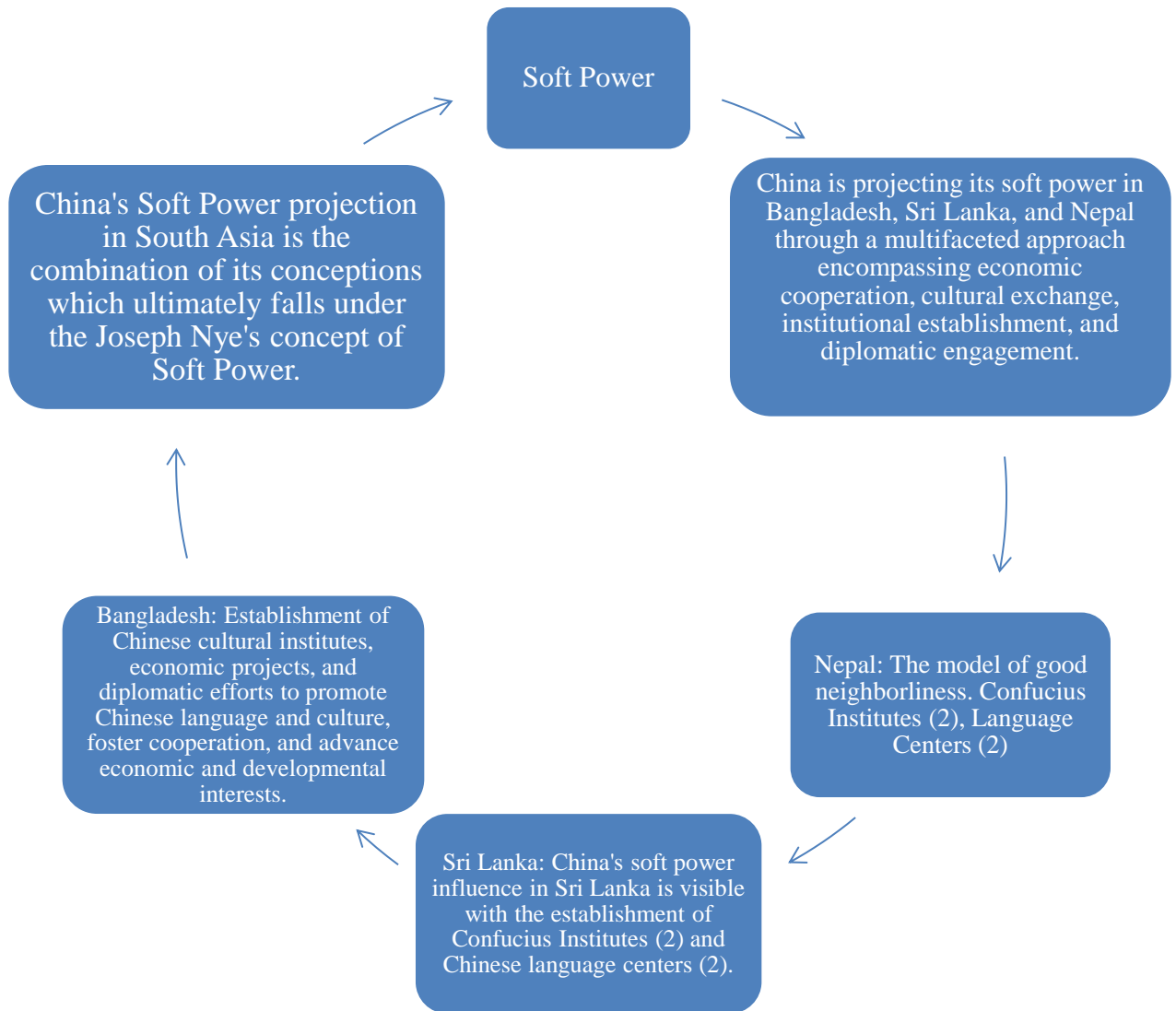


Source: Based on multiple sources, abstracted from the current literature on the Chinese notion of Soft Power.

Overall, China's use of economic influence as a tool of soft power is aimed at promoting its interests in the region by taking full advantage of its huge economic resources. China is enhancing its image as a responsible global power, and strengthening its position in the competition for influence with India and other regional powers in the region. As a result, the use

of the economy as a tool of soft power with Chinese characteristics is enhancing its influence and helping achieve its preferred foreign policy outcomes in the region by projecting its soft power.

Application of the concept of soft power



Source: Author's own insights based on analysis

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study has used a qualitative method of research. The qualitative method has helped to explore the complexities of the relationships between China, India, and other South Asian countries. It has provided insights into the political, economic, and cultural factors that

shape Chinese influence in the region. This research study is exploratory and based on thematic analysis, as the researcher had tried to explore and understand China's soft power projection in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal by examining the various themes and patterns of China's soft power influence in these countries. For conducting this research work, data is collected through primary and secondary sources.

The primary source of this research work includes interviews with prominent academicians and scholars. In the case of interviewing foreign scholars, the researcher has followed all the possible means especially virtual interviewing is been preferred. On top of this, the researcher has conducted interviews by posing open-ended and probing questions for an in-depth understanding of China's soft power projection in South Asia. Furthermore, the researcher has collected data through secondary sources. These include data collected from books, Journals, Magazines, articles, reports, and newspapers. Apart from the above-mentioned sources government official policy documents and reports, websites, and e-libraries are also taken into consideration.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As a basic research, this research study enhances and adds to the previous stock of knowledge about the emergence of China and its sway towards South Asia. Due to the lack of research work in this specific area in the context of Chinese increasing soft power influence in South Asia and its geo-political and geo-economic implications for India's regional dominant role. The research work not only benefits the students of International Relations, researchers, and scholars but is also helpful to various governmental and Non-governmental Media houses, especially those focused on South Asian affairs. This research also helps in seeking the attention of intellectuals, policymakers, politicians, and political leaders toward the ever-growing importance of Chinese engagements in South Asia and beyond.

This research study provides detailed information about China's foreign policy towards South Asia and how it uses economic means as an agent of its foreign policy. Furthermore, it highlights Chinese sources of soft power influence in South Asia and its engagements with various South Asian countries which include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. It also sheds light on smaller South Asian countries, particularly India's responses to Chinese influence in its

neighborhood. Keeping in view the gravity of the topic, it facilitates Scholars of International Relations to gain deep analysis and reliable data on the most important issue of South Asian politics.

DELIMITATION

The economic rise of China and its possible economic muscels pulling out into other parts of the globe is always in scope. However, there has been increasing engagement of China under the shadow of BRI in South Asia, which is raising some serious questions regarding India's traditional role in the region. This research work is primarily focused on China's increasing soft power influence in South Asia, especially taking into consideration a case study of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to gain a better understanding of the topic under research. Secondly, this study emphasizes on ramifications for India's traditional dominant role in the region due to Chinese growing influence in South Asia.

Furthermore, this research work predominantly focuses on those projects and initiatives taken by the government of the People's Republic of China in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. This study includes Bilateral, multilateral, and institutional initiatives in these focused countries. This limits the scope of the study only to the mentioned states in South Asia. Apart from the dominant powers of China and India other South Asian states are also part of this study, mainly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as a case study. Moreover, the application of soft power limits the room for Chinese military engagements and power struggles between China and India. The delimitation of the study in this context is that this research work predominantly focuses on the economic engagements of China in South Asia rather than the military engagements. Also, the research closely zooms in on the events and initiatives of the PRC in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal from 2013-2023 which helped China enhance its soft power in the region.

ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 01: China's Soft Power Expansion in South Asia

This chapter includes a detail research work on addressing the question of how China is expanding its soft power influence in South Asia.

Chapter 02: China's Strategies for Enhancing its Soft Power in South Asia

This chapter highlights in detail the strategies China is using to enhance its soft power influence in South Asia.

Chapter 03: Case Studies of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal

This chapter explores the utilization of Chinese soft power elements in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. It also highlights China's efforts to project soft power in these three countries under examination.

Chapter 04: Response of South Asian Countries: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal

This chapter includes a range of the reactions and responses of South Asian countries, particularly Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh to China's soft power projection in South Asia.

Chapter 1

China's Soft Power Expansion in South Asia

In international politics, power is considered as the chief concept of almost all the grand theories of International Relations. Among the leading theorists of International Relations, the main theme of the debate was/is power and power politics. These theorists endeavored to elucidate the scope and ramifications of power on the conduct of both states and individuals within their respective domains of inquiry. Mostly, it was seen in terms of how one state influences or controls the behavior of another entity in the international system by using all the possible means, including force³². This type of thought about power politics is mainly associated with the realist school of thought.

However, with the change in world order the definition and interpretation of power also changed. With the emergence of the New World Order, the employment of military means and the use of traditional hard power to achieve national interests came under severe criticism³³. Although hard power remains impotent in international relations, its legitimacy and effectiveness are declining with the dynamic nature of the international system and the emergence of international law, international organizations, and multilateralism. Hence, the concept of soft power emerged as an alternative approach to hard power. The concept of soft power is characterized by cooperation and partnership, instead of power projection in the case of hard power³⁴.

1. Western Notion of Soft Power

Joseph Nye for the first time developed the term “Soft Power” in his well know book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* published in 1990. Further Joseph Nye explained the term soft power in his book *The Paradox of American Power* published in 2001, by spending a dozen or more pages on explaining and relating soft power to the U.S. hard

³²Shweta Karki and Sarashree Dhungana, “Soft Power in International Relations: Opportunities for Small States like Nepal,” *Journal of International Affairs* 3 (2020): 162–79.

³³Dharma Bahadur Baniya, “Soft Power in the Contemporary World: Recommendations To the Small States’ Security,” *Unity Journal* 2 (February 2021), https://www.academia.edu/73706411/Soft_Power_in_the_Contemporary_World_Recommendations_to_the_Small_States_SecurityUnity.

³⁴Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson, *Going Public: Diplomacy for the Information Society* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2000), <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/going-public-diplomacy-for-the-information-society/>.

power³⁵. The pioneer of the term defined, explained, and elaborated soft power in detail in his famous book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* published in 2005. Joseph Nye defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”³⁶. A state can attract other states through cooperation and being attractive rather than using force and coercion to influence the behavior of others. The currency's soft power implies attracting others and influencing their acts including culture, values, and foreign policy³⁷.

Soft power is increasingly dominating as a central component of a state's foreign policy to achieve its national interests. Scholars like Nye argue that soft power is stepping-up its relevance in countries' power matrix, making the hard power era ebbing away. On the flip side, a new era of soft power has emerged with normative power and intangible sources of power taking the stage of international relations³⁸. Scholars argue that it is the soft power that works in the background of the more visible form of hard power in the shape of military and economic might in the international system.

1.1 Sources of Soft Power

Joseph Nye identified three main sources of soft power: foreign policy, political ideals, and culture. A nation endowed with a desirable culture, widely recognized values, and a foreign policy accepted by other governments can exert influence over others without resorting to coercion—a tactic known as soft power. The discussion that follows goes into further depth on the history of soft power and the principles that support it.

³⁵Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*.

³⁶Nye.

³⁷Baniya, “Soft Power in the Contemporary World: Recommendations To the Small States’ Security.”

³⁸Obja Borah Hazarika and Vivek Mishra, “South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China,” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 20, no. 03 (2016): 112–19.

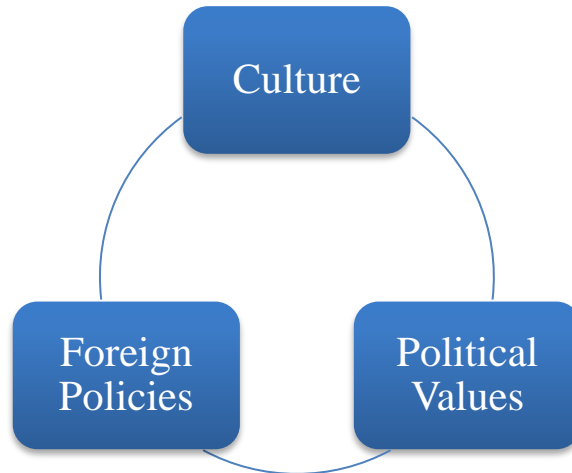


Figure 1 Sources of Soft Power

Source: Composed based on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power

1.1.1 Culture

The term culture has many meanings and manifestations. However, most comprehensively it can be defined as the set of ideas, values, and practices of a particular society. Culture gives meaning to the values and practices of a distinct group of people. Both forms of culture, whether high or popular play an important role in constructing a positive or otherwise image of a nation both domestically and globally.

A country with universal values and practices that are familiar to the outside world is easily acceptable. States like individuals feel attracted towards those states having a relationship of attraction between its common values and interests. This creates a sense of friendship and attractiveness. On the other side, states with narrow values are less likely to work as a centripetal force to produce soft power³⁹. Joseph Nye argues that culture should not be simply treated as a power of popular culture, but the effectiveness of any source of soft power depends on the context. For instance, America's cultural soft power may have opposite effects in Saudi Arabia but will have different results in any other liberal society of the world. In Nye's view culture is one of the three major sources of soft power, which enables states to influence others without using force or violence. Likewise, the German Editor Josef Joffe argues about American cultural soft power as it is much larger than the US economy and military. He compares US soft power

³⁹Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*.

with the Roman and Soviet power by claiming that American's soft power rules over an empire on which the sun never sets⁴⁰.

1.1.2 Political Values

Political values are considered the major source of soft power. According to Joseph Nye America exports its political values across the world by using the minds of the millions of students every year who study in American universities when they return homelands. Joseph Nye explains in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* that most Chinese leaders sent their sons or daughters to the US for educational purposes⁴¹. These Chinese students who studied in the US present a realistic view of the US, which often contradicts Chinese official propaganda.

Political values at home and abroad are the source of the soft power of any country. Those political values that face criticism domestically or globally, or at different world forms result in unpopularity at both stages and result negatively in a country's soft power. Political values such as promoting democracy, human rights, and a free market economy play a critical role in boosting a country's soft power. For instance, after the disintegration of the USSR in 1990 the US was taken for granted as the sole power of the world. Its political values were considered as the highest stage of human development and the victory of the western political values and norms. The Yugoslav scholar Milovan Djilas summed up US political values soft power that if the US weakens "then the way is open to everything bad"⁴².

However, on the other side when the US political values started spreading with the use of force and coercion to install democratic governments, and introduced human rights with humanitarian intervention and sanctions soft power dimmed. A British author, W. T. Stead termed the phenomena "The Americanization of the world"⁴³. It resulted in a negative image of the US famously known as Anti-Americanism. The wave of Anti-Americanism spread all across the globe, especially in the Muslim world where the US was involved in promoting democracy,

⁴⁰Josef Joffe, "Who's Afraid of Mr. Big?," *The National Interest*, June 1, 2001, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/whos-afraid-of-mr-big-1201>.

⁴¹Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*.

⁴²Nye.

⁴³Nye.

nation-building, human rights, and later on fighting terrorism but with a different approach of power politics rather than using soft and political means to pursue its goals⁴⁴.

1.1.3 Foreign Policy

Foreign policies of countries also affect their soft power status. The status of any country's soft power is enhanced when its actions towards other states are soft instead of using hard power sources. A state's foreign policy promotes its image as a responsible power/partner when it follows the internationally recognized rules of international law. On the other hand countries with foreign policy goals based on selfish and narrow national interests often undermine their soft power. For instance, the US 2003 foreign policy action of invading Iraq made the US unpopular in the international state. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the large majority of people in different countries of the world said that they find distasteful American's growing influence in their respective countries⁴⁵.

It was also observed that without the United Nations authorization, many states declined to participate in the US peacekeeping missions in Iraq. And after the war polls showed a fall in the popularity of the United States and surprisingly an increase in the popularity of Osama bin Laden. Even the US close allies of Europe, during polls, showed that the Iraq war washed away the sympathy and goodwill the US gained in the eyes of European countries for the US due to 9/11⁴⁶. This makes clear that a country's foreign policy actions receive different reactions from other countries. Soft, cooperation-based, and non-interventionist foreign policies attract other countries and build a positive image. However, opposite to this aggressive, hawkish, and interventionist foreign policies result in a state's unpopularity at the global level, resulting in the decline of soft power.

1.2 The Chinese Notion of Soft Power

The idea of soft power dates back to hundreds of years in Chinese culture, even though Nye first used it in 1990. The preference for gentle power over strong force dates back to ancient China. The conventional knowledge from China's past demonstrates the significance of soft

⁴⁴Nadeem F. Paracha, "Anti-Americanism in Pakistan: A Brief History," *Dawn*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1144214>.

⁴⁵Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Views of a Changing World June 2003" (Washington, DC: Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2003), <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2003/06/Views-Of-A-Changing-World-2003.pdf>.

⁴⁶Pew Global Attitudes Project.

power in both their internal and global systems. Some Chinese proverbs that illustrate the use of soft power in the ancient Chinese community include 濫柔克剛 yirouke gang (use soft and gentle tactics to defeat the hard and powerful) and 滴水穿石 di shuichuanshi⁴⁷ (drips of water can penetrate a stone).

In China's history, the employment of soft power has rarely been a recent phenomenon, during the reign of Zhu Di, the Youngle Emperor and third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Admiral Zheng He, a famous military leader and explorer used soft power. In an attempt to demonstrate the Ming Dynasty's might and wealth, Zheng He embarked on a charm offensive that took him across the Indian and South China Seas and through many nations. In the 15th century, Zheng He was considered a renowned navigator and visited most of the Asian and African waters with ships full of gifts. Recent African newspapers refer to Zheng He as the first leader and example of using soft power by carrying Chinese treasures to the Kenyan coast and in return, the imperial court of Kenya gifted a giraffe⁴⁸.

In contemporary international relations, the Chinese notion of soft power is broader in scope and includes not only those sources pointed out by Nye but much more. It is believed that the Chinese notion of soft power is the expanded version of the one codified by Nye in his work. Scholars use this argument because the Chinese version of soft power includes those sources that the West may not regard⁴⁹. These sources of China's soft power enhancement include economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, soft-power-oriented economic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and institutional setups for promoting its image. The use of these sources as elements of soft power is termed as soft power with Chinese characteristics.

⁴⁷Ying Fan, "Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (May 29, 2008): 147–58.

⁴⁸Liu Guangyuan, "From Giraffe the Diplomat to 'Peace Arl,'" *Daily Nation*, October 11, 2010, http://ke.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zxyw/201010/t20101011_6815652.htm.

⁴⁹AshmitaRana, "Struggle and Success of Chinese Soft Power: The Case of China in South Asia," *E-International Relations*, 2022, <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/11/14/struggle-and-success-of-chinese-soft-power-the-case-of-china-in-south-asia/>.

1.3 Sources of Chinese Soft Power

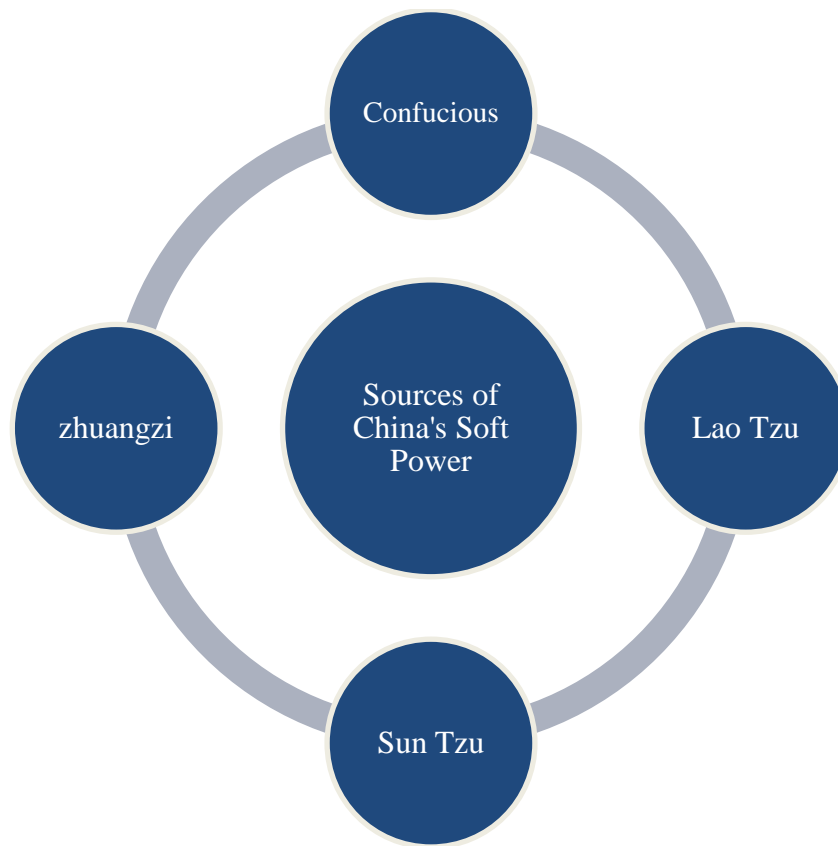


Figure 2 Sources of Chinese Soft Power

Source: Author's Own Insights

The source of China's soft power is the teaching of the great Chinese scholars and thinkers. Their ideas and thoughts sound unique giving birth to contemporary Chinese thoughts on soft power. The concept of soft power in China emanates from the philosophy of Confucius, Lao Tzu, Sun Tzu, and Zhuangzi. The idea of soft power dates back to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu⁵⁰. The famous Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu argues about soft power "Whatever is soft is strong."⁵¹ Also, the idea of soft power is closely associated with the teaching of Confucius, the

⁵⁰Palit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," June 8, 2010.

⁵¹Leah Averitt, "Semaphore: Chinese Hospital Ships and Soft Power," *Sea Power Center*, no. 3 (April 2011), <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-03-11#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20philosopher%2C%20Lao%20Tzu,soft%20power%20is%20not%20new.>

famous Chinese philosopher. Confucius advises the rulers of China to win the loyalties of the people at home and abroad with virtue (Soft power) and not with the use of force (hard power)⁵².

Some even relate it to Chinese strategist Sun Tzu who states that a perfect plan is not to win a war with bloodshed, but a perfect plan is to win the war against your adversary without any fighting and causing any bodily damage⁵³. Furthermore, the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu championed winning a battle without fighting. Later on, many other ancient Chinese scholars like Mencius and Zhuangzi advocated the use of soft power instead of hard power to influence the behavior of others. The famous Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's thoughts reflect the use of soft power/means to achieve desired goals and objectives in life. Zhuangzi's thoughts are mainly drawn from the Laozi philosophy. However, Zhuangzi is known for its harmonious practice and knowledge of how to save the blade edge⁵⁴. Zhuangzi, as an expert in economics from ancient China prefers solutions for financial/economic crises that are beyond the immediate.

1.4 Role of Chinese Leadership

China's ancient history, which was characterized by a rich cultural legacy and intellectual traditions like Confucianism, is where the country's soft power originated. However, Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" strategy in the late 1970s marked a paradigm shift in China's foreign policy outlook⁵⁵. Deng departed from Mao's dogmatic ideology in favor of pragmatic diplomacy and economic progress. China's entry into the world economy began during this time, with the development of alliances based on shared political ideals and economic interests.

The notion of a "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" was promoted by the Chinese leadership in the early years of the twenty-first century, which marked a significant shift in the country's soft power strategy. This ideology marked a dramatic change away from hard force and

⁵²Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (2008), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670560802000191>.

⁵³Hassan Jalil Shah, Qasir Ajmal Khattak, and Saman Attiq, "Soft Power and Its Efficacy: A Case Study of Pakistan," *Islamabad Policy Research Institute* 16, no. 2 (2016): 119–39.

⁵⁴Emmanuel Lincot, "China, A New Cultural Strength? Soft Power and Sharp Power," *Asia Focus* (Institut De Relations Internationales Et Strategiques, April 2019).

⁵⁵ Adastra, "Chinese Leadership: From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power,'" *Adastra Fellows*, December 8, 2020, <https://adastra.org.ua/blog/chinese-leadership-from-soft-power-to-sharp-power>.

towards soft power, seeking to allay international fears that China's rising influence would not be a danger. Interestingly, the definition of "soft power" as used by the Chinese government was first stated on October 15, 2007, during the XVII National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in a political report given by Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee⁵⁶. Hu Jintao listed four essential tasks to develop China's "soft power" in the context of establishing Chinese-style socialism:

- 1) The establishment of a system of fundamental socialist values, the fortification of the socialist ideology's attracting and cementing forces;
- 2) The development of a harmonious culture and the teaching of civilized customs;
- 3) The dissemination of national culture throughout the world and the construction of the Chinese people's common spiritual centre;
- 4) The encouragement of cultural innovation and the bolstering of the vitality of cultural development.

Under Xi Jinping, China's soft power policy has placed a strong emphasis on the nation's dedication to responsible global leadership, as seen by its involvement in global governance, greater membership in international organizations, and participation in international peacekeeping operations. This strategy now heavily relies on the "Chinese Dream" narrative, which fosters wealth and national renewal on a local and international level. The purpose of this story is to present China as an alternative to Western paradigms, serving as a model for government and development.

Xi Jinping (2014) highlighted the need of bolstering China's soft power, saying, "We should present a good Chinese narrative, increase China's soft power, and better communicate China's message to the world."⁵⁷ This call to action emphasizes how crucial it is to develop a strong national narrative that connects China's rising political and economic power to the rest of the world, therefore making the country more likeable and appealing to foreigners.

⁵⁶ Adastra.

⁵⁷ Chiara Cacco and Sahibzada Muhammad Usman, "Chinese Soft Power and An Emerging Global Influence," *Stratheia*, January 14, 2024, <https://stratheia.com/chinese-soft-power-and-an-emerging-global-influence/>.

In order to increase their influence globally, Chinese leaders have also made use of classic soft power instruments like language promotion, educational exchanges, media expansion, and pop culture icons. This strategy emphasizes the idea that charismatic national leaders can be used as resources for soft power, potentially increasing their influence in the field of soft power.

1.5 Tools of China's Soft Power

China is not only using culture, political values, and foreign policy to promote its soft power. The means and ways China is using these sources to portray its soft power also include economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and institutional setups. Chinese tools of Power are mostly economic-based, using all the available ways and means of economy to promote its image as a trustworthy partner and major power. The last fifty years have shown that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which were initially proposed by China and India remain relevant for fostering world peace and harmony. The fundamental tenets of international law, which direct governments towards progress, peace, and the defense of rights, are non-aggression, non-interference, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

Over time, China has expanded on these principles to include the rejection of hegemonism, recognition of each state's right to self-determination, respect for sovereignty, and the promotion of a just and equitable international economic order, with the United Nations playing a key role. The observance of these principles has fostered a deep understanding and mutual trust between China and South Asian countries, serving as a cornerstone of their bilateral ties.

According to Professor Dr. Moonis Ahmar, former Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Karachi China's tools of influence include connectivity, trade, aid, and diplomacy based on the Chinese five principles of peaceful coexistence⁵⁸. The tools of Chinese soft power are discussed below.

1.5.1 Economic Cooperation

Instead of cultural influence China is using economic cooperation as the major driver behind its soft power image. Economic cooperation helped China to boost its soft power from

⁵⁸Moonis Ahmar, Online, November 23, 2023.

30th to 5th position worldwide from 2015 to 2023 respectively⁵⁹. Chinese economic cooperation includes helping developing countries in South Asia and beyond to develop infrastructure, strengthen their communication systems, and fulfill their energy needs. The most obvious example is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The official white paper of the People's Republic of China titled “China's Peaceful Development Road” highlights the peaceful development of China by linking the development of China with the rest of the world⁶⁰. Likewise, China considers South Asian countries as part of its policy to seek cooperation and promote development by providing aid, loans, FDI, and grants to avoid awful economic situations.

1.5.2 Cultural Influence

Culture is considered as the source of soft power, and China is using its ancient and rich cultural heritage as the main source of its soft power. With the popularity of the uniqueness of culture and its portrayal at the regional and international events, China had planned to arrange and participate in countless events at the international cultural centers all over the world. According to Lai and Lu in these cultural events, China's participation is to enhance its image and its cultural influence at the global level⁶¹. Chinese cultural events are organized and celebrated by Chinese embassies, consulates, and students worldwide. These events include Chinese movie events, displays of art, traditional Chinese gymnastics shows, customary cuisine and dietary celebrations, Chinese cultural weeks, and Chinese festival celebrations (New Year, mid-autumn)⁶². Along with this China is building a network of strong culture representation and promoting its peaceful economic rise. In this regard China started to establish Confucius institutes, China Cultural Centers, Confucius classrooms, and China language centers all across the world to build the perception of the peaceful rise of China and enhance its soft power to gain its foreign policy goals.

⁵⁹Brand Finance, “Global Soft Power Index 2023” (Brand Finance, March 2023), <https://softpower.brandfinance.com/2023/globalsoftpowerindex>.

⁶⁰Information Office of the State Council, “China's Peaceful Development” (Information Office of the State Council, September 2011), http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm.

⁶¹Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2012), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203122099/china-soft-power-international-relations-hongyi-lai-yiyi-lu>.

⁶²Jayani D. Jayasundara, “China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives” (University of Turku, 2023).

1.5.3 Diplomacy

In 2023, China abruptly increased its budget for diplomacy by 12.2% to increase its diplomatic engagements after the zero-COVID policy and the end of COVID-19, which pushed many states to close their doors to foreign nationals⁶³. According to China's former foreign minister, Qin Gang, "China's diplomacy has pressed the accelerator button", emphasizing China's resumption of its diplomatic engagements and international exchanges⁶⁴. The diplomatic budget is not only used to spend on foreign trips, but according to China's Ministry of Finance the term "diplomatic expenditure" includes budgets for foreign ministry, Chinese embassies and consulates, foreign aid, participation in international organizations, and external propaganda⁶⁵.

China's soft power diplomacy revolves around a harmonious society and its peaceful rise and development. For this purpose Chinese diplomacy can be divided into; public diplomacy, soft-power oriented economic diplomacy, political diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. Using diplomatic tools China is increasing its soft power footprints all across the globe, especially in its neighborhood through its "good neighborhood" policy⁶⁶.

1.5.4 Institutional Setups

Regional or international institution building is considered as the main driver behind the recognition and acceptance of ideas and political values⁶⁷. Some degree of institutionalization is necessary to have shared expectations and understanding in the international system⁶⁸. Likewise, China is developing various institutions to promote its values and principles to achieve its foreign policy goals of enhancing China's soft power influence. The institutional building process is parallel to the already established institutes. These institutions help China to initiate new rules and norms with small and gradual effects⁶⁹. China has established various institutes

⁶³Cobus van Staden, "China Announces Double-Digit Budget Increase for Diplomacy," *China Global South Project*, March 9, 2023, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2023/03/09/china-announces-double-digit-budget-increase-for-diplomacy/>.

⁶⁴Nectar Gan, "China Ups Diplomatic Offensive with Drastic Increase in Budget – and Hardened Stance on US," *CNN*, March 9, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/08/china/china-budget-diplomatic-expenditure-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁶⁵Gan.

⁶⁶Natasya and Rungtawechai, "Is China Truly Friendly?: Case of China's 'Good Neighbor' Policy toward Nepal."

⁶⁷Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "The Institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific: Problems and Prospects," *Oxford University Press* 96, no. 1 (2020): 149–68.

⁶⁸Robert Keohane, "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research," *Sage Journals* 45, no. 4 (1990), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/002070209004500401?journalCode=ijxa>.

⁶⁹Gerald Chan, "China Faces the World: Making Rules for a New Order?," *Journal of Global Policy and Governance*, June 21, 2013, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40320-013-0022-7>.

and organizations that help China achieve its foreign policy objectives. For instance, the AIIB, Chinese Development Bank, New Development Bank, and Silk Road Fund are among those prominent. China is also using the platform of organizations like the SCO to ensure the participation of adversary states like Pakistan and India.

China is developing its soft power by using institutional setups for multifarious purposes. Institutions like the AIIB provide loans, especially to Asian countries, and India is the largest loan taker from the AIIB⁷⁰. Although India is the major critic of Chinese economic initiatives, however, the institutional setups make the international system intelligible.

1.6 China's Soft Power in South Asia

Since 1950s Chinese foreign policy is distinctive and mostly focused on portraying China's image as a peace-loving, cooperative, stable, responsible, people-based, and non-interventionist power. The application of China's soft power projection in small South Asian countries is profound and reflective. China's soft power projection in South Asia has the perfect space for extending its sphere of influence. China in the past few decades has superseded the influence of the US and India in South Asia⁷¹. Overall China's policy towards South Asia can mainly be divided into two categories "India" and "Non-India"⁷². Except for India, and Bhutan, China is successful in projecting its soft power in South Asia. China's engagement with South Asian countries both bilaterally and multilaterally has enhanced South Asia's strategic priority for China. Several reasons make South Asia important for China. For instance, South Asia is the most contagious region in Tibet and Xinjiang. It is also important for China because major trade routes and sea lanes straddle in this region.

In the wake of fast-changing regional and global power dynamics, the partnership between Pakistan and China is cited as the model of inter-state relationships. China-Pakistan friendship is often defined by Chinese leaders as an "iron brother" and "all-weather friend."⁷³ The all-weather friendship of China-Pakistan got higher than the mountains when China launched the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan. Policymakers consider

⁷⁰Ananth Krishnan, "One-Third of Funding by AIIB Has Gone to India," *The Hindu*, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/one-third-of-funding-by-aiib-has-gone-to-india/article32699050.ece>.

⁷¹Tara Rao, "The Extent of China's Soft Power Influence in South Asia," *Young Voices*, 2020.

⁷²Palit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," June 8, 2010.

⁷³"Full Text of President Xi Jinping's Speech to the Parliament in Pakistan," 2015, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pak-China_Year_of_Friendly_Exchange_Doc-1.docx.pdf.

the Chinese flagship project of CPEC as the “game changer” for Pakistan⁷⁴. The research paper “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and soft power in Pakistan: an examination of the local English-language press” concludes after examining 651 reports from seven newspapers that the positive reporting of China in Pakistani newspapers is directly linked with Chinese soft power⁷⁵. China’s soft power influence in Pakistan is a success story of Chinese soft power projection in South Asia.

In addition to Pakistan other South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Nepal also reflect the success stories of China’s soft power influence. Concerning soft power engagements with Bangladesh in 1979 China proposed an agreement of cooperation with Bangladesh. This agreement helps to establish and strengthen cooperation in culture, bilateral exchanges, education, sports, and media⁷⁶. The most recent soft power gesture from China towards Bangladesh is the agreement in the shape of a reduction of tariff to zero on 97% of Bangladeshi exports to China. This accounts for almost 97% of Bangladeshi total exports to China, and in terms of numbers 8,256 Bangladeshi products witness a reduction in tariff to zero⁷⁷. Likewise, China offers infrastructure development, economic and technical assistance, strong diplomatic partnerships, and scholarships for Bangladeshi Students.

China is taking a keen interest in promoting its soft power in Afghanistan. Although agreements exist on cultural cooperation, boundary protocols, and agreement on economic and technical cooperation between China and Afghanistan. However, China is interested in developing strong connections to the new Afghan government. China is the first country who strikes an economic deal with the war-ravaged country under the Afghan Taliban. The contract includes extraction of oil from the Amu Darya basin. The initial investment for the first year of

⁷⁴Wang Xu, “CPEC: A Game-Changer in the Changing World,” *Dawn*, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2386838/cpec-a-game-changer-in-the-changing-world>.

⁷⁵Muhammad Ittefaq, Zahid Shahab Ahmed, and Yadira Ixchel Martínez Pantoja, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Soft Power in Pakistan: An Examination of the Local English-Language Press,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 2023, 1–14.

⁷⁶Obja Borah Hazarika and Vivek Mishra, “Soft Power Contestation between India and China in South Asia,” *Prints Publications Pvt Ltd*. 11, no. 2 (2016): 139–52.

⁷⁷Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “Opportunities for Bangladesh Exporters as China Reduces Tariffs to Zero on 97% of All Products,” *China Briefing*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/opportunities-for-bangladesh-exporters-as-china-reduces-tariffs-to-zero-on-97-of-all-products/>.

the project includes investments of \$150m and \$540m over the next three years⁷⁸. China also provided a huge amount of aid after the US withdrawal to support the Afghan population. China donated 250 million Yuan (US\$37.4 million) to the Taliban-led Afghan government⁷⁹. According to Reuters China also provided US\$7.5 million as humanitarian aid after the country was hit by an earthquake that killed more than 1,000 people in June 2022⁸⁰. China is also developing the Aynak Cooper Mine and pouring investments into Afghanistan. China with the help of Islamabad concluded the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and in this regard signed several agreements with the Afghan government⁸¹.

China's soft power projection in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the cultural exchange program between the two countries facilitated by the agreement signed in 1979. Both countries enjoyed a good relationship until the severe criticism faced by both countries after the port of Hambantota was leased to China⁸². Instead of China's economic assistance and investments, infrastructure development, cultural exchanges and Confucius institutes, educational scholarships, media cooperation, and diplomatic cooperation China faced severe criticism, especially from the West. Western media links the Hambantota lease with "Debt-Trap" diplomacy and Chinese grand strategy. However, many others argue that the Hambantota port deal has little evidence of Beijing having any grand strategy⁸³. The recent balance-of-payment problem which led Sri Lanka to witness default had been in the making over the past several years. China helped Sri Lanka with a 2-year debt moratorium and got an IMF loan to reconstruct its economy⁸⁴. Although Western media is projecting China's negative image, both Sri Lanka and China are enjoying a good relationship. China's soft power influence in Sri Lanka is still

⁷⁸Saroj Kumar Aryal and Simant Shankar Bharti, "Evolution of 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' Since Independence," *Society* 60, no. 2 (April 2023): 224–32, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00819-y>.

⁷⁹Kate Zhang, "China Delivers US\$37 Million in Aid to Afghanistan, Fulfilling Promise to Taliban," *South China Morning Post*, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3184316/china-delivers-us37-million-aid-afghanistan-fulfilling-promise?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=3184316.

⁸⁰Reuters, "China to Provide \$7.5 Million in Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan, Foreign Ministry Says," *Reuters*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-provide-75-mln-humanitarian-aid-afghanistan-foreign-ministry-2022-06-25/>.

⁸¹Silk Road Briefing, "Afghanistan Accepted Into China's Belt & Road Initiative," *Silk Road Briefing*, May 29, 2023, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/05/29/afghanistan-accepted-into-chinas-belt-road-initiative/>.

⁸²Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

⁸³Nilanthi Samaranyake, "Chinese Belt and Road Investment Isn't All Bad—or Good," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/sri-lanka-china-bri-investment-debt-trap/>.

⁸⁴Reuters, "China Offers Sri Lanka a 2-Year Debt Moratorium," *Reuters*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/25/china-offers-sri-lanka-a-2-year-debt-moratorium.html>.

relevant and helped it bypass the difficult times of default with Chinese help. According to some experts, China has invested some \$23.9 billion in constructing roads, expressways, and building ports⁸⁵.

Likewise, China offers infrastructure development, economic and technical assistance, strong diplomatic partnerships, and scholarships for Nepalese Students. While on the other side, Nepal sees India with a “big brother” attitude that compels Nepal towards China⁸⁶. Even Nepal jointed the Chinese BRI as an alternative to avoid Nepal’s overdependence on India.

1.7 Conclusion

To conclude the above mention countries of South Asia can be classified into three categories. The first category includes those states of South Asia which falls under the group of states where Chinese soft power is dominant compared to India. These states include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Afghanistan. However, countries like Sri Lanka and Bhutan can be categorized as in-between. While, India and Maldives are at the opposite pole, having concerns over Chinese soft power projection in South Asia which can destabilize the region by losing the soft touch to the hard one.

⁸⁵Ganeshan Wignaraja et al., “Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka,” *Chatham House*, March 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/CHHJ8010-Sri-Lanka-RP-WEB-200324.pdf>.

⁸⁶Hazarika and Mishra, “South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China.”

Chapter 02

China's Strategies for enhancing its Influence in South Asia

A strategy is a plan of actions that fit together to reach a clear destination. This plan of action is designed to achieve the long-term goals of any state or entity⁸⁷. A strategy is considered to achieve one's goals by utilizing all the available means at any particular period under a particular situation. Setting goal/goals for a strategy is a political function of a state, which can be achieved through political, economic, and social mechanisms. A strategy does not only depend on its goals but the means available to achieve it on the situation around policy makers.

In the case of China, it is using all the resources of soft power as the available means to achieve its goals of foreign policy in South Asia and beyond. In south Asia, China is using different sources of soft power to attract South Asian countries and mold their perceptions concerning the rise of China as a responsible great power. The sources of China's soft power enhancement vary from economic to cultural influence. The strategies China is opting to influence South Asian countries are discussed in detail below.

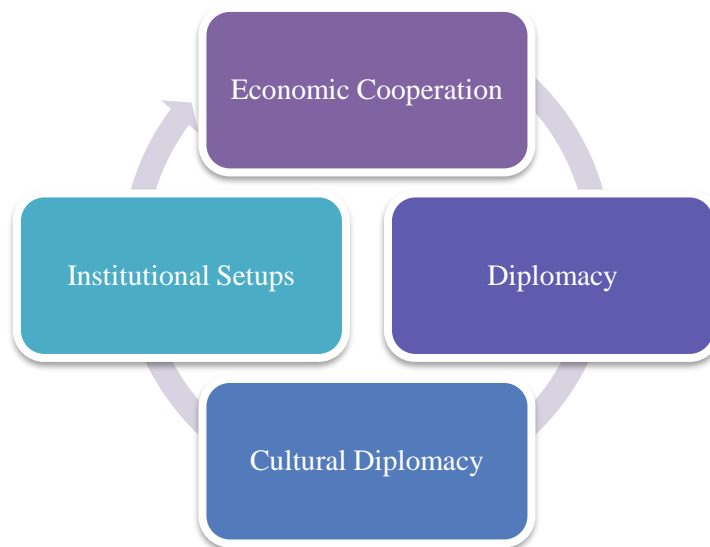


Figure 3 Chinese Strategies of Soft Power

Source: Author's Own Insights

⁸⁷Tefi Alonso, "What Is Strategy?," *Cascade* (blog), January 25, 2023, <https://www.cascade.app/blog/what-is-strategy>.

2.1 Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation is the backbone of Chinese soft power strategy to enhance its influence abroad. With the rise of China as an economic power it has opted for economy as a tool of strengthening its soft power. According to the Brand Finance 2023 report on the “Global Soft Power Index”, China maintained its first position globally in “easy to do business in and with” and in “future growth potential” for a consecutive second year⁸⁸. Economic cooperation measures China’s ability to exert influence through the economy and complex economic interdependence⁸⁹. According to the Lowy Institute “Asia Power Index”, China stands on the top in economic relationships with a total score of 98.3/100 and in second position for economic resources with a total score of 72.9/100, which includes connectivity, technology, and international leverage, and size of the economy⁹⁰.

Due to South Asia’s geo-economics and geopolitical importance, it is a region of significance importance for China to hold its foot firmly and develop strong economic relationships with the South Asian countries to enhance its soft power influence. The umbrella term of “economic relationships” includes a wide range of areas like infrastructure development, economic assistance, FDI, and trade and investment.

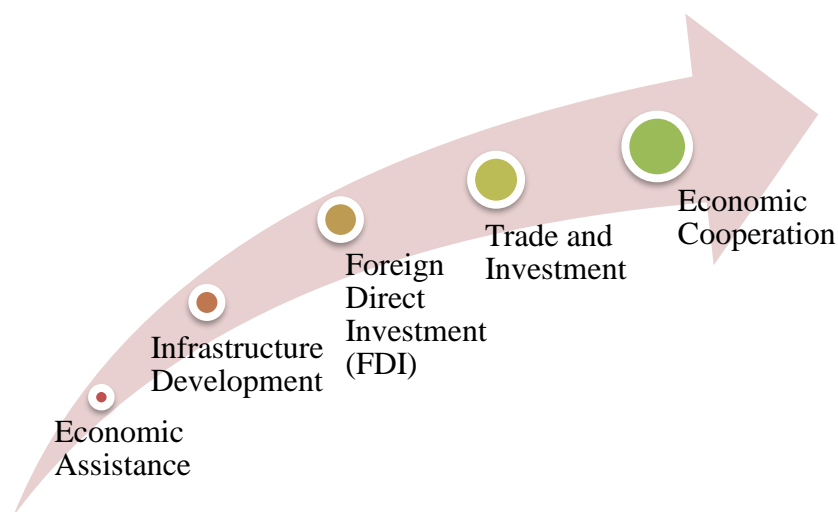


Figure 4 Tools of Economic Cooperation

Source: Author’s Own Insights

⁸⁸Brand Finance, “Global Soft Power Index 2023.”

⁸⁹Romi Jain, “China’s Economic Expansion in South Asia,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 31, no. 1 (December 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26608821>.

⁹⁰Lowy Institute, “‘China’, Asia Power Index,” 2023, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/china/>.

2.1.1 Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development not only results in the facilitation of borderland facilities, connectivity, and development but also results in political influence⁹¹. Such influence through developing and upgrading neighbors' infrastructure can be calculated as the influence through soft power. China's infrastructure development initiatives under the BRI and GDI are speeded throughout the globe. In South Asia, China has invested huge amounts of money to develop the South Asian infrastructure. The well-known examples of infrastructure development in South Asia are the projects under CPEC in Pakistan, THEC in Nepal, BCIM in Bangladesh, and various strategically and economically important projects in Sri Lanka, including the Colombo Port City, Norocholai Power Station, and Colombo International Container Terminal.

South Asia is the least developed and connected part of the globe. All the South Asian countries are eager for foreign assistance to develop their infrastructure and connect with the rest of the world. According to the ADB 2017 report South Asia needs \$1.7 trillion in investments every year in infrastructure until 2030 to develop and maintain its growth momentum and to tackle issues like climate change and growing poverty⁹². Furthermore, according to the 2019 policy brief of the UNESCAP-SSWA South Asian countries are suffering from significant gaps in infrastructure not only comparing South Asian countries with the global averages but also in comparison with the neighboring regions of South Asia⁹³. The extensive infrastructure disparities contribute to the low rankings of South Asian countries in the Global Competitiveness Index 2023. Except for India which secures the 40th position, none of the South Asian nations featured in the top 70 countries globally⁹⁴ according to the Global Competitiveness Index 2023.

South Asia is often described as the least integrated part of the world and has poor infrastructure with inadequate transport networks and transportation facilities. This results in

⁹¹Galen Murton, "Beyond the BRI: The Volumetric Presence of China in Nepal," *Regional Studies Association*, March 23, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2186475>.

⁹²ADB, "Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs" (Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank, February 2017), <https://www.adb.org/publications/asia-infrastructure-needs>.

⁹³UNESCAP, "Financing Sustainable Infrastructure Development in South Asia: The Case of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)" (UNESCAP, October 2019), https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Brief%20AIIB_Oct19.pdf.

⁹⁴Piyush, "Global Competitiveness Index 2023: Denmark, Ireland, and Switzerland Lead the Way," *Current Affairs*, June 26, 2023, <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/global-competitiveness-index-2023-denmark-ireland-and-switzerland-lead-the-way/#:~:text=Ireland%2C...-Global%20Competitiveness%20Index%202023%3A%20Denmark%2C%20Ireland%2C%20and%20Switzerland%20Lead,stand%20out%20as%20exemplary%20performers>.

high costs of intra-regional trade rather than trade with distant regions. According to the World Bank statistics intra-regional trade among South Asian countries barely accounts for 5 percent of total South Asia trade, compared with the ASEAN region which makes up 25 percent of intra-regional trade of its total⁹⁵. Building infrastructure and cross-border transport corridors with facilitations at the borders is the need of the hour for South Asian countries.

China in this regard is the only actor to play its part in South Asian infrastructure development and connect all the South Asian states with mainland China. As a sub-region of Asia with unmet needs for infrastructure development, South Asian countries welcomed Chinese investments in physical infrastructure development to help close some of their infrastructural gaps. Countries like India also emerged as the important borrower of funds for development with the establishment of AIIB. Since 2016, AIIB financed 221 projects in India. Among its 106 members, India is the largest borrower from AIIB⁹⁶.

China has invested a large chunk in developing infrastructure in South Asian countries. Many of the Chinese-funded infrastructure projects are completed while others are under construction. In South Asia Pakistan under CPEC is home to numerous Chinese infrastructure projects which include 21 projects in the energy sector, 24 in the transportation sector, and 14 projects in Gwadar; the hub of CPEC, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) includes 9 projects and social sector development includes 27 projects. Among these projects, 29 are completed and the rest are under construction while some are categorized as in-pipeline projects. Likewise, other South Asian countries are home to China's infrastructure projects. For instance, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan are receiving huge amounts of money for developing infrastructure.

⁹⁵World Bank, "Why #OneSouthAsia?" (Washington, D.C: World Bank, 2022), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade#:~:text=Intraregional%20trade%20accounts%20for%20barely,of%20at%20least%20%2467%20billion.>

⁹⁶Singh Rahul Sunilkumar, "What Is Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank? India, Its Largest Borrower, Accused of Chinese Influence," *Hindustan Times*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/what-is-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank-aiib-india-its-largest-borrower-accused-of-chinese-influence-101686819157819.html#:~:text=AIIB%20operations%20began%20in%20January,borrower%20as%20of%20November%202022.>

2.1.2 Economic Assistance

Economic assistance is the type of assistance that one country voluntarily transfers to another country in time of need. Economic assistance can take many forms like grants, loans, aid, and gifts. Countries also provide economic assistance through capital, goods, food, supplies, and services after natural disasters, in times of war, or during economic crises⁹⁷. Economic assistance has a direct effect of admiration on the recipient country's population towards the donor country. Helping in need or without strings attached helped the donor country to enhance its soft power image in the recipient country. In this regard, South Asia is vulnerable to economic assistance. The growing population, migration, and natural disasters compel South Asian countries to look forward to economic assistance from countries like China and India.

China provides economic assistance to various South Asian countries. China has assisted South Asian countries in times of natural disasters and economic crises. In the recent floods of August 2022 in Pakistan, China provided flood assistance ranging from governmental to private/individual aid. China announced \$74.37 million of flood assistance to Pakistan which is considered as the highest amount of flood assistance received by Pakistan compared to other countries and organizations⁹⁸. Furthermore, China helped Afghanistan during its tough time by providing humanitarian assistance after the US withdrawal. China after the US withdrawal pledged \$37 million in aid to Afghanistan⁹⁹.

In addition, China provided \$7.5 million when Afghanistan was hit by a strong earthquake in June 2023. To support the Afghan economy and to help the Afghan population China started importing pine nuts from the country to ease the tense economic situation¹⁰⁰. China also helped the war-ravaged country by funding a teaching building and auditorium at Kabul University. The teaching building includes a lecture hall and 30 classrooms equipped with modern teaching facilities.

⁹⁷Will Kenton, "What Is Foreign Aid? Forms of Aid, Statistics, and Examples," *Investopedia*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/foreign-aid.asp#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways,humanitarian%20aid%20and%20military%20assistance>.

⁹⁸Tauseef Javed, "Comparing the US and Chinese Flood Relief Assistance to Pakistan," *Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, November 28, 2022, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/social-issues/comparing-the-us-and-chinese-flood-relief-assistance-to-pakistan/#:~:text=The%20assistance%20started%20very%20soon,compared%20to%20any%20other%20country>.

⁹⁹Huaxia, "China's Aid Helps Afghans in Difficult Time," *Xinhuanet*, August 30, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220830/08b31fdf4dbc46e6b6986f0007d7dbc1/c.html>.

¹⁰⁰Huaxia.

In addition to Afghanistan, Nepal is also a success story of China's enhancement of soft power through economic assistance in critical times. Hundreds of Chinese medical personnel took part in Nepal's devastating earthquake in 2015. This was the turning point of relations between the two countries. Since the 2015 earthquake, both states have been enjoying good bilateral relationships. Chinese officials pledged to provide \$483 million for rehabilitation and reconstruction purposes to earthquake-stricken Nepal¹⁰¹. The then foreign minister of China announced that China will provide 3 billion Yuan for restoration of cultural heritage, medical and sanitation building, rehabilitation of earthquake victims, and infrastructure development¹⁰².

2.1.3 FDI

Foreign Direct Investment is considered as one of the tools of exerting foreign influence. This influence which results from the FDI becomes a deliberate soft power strategy of the FDI provider state. Many scholars consider China's FDI as a soft power strategy to project its soft power by influencing the behavior of states¹⁰³. In South Asia, China has the capacity for Foreign Direct Investments. In many of the South Asian countries, China provides the highest amount of FDI.

For instance, Pakistan received \$347.6 million from China as a Foreign Direct Investment in the first 10 months of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022-2023. According to the Board of Investment of Pakistan, the largest share of FDI to Pakistan is received from China followed by Japan and Switzerland. Also in the Fiscal Year 2021-2022, China was the leading investor in Pakistan with the largest share of the total FDI received by Pakistan, which was 28.47% of the total FDI received¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰¹Xinhua, "China Donates 483 Mln USD to Nepal for Post-Quake Rehabilitation, Reconstruction," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 25, 2015, [https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/china-donates-483-mln-usd-nepal-post-quake-rehabilitation-reconstruction#:~:text=Nepal%20%2B%201%20more-,China%20donates%20483%20mln%20USD,for%20post%20quake%20rehabilitation%2C%20reconstruction&text=KATHMANDU%2C%20June%2025%20\(Xinhua\),in%20rehabilitation%20and%20reconstruction%20efforts](https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/china-donates-483-mln-usd-nepal-post-quake-rehabilitation-reconstruction#:~:text=Nepal%20%2B%201%20more-,China%20donates%20483%20mln%20USD,for%20post%20quake%20rehabilitation%2C%20reconstruction&text=KATHMANDU%2C%20June%2025%20(Xinhua),in%20rehabilitation%20and%20reconstruction%20efforts).

¹⁰²Xinhua.

¹⁰³John Terrance Maguire, "Foreign Investment As A Soft Power Influence Strategy" (Johns Hopkins University, 2020), <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/62792?show=full>.

¹⁰⁴Pakistan Today, "Chinese FDI to Pakistan Reached \$ 347.6 Mm in First 10 Months of FY 22-23," *Pakistan Today*, June 7, 2023, [https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/06/07/chinese-fdi-to-pakistan-reached-347-6-mm-in-first-10-months-of-fy-22-23/#:~:text=June%207%2C%202023-,Chinese%20FDI%20to%20Pakistan%20reached%20%24%20347.6%20mm%20in%20first,months%20of%20FY%2022%2023&text=ISLAMABAD%3A%20Pakistan%20has%20received%20%24%20347.6,of%20Investment%20Pakistan%20\(BOI\)](https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/06/07/chinese-fdi-to-pakistan-reached-347-6-mm-in-first-10-months-of-fy-22-23/#:~:text=June%207%2C%202023-,Chinese%20FDI%20to%20Pakistan%20reached%20%24%20347.6%20mm%20in%20first,months%20of%20FY%2022%2023&text=ISLAMABAD%3A%20Pakistan%20has%20received%20%24%20347.6,of%20Investment%20Pakistan%20(BOI)).

Furthermore, China emerged as the biggest source of FDI in Bangladesh¹⁰⁵ since the commencement of BRI in Bangladesh. Over the past decade, Chinese FDI to Bangladesh surpassed the value of \$2.6 billion compared to Japan which stands at \$380 million¹⁰⁶. The FY 2022 witnessed Chinese FDI as the largest source of FDI of Bangladesh in terms of gross flow of \$940 million. China also ranked as the top foreign investor in Bangladesh in 2022, where 240 Chinese companies are operating in different sectors of Bangladesh's economy¹⁰⁷. These companies operating in energy generation, construction of railroads, digitization, e-governance, and renewable energy are becoming an integral part of Bangladesh's economic growth.

In addition to Pakistan and Bangladesh, China is also the largest FDI provider to the Himalayan nation of Nepal. Over the last decade or less China has emerged as a very important investor in Nepal. China over the last six consecutive years remains the largest source of FDI in Nepal. China contributed 71 percent of Nepal's total FDI for the FY 2021¹⁰⁸. India, China, Singapore, and Ireland are the main sources of FDI in Nepal. However, the share of China outnumbers the combined share of all the leading investors of Nepal.

Moreover, China has shifted its attention towards the war-ravaged country of Afghanistan. Some call it as China gambling in Afghanistan, due to the unpredictable situation under the Taliban government. The current Afghan regime is not recognized by any state; however, China has invested a large amount of FDI in Afghanistan. China's strategy of using its economy as the major tool for creating a soft image is best working in Afghanistan. Currently, China is the only country contributing a major share of the FDI inflow into Afghanistan.

2.1.4 Trade and Investment

Economic influence is the major tool of influence in the international arena. States use trade, investment, FDI, loans, grants, connectivity corridors, institutions, and free trade agreements to attract other states toward their center of gravity. For instance, states that have the

¹⁰⁵Shafi Mostofa, "China in South Asia: Bangladesh Is Tilting towards China," *South Asian Voices*, July 19, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/china-in-south-asia-bangladesh-is-tilting-towards-china/>.

¹⁰⁶Apparel Resources, "Chinese FDI in Bangladesh Shows Growth," *Apparel Resources*, August 2, 2023, <https://apparelresources.com/business-news/trade/chinese-fdi-bangladesh-shows-growth/>.

¹⁰⁷Prithvi Gupta, "Chinese BRI Investments: A Cornerstone of the Expanding China-Bangladesh Ties," *Observer Research Foundation*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/chinese-bri-investments/>.

¹⁰⁸Mark A. Rosmann, "Nepal Attempts to Increase Foreign Direct Investment Opportunities for Agriculture as It Pushes Self-Reliance" (United States Department of Agriculture, March 18, 2021).

least barriers to trade and investments are considered as top-ranked on the list of “ease in doing business”.

Likewise, China is using its economic muscles to get maximum benefit from its trade relations with other nations. In most of the South Asian countries, China is the largest trading partner. Despite COVID-19 and the Ukraine war effects Chinese trade relations with most of the South Asian countries are well maintained. For instance, China and India are both engaged in the power struggle for South Asia’s dominant role; however, both states enjoy good trade relations with a total trade volume of \$113.83 billion during 2022-2023¹⁰⁹. Today China is the second largest trading partner of India after the US. However, China maintained its position on the top of the list as the largest trading partner of India from 2013-2014 to 2017-2018 and also in 2020-2021¹¹⁰.

Moreover, China is also the largest trading partner of Pakistan¹¹¹ and Bangladesh¹¹² in South Asia. Additionally, China is the second-largest trading partner of Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives, and the third-largest trading partner of Afghanistan. For all-weather-friendly relations, China has free trade agreements with various South Asian countries while other South Asian countries are enjoying tariff reductions and zero-duty or duty-free status to facilitate trade relations¹¹³.

2.2 Cultural Diplomacy

With all the available channels of cultural diplomacy China has been successful so far in influencing other South Asian countries by strongly casting its footprints in this region. The cultural influence is reinforced by the presence of the Chinese Diaspora in many countries of the South Asian region especially where Chinese projects are completed or under construction. The

¹⁰⁹The Hindu, “U.S. Emerges as India’s Biggest Trading Partner in FY23 at \$128.55 Billion; China at Second Position,” *The Hindu*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/us-emerges-as-indias-biggest-trading-partner-in-fy23-at-12855-billion-china-at-second-position/article66743587.ece>.

¹¹⁰The Hindu.

¹¹¹Pakistan Today, “China Remains Pakistan’s Largest Trading Partner in 2022-23,” *Pakistan Today*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/03/06/china-remains-pakistans-largest-trading-partner-in-2022-23/>.

¹¹²Dhaka Tribune, “China Ranked Bangladesh’s Top Trading Partner in May,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/275049/china-ranked-bangladesh-s-top-trading-partner-in>.

¹¹³Joyeetan Bhattacharjee, “Bangladesh: Zero-Tariff Imports, a Diplomatic Victory for China,” *Observer Research Foundation*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bangladesh-zero-tariff-imports-a-diplomatic-victory-for-china-69400/>.

settled Chinese Diaspora are portraying China’s soft image by emphasizing peace, stability, and regional harmony.

China uses a variety of tools for cultural diplomacy to further its interests. It is noteworthy for having founded Confucius Institutes in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives¹¹⁴. These institutions, which are a key component of China's soft power, not only support the Chinese language but also cover more ground in terms of Chinese culture. Enhancing bilateral cooperation in fields like tourism, education, language, culture, and social and cultural exchanges are the main objectives of these institutes. Confucius Institutes are committed to promoting the Chinese language and culture abroad, according to Hanban, an organization within the Chinese Ministry of Education. As part of its global expansion, China has established 1,172 Confucius Classrooms and 550 Confucius Institutes at various foreign institutions, promoting cross-border cultural and educational exchanges¹¹⁵. The info-graphic that goes with it offers a graphic depiction of the Confucius Institutes' worldwide dissemination.



Figure 5 Confucius Institutes around the World

¹¹⁴Parama Sinha Palit, “China’s Soft Power in South Asia,” *Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*, 2010, <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/6499>.

¹¹⁵Ananth Krishnan, “The Hindu Explains | What Are Confucius Institutes, and Why Are They under the Scanner in India?,” *The Hindu*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hindu-explains-what-are-confucius-institutes-and-why-are-they-under-the-scanner-in-india/article32306693.ece>.

Source: Beijing

Reviewhttp://www.bjreview.com/Multimedia/Infographics/201812/t20181210_800151024.html

Likewise, South Asia is also witnessing Chinese Confucius Institutes mushrooming. In India, the number of Confucius Institutes is six. The Hanban website lists three as CIs and three institutes as Schools of Chinese languages. On the other hand, Pakistan has four Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom¹¹⁶. Sri Lanka has two Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom¹¹⁷. Bangladesh has also two Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom¹¹⁸. Nepal has two Confucius Institutes, four Confucius Classrooms, and nine teaching points¹¹⁹. Afghanistan has only one Confucius Institute located at Kabul University¹²⁰. However, Bhutan and Maldives have no Confucius Institutes.

Furthermore, to enhance China's cultural dimension and increase its language influence in South Asia and beyond China has setup a large number of Chinese language centers to facilitate the locals to learn Chinese and close the language gap. All seven South Asian states have Chinese language centers to promote the Chinese language.

In addition to language, China is also focused on promoting its various cultural aspects. Apart from Chinese embassies and consulates Chinese students studying at various institutes and Confucius centers in foreign countries celebrate China's cultural day events¹²¹. The Chinese cultural day event features a variety of cultural acts, such as tongue twisters, tea culture, flute, dragon show, ribbon display, chopsticks competition, and Chinese music.

¹¹⁶Hanban, "(Pakistan) Confucius Institutes & Classroom," International Education Exchange Information Platform, October 31, 2016, <http://www.ieeip.cn/bbx/1071727-1123792.html?id=27381&newsid=712451>.

¹¹⁷Hanban, "(Sri Lanka) Confucius Institutes & Classroom," International Education Exchange Information Platform, October 31, 2016, <http://www.ieeip.cn/bbx/1071727-1123792.html?id=27381&newsid=712493>.

¹¹⁸Hanban, "(Bangladesh) Confucius Institutes & Classroom," International Education Exchange Information Platform, October 31, 2016, <http://www.ieeip.cn/bbx/1071727-1123792.html?id=27381&newsid=712469>.

¹¹⁹Confucius Institute at KU, "Welcome to Confucius Institute at KU," Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University, 2007, <https://ci.ku.edu.np/index.php?go=home>.

¹²⁰Xinhua, "Chinese Language Resonates with Afghan Youth," *Daily China*, October 20, 2022, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj19f7b3LCBAxWLQ_EDHQeVAsEQFnoECA4QAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.chinadaily.com.cn%2Fa%2F202210%2F20%2FWS6350e701a310fd2b29e7d988.html&usg=AOvVaw27Gt70im39QlaYJRDmQBmC&opi=89978449.

¹²¹China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, "NUML Islamabad Holds a China Culture Day Event," *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, November 30, 2021, <https://cpecinfo.com/numl-islamabad-holds-a-china-culture-day-event/>.

2.3 Public Diplomacy

Like other countries, China is also using public diplomacy as a strategy for projecting China's soft power and hunting its foreign policy objectives. The Chinese government is investing huge amounts of money and diplomatic efforts to project China's image. Moreover, China has rapidly developed policies and public diplomacy skills to boost China's international image and reputation at the international level¹²². China's public diplomacy uses various actors, including Chinese public and private individuals, civil society groups, government officials, and various Chinese institutions to try hard to achieve China's public diplomacy objectives.

China's public diplomacy is aspired to achieve three objectives not only in South Asia but globally. These objectives include; shaping a systematic and peaceful harmonious international environment favorable and acceptable for China's peaceful rise; projecting China's soft power and its international image as a responsible power; and building Chinese characteristics-based soft power with principles, values, and norms¹²³. Therefore, in the case of China, public diplomacy as a tool of Chinese foreign policy occupies a high place as an element of its soft power projection¹²⁴.

China is trying to portray its soft power by reclaiming international recognition and prestige, has been actively involved in public diplomacy since the 2000s. Through active public diplomacy, China is trying to shape the perceptions of those who see the rise of China as a "China threat". Moreover, China wants recognition for terms like the "Peaceful Rise" of China; the "Peaceful Development" of China; and the "Harmonious Society" in international relations¹²⁵. In 2007 the Chinese leadership incorporated soft power as the tool of projecting China's principles and its global image. Former President Hu Jintao underlines the importance of

¹²²Ingrid d'Hooghe, "The Expansion of China's Public Diplomacy System," *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19–35.

¹²³Jian Wang, "Introduction: China's Search of Soft Power," in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–18, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230116375_1.

¹²⁴David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect," *Council on Foreign Relations* 94, no. 4 (August 2015): 99–107.

¹²⁵Wang, "Introduction: China's Search of Soft Power."

soft power in making China “more influential politically, more competitive economically, more appealing in its image, and more inspiring morally”¹²⁶.

Chinese government invests heavily in promoting its international image, protecting China from international criticism, and advancing China’s domestic and international agendas for its peaceful economic rise. China is following its version of soft power, including public diplomacy that suits the country’s culture and political system¹²⁷. At the international level China’s public diplomacy is focused on three main objectives: trying to obtain recognition and understanding of its political system, seeking and building an understanding of a stable, reliable economic partner and member of the international community, and respect for being the ancient civilization and culture with a long centuries-old history¹²⁸.

2.4 Institutional setups

International Relations would be unintelligible without some degree of institutionalization. It is considered that international relations would lack shared understanding and expectations without institutionalization¹²⁹. A few functionally more general goals must be specified, several norms must be established, these norms must be clarified, formal rules must be formulated, and the process must be expanded to include concrete entities such as staff, budgets, permanent and ad hoc committees, internal processes, and staff that have the authority to formulate and carry out policies and norms¹³⁰. Regional institutional building is considered a key component of the process of gaining recognition and acceptance for political, economic, and social norms, ideas, and principles¹³¹.

The People’s Republic of China as a primary mover of the institutionalization of regional multilateral processes emerged as a major development in Asian politics¹³². China’s interest in

¹²⁶Daniel M. Hausman and Michael S. McPherson, “Taking Ethics Seriously: Economics and Contemporary Moral Philosophy,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 31, no. 2 (1993), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2728513>.

¹²⁷Ingrid d’Hooghe, *China’s Public Diplomacy*, vol. 10, Diplomatic Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2015), <https://brill.com/display/title/24897>.

¹²⁸Ingrid d’Hooghe, “Public Diplomacy in the People’s Republic of China,” in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 88–105, https://culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/soft_power/The_New_Public_Diplomacy.pdf.

¹²⁹Robert O. Keohane, “Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research,” *International Journal* 45, no. 4 (1990): 731–64.

¹³⁰Chien-Peng Chung, “China’s Approaches to the Institutionalization of Regional Multilateralism,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, October 29, 2008, 747–64.

¹³¹He and Feng, “The Institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific: Problems and Prospects.”

¹³²Chung, “China’s Approaches to the Institutionalization of Regional Multilateralism.”

regional organizations and institutionalization is not natural because of its openness and economic reforms, but it is a calculated response of the PRC to the unpredictable and changing circumstances.

China's soft power projection is not limited to economic engagements in South Asia. China's way of soft power projection is multifarious by nature, including institutional setups as well. The process of gaining influence through soft means of power started well before the realization of BRI. China's 6 party talks, SCO, peacekeeping missions, China maritime security, and China development practice were all efforts for institutionalization to develop, structure, and establish a regional order where China's national interests can be fulfilled¹³³.

China has successfully established a connection between the development and institutionalization of several types of regional and sub-regional engagements in Asia and its political, economic, and security objectives as well as its standing internationally. China is actively and deftly employing regional multifaceted economic and security organizations to expedite cooperation and integration in the region with neighboring states to convince Asian states that China's rise will not jeopardize regional order and national interests and to use its role and diplomatic activity in Asia as a springboard for more influence in global affairs. Without China's support or engagement, the majority of these institutions, if not all of them, may not have existed¹³⁴.

Some of the major institutes and organizations involved in promoting China's foreign policy goals of projecting its soft power in South Asia and beyond include the China International Commercial Court (CICC), the one-stop shop dispute resolution platform¹³⁵ or a legal hub for the BRI, the China-led Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), Chinese Development Bank (CDB), New Development Bank (NDB), Silk Road Fund (SRF), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is considered as well-institutionalized. Although most of these institutes established by China are in its early stages, working in a similar way to the already established institutes and organizations. This helps other countries to look for opportunities and fulfill foreign policy objectives and national interests. Most of these

¹³³Chung.

¹³⁴Chung.

¹³⁵Jiangyu Wang, "Flexible Institutionalization: A Critical Examination of the Chinese Perspectives on Dispute Settlement for the Belt and Road" 29, no. 1 (January 11, 2022): 70–85.

organizations and institutes deal with political and economic matters of the member states, including those states linked with China through China's BRI and other multilateral projects and initiatives.

All the above-mentioned multilateral institutions help us to understand and examine Chinese policy issues and processes of its soft power projection. It also helps us understand Chinese interests, its role, and the adaptation of new norms for governing these institutes. A deep study of China-led institutions assists in understanding that China is determined to shape and speed regional development, interaction, and integration¹³⁶. China's engagement in establishing multilateral institutions not only signifies its aspiration to shape its own rules and norms for regional cooperation and interaction but also enhances the inclination of states and other international entities to adhere to the established norms of interdependent behavior¹³⁷.

2.5 Conclusion

Chinese strategies for projecting its influence are diversifying. Beijing has applied all the possible tools and means to project its soft image in South Asia and beyond. These strategies are not only limited to the country's foreign policy, culture, and values but also include economic assistance, aid, trade and investment, FDI, public diplomacy, political values, institutional setups, and traditional Chinese customs. All these tools are materialized in systematic ways as strategies to project and build its soft image through soft means of power, excluding force and intimidation.

¹³⁶Kuik Cheng Chwee, "Multilateralism in China's ASEAN Policy: Its Evolution, Characteristics, and Aspiration," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (April 2005): 102–22.

¹³⁷Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions: The ASEAN Way and International Relations Theory," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 107–62.

Chapter 03

Case Studies of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal

A distinctive aspect of China's impact through soft power in South Asia is the manifestation of such influence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, especially within the context of China's regional foreign policy in the area. Given India's historical prominence over the smaller South Asian nations, these three states hold significant importance in shaping China's regional foreign policy toward South Asia. China and India are engaged in a competition for increasing influence in South Asia, utilizing various soft power channels alongside strategic tools within the realm of power politics¹³⁸.

In the 21st century, South Asia strategically emerged as China's priority. However, on the other hand, India considers the South Asian region as its backyard and strategically important. Therefore India eyes on Chinese soft power projection and its enhancement in South Asia¹³⁹. For China, its main asset and primary instrument of influence in these three countries is economic, and Chinese actors are proactive in wielding these economic leverages over other powers. It helps China to extend its influence in the South Asian region which is traditionally considered as India's strategic backyard. These economic engagements serve China's foreign policy objectives by helping project its soft power in South Asian countries¹⁴⁰.

The choice to examine the three nations in South Asia is based on the geography, history, and current dynamic realities of these nations. Apart from this, India has worked as the economic powerhouse for most of the smaller South Asian nations for decades. Also, India's hegemonic role in South Asia makes it vulnerable to competition with China's increasing role in these countries, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. India is closely observing the situation in South Asia. Indian analyst Shivshankar Menon, a distinguished fellow at Brookings India

¹³⁸Hazarika and Mishra, "South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China."

¹³⁹Pal, "China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries."

¹⁴⁰Pal.

considers China as the greatest strategic challenge for India¹⁴¹ in South Asia. According to Rajesh Rajagopalan professor of international politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi, considers China as the most immediate and direct military threat to India. He also considers China's growing and deepening relationship with South Asian states as a major challenge to the dominant hegemonic role of India in the region¹⁴². India sees China as the biggest geopolitical threat in South Asian politics.

Keeping in view the context, any success of China's soft power initiatives in South Asia is considered as a major contributor to a strong Chinese Presence in South Asia. All the three states under research, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal provide a thoughtful understanding of the soft power strategies China is using to enhance its influence in the three South Asian states; Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. A detailed note on the case studies of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal will further make the point more clearly about how China is using economic engagements, cultural diplomacy, political engagements, media influence, people-to-people ties, public diplomacy, and institutional setups to project its soft power influence.

3.1 Case Study: Bangladesh

China-Bangladesh relationship had undergone a significant transformation. Despite the initial challenges, both states considerably strengthened their relations. This is largely driven by two factors: first China's policy of economic assistance and infrastructure development for connectivity and economic growth, secondly Bangladesh's growing anti-India sentiments because of its hegemonic designs and big brother attitude towards smaller South Asian countries¹⁴³. Over the years the relationship between China and Bangladesh evolved by making significant improvements in economic and defense cooperation. China's soft power projection in Bangladesh started as early as 1979¹⁴⁴. In 1979 China-Bangladesh agreed on cooperation. The agreement is focused on strengthening bilateral exchanges and cooperation in culture, education, media, and sports.

¹⁴¹Shivshankar Menon, "India's Foreign Affairs Strategy" (Brookings Institution India Center, May 3, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/indias-foreign-affairs-strategy/>.

¹⁴²Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Strategic Choices: China and the Balance of Power in Asia," *Carnegie India*, September 14, 2017, <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/09/14/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-73108>.

¹⁴³Mostofa, "China in South Asia: Bangladesh Is Tilting towards China."

¹⁴⁴Hazarika and Mishra, "South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China."

China is actively enhancing its soft power influence in South Asia, specifically in Bangladesh. Bangladesh engagements are more significant in infrastructural investments compared to other smaller South Asian nations¹⁴⁵. While China's concept of a "community of common destiny" is fostering stronger bilateral ties with Bangladesh, it is evident that China's approach to soft power is concurrently amplifying its influence over Bangladesh's policy-making process. This serves as a comprehensive demonstration of how China is exerting its influence on Bangladesh through the strategic use of soft power.

3.1.1 Soft Power-Oriented Economic Diplomacy

Unlike other strategies, soft power-oriented economic diplomacy is a “safe bet” for attaining and fulfilling states' foreign policy objectives at a low cost¹⁴⁶. China's economic cooperation, infrastructure development, FDI, and trade and investment policies are helpful tools of soft power in Bangladesh. Economists have predicted a 7.8% rise in Bangladesh's economy after the BRI construction projects are completed. Both countries are maximizing their mutual economic gains under various Chinese initiatives, most famously under the BRI and MSR¹⁴⁷.

China has the largest share of Bangladesh's FDI. China's investments in Bangladesh have surged extensively by emerging as the biggest source of FDI in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's careful management of Chinese funds can be a win-win partnership for both the countries. China as the most influential trading partner of Bangladesh has invested more than \$2.6 billion in FDI in the past few years in Bangladesh¹⁴⁸. In 2021 China provided \$700 million in FDI while the next year witnessed an increase of 30 percent reaching \$1 billion in 2022. However, the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) report published in August 2023 reports investments of \$800 million in FDI alone in 2023¹⁴⁹. This increasing flow of FDI in Bangladesh works as a strategy to enhance its soft power in Bangladesh.

¹⁴⁵Jasmin, Nural Huda Sakib, and Foysal Jaman Shishir, “Chinese Soft Power in Bangladesh: Debt Trap or Shared Interests?,” *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2023), <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2717541323500043>.

¹⁴⁶Carl Marklund, “The Return of Geopolitics in the Era of Soft Power: Rereading Rudolf Kjellén on Geopolitical Imaginary and Competitive Identity,” *Geopolitics* 20, no. 2 (October 13, 2014): 248–66.

¹⁴⁷Chakrovorty, “China's Soft Power in Bangladesh.”

¹⁴⁸FAIR, “Chinese Investment in Bangladesh Explained,” *Foreign Affairs Insight and Review*, August 2, 2023, <https://fairbd.net/chinese-investment-in-bangladesh-explained/>.

¹⁴⁹Gupta, “Chinese BRI Investments: A Cornerstone of the Expanding China-Bangladesh Ties.”

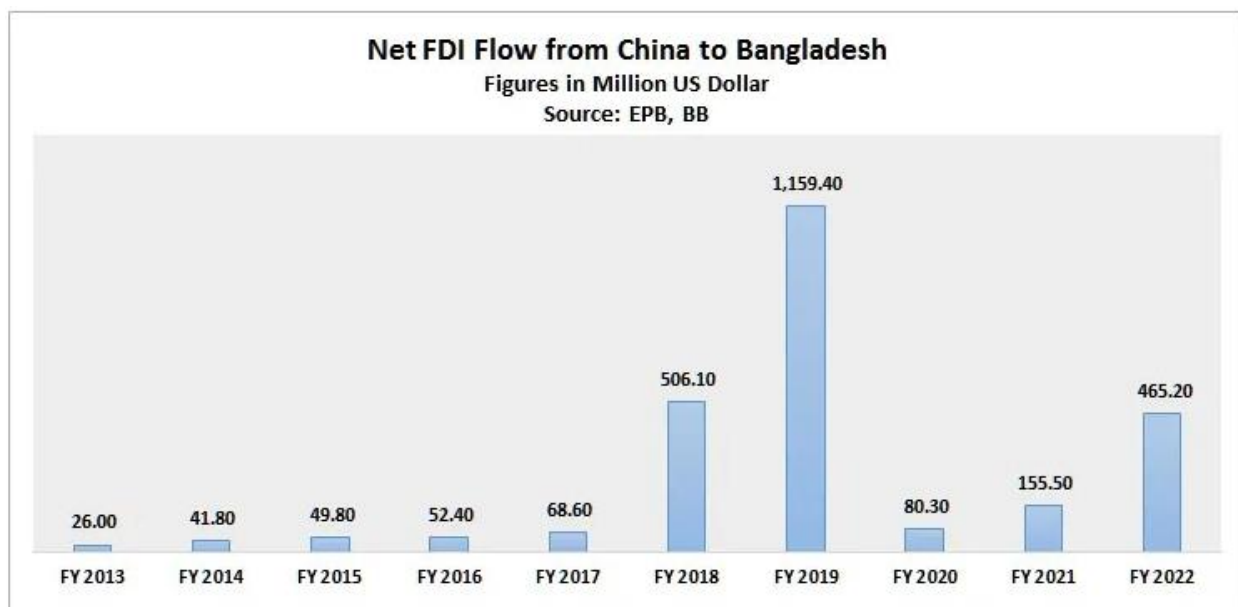


Figure 6 Net FDI Flow from China to Bangladesh

Source: Foreign Affairs Insight and Review <https://fairbd.net/chinese-investment-in-bangladesh-explained/>.

Furthermore, China started investing in infrastructure in Bangladesh when President Xi Jinping visited Bangladesh in 2016. The Chinese government signed some 25 agreements with Bangladesh to be financed by a Chinese loan worth \$24 billion during Xi's historic visit to Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh's former junior finance Minister M.A. Mannan told that “our infrastructure needs are big, so we need huge loans.”¹⁵⁰ By signing the agreements with China, Bangladesh becomes part of the premier transnational infrastructure program, the BRI. Bangladeshi leadership also views Chinese infrastructure project financing as a source to achieve its “Vision 2041”¹⁵¹, a plan to transform Bangladesh into a developed nation.

Bangladesh is home to the second largest Chinese foreign investment after Pakistan in South Asia. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, the total amount of China’s investments and contracts in Bangladesh is \$7.07 billion¹⁵². Most of these projects are in the transportation and energy sectors. Under Xi's leadership, the number of Chinese projects in Bangladesh reached 64 in different sectors and of different nature varying from agriculture to

¹⁵⁰Ruma Paul and Ben Blanchard, “China to Sign Some \$24 Billion in Loans to Bangladesh as Xi Visits,” *Reuters*, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-bangladesh-china-idUKKCN12D33Z>.

¹⁵¹Gupta, “Chinese BRI Investments: A Cornerstone of the Expanding China-Bangladesh Ties.”

¹⁵²China Global Investment Tracker, “Chinese Investments & Contracts in Bangladesh (2005 - 2023)” (China Global Investment Tracker, 2023), <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

telecommunication and from infrastructure to industries and energy sector. In infrastructure major position of investment is consumed for connectivity purposes like building bridges, Highways, Expressways, and railway tracks¹⁵³.

Reports label China as the “biggest player” in Bangladesh’s energy transition. According to Asian Development Bank report almost 90% of energy projects in the pipeline are funded by China¹⁵⁴. The Bangladeshi economy is currently dominated by 240 Chinese enterprises in all key areas. China has been crucial to development in these important economic areas, from railroads, energy generation, and transmission to transportation infrastructure, e-governance, renewable energy, and reaching Bangladesh's carbon reduction objectives for 2041¹⁵⁵. According to Prithvi Gupta’s report published by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the list of major projects in Bangladesh with Chinese economic support is compiled by the author as under.

¹⁵³BWGED, “List of Projects under BRI in Bangladesh,” Bangladesh Working Group on Ecology and Development, 2020, <https://bwged.blogspot.com/2020/11/list-of-projects-under-bri-in-bangladesh.html>.

¹⁵⁴Shahnaj Begum, “China the ‘Biggest Player’ in Bangladesh’s Energy Transition,” *The Third Pole*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/energy/china-the-biggest-player-in-bangladeshs-energy-transition/>.

¹⁵⁵Gupta, “Chinese BRI Investments: A Cornerstone of the Expanding China-Bangladesh Ties.”

| Subsector | Project | Contractor | Chinese Investments in US\$ Billions |
|-----------|---|--|--|
| Transport | Padma Multipurpose Rail Road bridge | China Major Bridge Engineering Co. Ltd. (China Bridge) | 3.3 |
| Transport | Karnaphuli River Tunnel Project | China Communications Construction Company Ltd. (CCCC) | .703 |
| Transport | Paksey Bridge | China Bridge | 1.3 |
| Transport | Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge | China Bridge | .064 |
| Transport | Dhaka Bypass | Sichuan Road and Bridge Group, Shamim Enterprises and UDC Construction Ltd. | .322 |
| Transport | Dhaka-Khulna (N8) Highway | CCCC | 1 |
| Transport | Dhaka-Sylhet 4-lane highway | Longjian Road and Bridge Company Ltd., Max Infrastructure Ltd. | 1.94 |
| Transport | Dhaka-Ashulia Elevated Expressway | China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CNMIEC) | 1.3 |
| Transport | Tongi-Bhairab Rail link | China Railway Design Corporation | N/A |
| Transport | Dohazari - Cox Bazar Rail Link | China Railway Group Limited (CREC), Toma Construction and Company Ltd. | Not funded by Chinese companies |
| Transport | 2nd Meghna Bridge | N/A | .161 |
| Transport | Akhaura-Sylhet railway line upgradation | China Railway Construction Bridge Engineering Bureau Group Co. Ltd. | 1.34 |
| Energy | Payra 1320 MW Power Plant | Electric Power Construction (NEPC) and China National Energy Engineering and Construction (CECC) | 1.9 |
| Energy | Bhanskhali (S Alam) Power Plant | SEPCO III Electric Power Construction Corporation | 1.875 |
| Energy | Barisha 350MW Power Plant | Power Construction Corporation of China (PowerChina) | .54 |
| Energy | Saidpur Power Plant | Dongsang Electric International Corporation (DEC) | .125 |
| Energy | Gulshao 350MW Power Plant | China Huaneng Group Co. Ltd. | .35 |
| Energy | Power Grid Strengthening Project | China's Jiangsu Etern Co. Ltd. | 1.32 |
| Energy | Chevron ONG fields | China ZhenHua Corporation (ZhenHua) | 2 |
| Energy | 220 km pipeline | China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau (CPP) | .55 |
| Energy | 350MW Solar energy park | CNMIEC | .5 |
| Energy | Patuakali 1320 MW Power Plant | China North Industries Group Corporation Ltd. (NORINCO) | 2 |
| | Total number of projects: 23 | Number of companies involved: 21 | Total cost: US\$ 22.56 billions |

Figure 7 Chinese Major Projects in Bangladesh

Source: Observer Research Foundation (ORF) <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/chinese-bri-investments/>

Additionally, according to Professor Dr. Mohammad Nuruzzaman, of the North South University of Bangladesh, Bangladesh was the first nation in South Asia to join the Belt and Road Initiative and is a significant strategic partner of China. China and Bangladesh are becoming a society with a common future as their interests are converging more and more¹⁵⁶. Bangladesh will soon have greater growth chances thanks to China. First, Bangladesh now has a

¹⁵⁶Mohammed Nuruzzaman, Online, December 4, 2023.

demand for foreign investment and trade due to the growing economy of China. Second, the development of "Smart Bangladesh" has been aided by China's economic expansion. Third, the economic expansion of China has guaranteed the synchronization of Bangladesh's and China's development plans. The Belt and Road Initiative will become 10 years old this year 2023¹⁵⁷. China's economic expansion has increased the Belt and Road Initiative's impact, inspiration, and energy, allowing it to become firmly embedded in nations along the Belt and Road, including Bangladesh.

3.1.2 Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy plays an important role in the projection of soft power. It is one of the main tools for enhancing and outcropping soft power in foreign countries. Through an intricate network of Confucius institutes, Chinese language centers, Confucius classrooms, and interactions and exchanges with Bangladeshi counterparts, China actively exports many facets of its cultural legacy¹⁵⁸. Bangladesh hosts two Confucius institutes, several Confucius classrooms, and Chinese language centers. China also provides scholarships for Bangladeshi students and scholars to improve its soft image and build strong people-to-people connections. This year alone a total of 55 Bangladeshi students won the Chinese Government Scholarship, including 18 undergraduates, 23 masters, and 14 doctors¹⁵⁹.

Furthermore, both countries are involved in cultural exchange programs aimed to provide a guiding framework for exchanges and cooperation in different fields. For instance, the recently signed 2023-2027 Culture and Tourism Exchange Programme is a guiding skeleton for interactions and collaboration in culture and tourism between China and Bangladesh in the next few years¹⁶⁰. Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh stated during China-Bangladesh Culture & Art

¹⁵⁷Yao Wen, "BD an Important Strategic Partner of China," *The Financial Express*, August 3, 2023, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/views/bd-an-important-strategic-partner-of-china>.

¹⁵⁸Palit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," 2010.

¹⁵⁹Embassy of China in Bangladesh, "2023-2024 Academic Year Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS) Admission Result Officially Announced," June 19, 2023, http://bd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmjuw/202306/t20230619_11099620.htm.

¹⁶⁰Dhaka Tribune, "China, Bangladesh to Cooperate on Culture and Tourism Exchange," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/292102/china-bangladesh-to-cooperate-on-culture-and>.

Night held on 6 March, 2023 that strong and close cultural relation between the people of the two countries holds the key to sound and strong state-to-state relations¹⁶¹.

3.1.3 Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is considered as the key to people-to-people contact and ultimately to strong state-to-state relationships. For the PRC public diplomacy is one of the main tool of its soft power in Bangladesh to have close and durable relationships. China's public diplomacy has three main objectives in Bangladesh to fulfill¹⁶². First of all, China wants to improve its public relations with Bangladesh and other states to build a positive image. Second, China wants to stabilize its public relations with Bangladesh to achieve its broader goals. Third, China wants to reinforce its positive image aimed at India's strong and dominant position in South Asian politics.

Beijing has effectively enhanced its soft power and public diplomacy in Bangladesh, capitalizing on prevailing perceptions of India's foreign policy toward Bangladesh and other smaller South Asian nations¹⁶³. Moreover, China adeptly maintains strong ties with Bangladesh's two major political parties, the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party. An analysis of China's actions in Bangladesh suggests that China has employed of two distinct strategies in its public diplomacy efforts. The primary objectives include nurturing connections among elites and promoting cultural exchange through initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and cultural exchange programs, including scholarship initiatives¹⁶⁴.

3.1.4 Institutional Setups

Institutions play an important role in developing common understanding among various players of the international system. China for instance uses institutional setups to enhance its role as a major power in international relations. China-led regional organizations and various other institutes like China International Commercial Court help China to build its image as a liable power and rules maker in the region. Most of the China-led institutes provide loans, economic assistance, and FDI to the developing states to improve their infrastructure, build roads and

¹⁶¹Xinhua, "Culture-Art Night Highlights China-Bangladesh Cultural Exchanges," *Xinhuanet*, March 6, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230306/e0d977b9ca224967804d615890e11996/c.html>.

¹⁶²Jasmin, Sakib, and Shishir, "Chinese Soft Power in Bangladesh: Debt Trap or Shared Interests?"

¹⁶³Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*, The Ethnography of Political Violence (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

¹⁶⁴Jasmin, Sakib, and Shishir, "Chinese Soft Power in Bangladesh: Debt Trap or Shared Interests?"

railways for connectivity, and uplift the public by providing thousands of jobs to the native population of the host countries of Chinese-led institutions projects.

Bangladesh, as a participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), receives substantial financial support from various institutions. For instance, the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank) has entered into agreements for numerous projects, totaling millions of dollars, in collaboration with Bangladesh. A recent example is the loan agreement signed between China Exim Bank and the Finance Ministry of Bangladesh to facilitate the Rajshahi surface water treatment plant project. Notably, this marks the third water treatment plant in Rajshahi to receive funding from China's EXIM Bank¹⁶⁵. Additionally, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has a green list of 10 projects for Bangladesh, with one gaining approval in 2016, while the remaining was sanctioned from 2020 to the present¹⁶⁶. This trend highlights a significant surge in the number of projects approved by AIIB for Bangladesh in recent years.

In a nutshell, Bangladesh is essential for Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, while on the flip side Chinese growing influence is a challenge to Indian supremacy in the region. Bangladesh is drawn to the Belt and Road Initiative because it looks to have a considerable impact on the nation's economic growth. \$38 billion in grants, loans, and other types of assistance, such as joint ventures and infrastructure projects, have been given to Bangladesh by China¹⁶⁷. Many industries that support Bangladesh's GDP development are gaining from these investments. Scholars contends that Bangladesh benefits greatly from the Belt and Road Initiative, including other related initiatives that result in the development of first-rate infrastructure¹⁶⁸. Bangladesh is not expected to become engulfed in debt as a result of Chinese support.

¹⁶⁵Xinhua, "China Exim Bank to Issue Loans for Infrastructure Project in Bangladesh," *Xinhua Silk Road Database*, May 29, 2023, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/334318.html>.

¹⁶⁶Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, "Our Projects," Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2023, https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/list/year/All/member/Bangladesh/sector/All/financing_type/All/status/Approved.

¹⁶⁷Fahmida Khatun and Syed Yusuf Saadar, "How Can Bangladesh Benefit from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?," *South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment* 15, no. 3 (2019), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347490448_How_can_Bangladesh_benefit_from_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_BRI.

¹⁶⁸Shah Md. Azimul Ehsan, "What Does Belt and Road Initiative Connote for Bangladesh: A Window of Opportunities or Potential Challenges?," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (March 2021): 27–49.

3.2 Case Study: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a friendly country enjoying cordial relations with China dating back over many centuries. Both countries were connected by trade, culture, and knowledge through the ancient Maritime Silk Route. Chinese Buddhist scholars have also played an important role in the transfer of knowledge, ideas, and beliefs. After establishing formal diplomatic relations in 1957, both countries took several steps to enhance their political, economic, trade, and cultural relations¹⁶⁹.

The influence of China's soft power in Sri Lanka is complex and constantly changing. Despite coming under heavy fire recently, especially over the Hambantota port project, China is deliberately using a range of soft power instruments to portray a favorable image as a significant player in the South Asian region. China is actively attempting to increase its impact and presence in Sri Lanka via the use of soft power tactics. Chinese soft power expansion in Sri Lanka includes public diplomacy, debt restructuring, cultural exchanges, economic diplomacy, and institution building.

3.2.1 Economic diplomacy

Sri Lanka's current foreign policy is mainly focused on its economic needs owing to its recent political and economic crisis which led the country to economic default¹⁷⁰. The island nation is expecting both the regional powers of India and China to help it out of the crisis. In this regard, China backs Sri Lanka's debt plan to help the country amid the worst economic crisis¹⁷¹. Before the Sri Lankan economic crisis, China actively participated by investing billions of dollars to uplift Sri Lanka's infrastructure by developing and constructing ports, airports, highways, and power plants. These investments not only produced jobs in Sri Lanka but also improved connectivity and enhanced Sri Lanka's economy.

Despite its lower dependence on Chinese investments compared to other South Asian nations like Pakistan and the Maldives, China continues to significantly contribute to Sri Lanka's

¹⁶⁹Embassy of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, "Sri Lanka China Relations," 2023, <https://www.beijing.embassy.gov.lk/srirelation>.

¹⁷⁰Kithmina Hewage, "China in South Asia: Sri Lanka's Elusive Attempts to Balance Between India and China," *South Asian Voices*, July 25, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/china-in-south-asia-sri-lankas-elusive-attempts-to-balance-between-india-and-china/>.

¹⁷¹Anusha Ondaatjie, Asantha Sirimanne, and Eric Martin, "China Backs Sri Lanka Debt Plan, Sources Say, Paving Way for IMF Loan," *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-07/china-said-to-back-sri-lanka-debt-plan-paving-way-for-imf-loan>.

infrastructure. According to the World Economic Forum's 2019 Global Competitiveness Report, Sri Lanka ranks 61th in overall infrastructure performance among 141 economies worldwide¹⁷². A 2014 World Bank analysis estimated that Sri Lanka could need up to \$36 billion in infrastructure investments to address the existing deficit¹⁷³. The key factor that could effectively address Sri Lanka's infrastructure gap lies in considering Chinese investment ambitions.

Anticipated economic benefits and investments in infrastructure by China are poised to yield a robust soft power impact in Sri Lanka. Notably, a significant portion of Chinese investments in Sri Lanka is directed towards roads and railways, leading to the construction of 116.1 km or 68 percent of the nation's motorway network¹⁷⁴. The transformative impact of these Chinese-funded projects is evident in the notable improvement of roads connectivity in Sri Lanka and the subsequent reduction in travel times across the country.

Furthermore, the second-largest portion of Chinese investments is directed towards Sri Lankan ports. With a total investment of \$500 million from China, the Colombo port stands as the sole state-of-the-art deep-water terminal in South Asia, capable of accommodating over 20,000 twenty-foot-equivalent-unit (TEU) vessels, including ultra-large container carriers (ULCCs). Thanks to the support of China Merchant Port Holdings Company, the Colombo Port has ascended to become the eleventh most connected port globally¹⁷⁵.

Similarly, the third-largest recipient of Chinese funding in Sri Lanka is the non-renewable energy generation sector. A substantial \$1.4 billion Chinese investment was directed towards the construction of Sri Lanka's largest power plant, the Norocholai Power Station. This facility plays a significant role in meeting a considerable portion of the nation's electricity demand

Apart from these, the fourth area that is witnessing significant Chinese investments to improve Sri Lanka's infrastructure is water and sanitation, coupled with urban development. The

¹⁷²World Economic Forum, "The Global Competitiveness Report 2019" (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2019), http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf.

¹⁷³Wignaraja et al., "Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka."

¹⁷⁴Wignaraja et al.

¹⁷⁵Sunday Observer, "Colombo Port, 11th Best Connected in the World," *Sunday Observer*, January 6, 2019, <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/01/06/business/%E2%80%98colombo-port-11th-best-connected-world%E2%80%99>.

Port Metropolis Colombo project is particularly noteworthy since it is a freshly built metropolis spanning 269 hectares of land. Hailed as a game-changer for contemporary service development in Sri Lanka, the Port City attracted \$1.4 billion in early Chinese investments. It is projected that the project's construction will add 1.5 million units of A-grade office space to Colombo, as well as create 122,000 jobs and draw in over half a billion dollars in foreign direct investment (FDI).

China has invested a large amount in Sri Lanka to boot its infrastructure projects and support its economic growth. Despite the recent economic default of Sri Lanka China rolled back its debts and is the only country with the first major economic investment since the economic default¹⁷⁶, the project is considered as the South Asian largest logistic hub. Sri Lanka is home to 75 Chinese projects, which include 3 intermodal shipping ports, 31 power plants, 5 railways, 30 roads, and 6 seaports¹⁷⁷. Most of the Chinese infrastructure projects are related to logistics and transportation.

Leveraging the economy as a soft power tool to bolster influence in Sri Lanka proves effective. All the mentioned Chinese economic endeavors are contributing positively to the Sri Lankan economy and its citizens, thereby advancing China's influence and fostering a favorable image. China's robust economic diplomacy has notably elevated its soft power impact in Sri Lanka.

3.2.2 Debt Restructuring

China had played a great role in Sri Lankan debt restructuring. The country had tried hard to restructure its foreign debt after its economic default on April 12, 2022¹⁷⁸. China in this regard is playing a positive role in Sri Lanka's debt restructuring progression. Managing Director of International Monetary Fund (IMF) Kristalina Georgieva also discussed China's role in addressing the up-and-coming market debt crisis, especially China's important role in

¹⁷⁶AFP, "Chinese State-Owned Firm to Increase Sri Lanka Investment to \$2 Billion by Building New Port Complex," *Deccan Herald*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/chinese-state-owned-firm-to-increase-sri-lanka-investment-to-2-billion-by-building-new-port-complex-1214650.html>.

¹⁷⁷Katherine Grof, "All Infrastructure Projects Lead to Beijing : How the Belt and Road Initiative Has Influenced China's Regional Policy" (Wright State University, 2022), https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all/2641.

¹⁷⁸Lilian Karunungan and Amelia Pollard, "Sri Lanka Falls Into Default For The First Time Ever," *Bloomberg*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-19/sri-lanka-enters-default-and-warns-inflation-may-surge-to-40#xj4y7vzkg>.

restructuring Sri Lanka's debt issue, where China plays an active role¹⁷⁹. China also played an important role in paving the way for Sri Lanka to obtain a \$2.9 billion IMF loan after China's assurance regarding debt restructuring. It is also noticeable that Sri Lanka owes to China 19.6 percent of its total public external debt. This also includes its debt to Chinese creditors which accounts for \$7.3 billion. On the flip side, the largest share of Sri Lankan foreign debt consists of Eurobonds, which account for 36 percent¹⁸⁰.

3.2.3 Cultural Influence

Chinese are aware of the importance of cultural linkages and their influence in using it as an important strategy of soft power influence. China is using its centuries-old civilization trade routes and knowledge to attract the Sri Lankan public by establishing people-to-people strong bonds. This involves facilitating the movement of travelers, scholars, and artists between China and Sri Lanka, and reciprocally. The longstanding cultural connections between China and Sri Lanka have been enriched by mutual religious and cultural values spanning centuries. In the era of Zheng He, a navigator from the Ming Dynasty who undertook multiple journeys to Sri Lanka, formalized commercial and cultural exchanges were established¹⁸¹.

Due to strong religious and cultural bounds both the countries are enjoying strong people-to-people contacts. The religious factor is dominating all other cultural aspects of Chinese cultural soft power influence in Sri Lanka. China is using the Buddhist narrative to promote its soft power in Sri Lanka and boost its soft power influence.

Additionally, China is advancing its soft power impact by emphasizing the Chinese language. The Chinese language, cultural initiatives, and Confucius institutes are pivotal in this regard. In Sri Lanka, two Confucius institutes and one Confucius classroom have been established by China, complemented by numerous Chinese language centers¹⁸². The main objectives of these institutes are to promote Chinese cultural values and attract the Sri Lankan population by providing educational scholarships, cultural exchange visits, and easy access to tourists.

¹⁷⁹Umesh Moramudali and Thilina Panduwawala, "Demystifying China's Role in Sri Lanka's Debt Restructuring," *The Diplomat*, December 20, 2022.

¹⁸⁰Moramudali and Panduwawala.

¹⁸¹Jayasundara, "China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives."

¹⁸²Hanban, "(Sri Lanka) Confucius Institutes & Classroom."

3.2.4 Diplomatic Influence

China is actively engaged with Sri Lanka at the diplomatic level, fostering closer ties and influencing policy decisions by using diplomacy as a tool of soft power influence. Sri Lanka which is considered as the pearl of the Maritime Silk Route serves as a key nexus for China's maritime trade route¹⁸³. Due to the said reason, Beijing is taking every step to have good and cordial relations with Sri Lanka. At the height of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009; Beijing was able to build a significant presence in the country thanks to India's reluctance to support the government of the island nation. This led to the emergence of a powerful diplomatic relationship¹⁸⁴.

China has continuously supported Sri Lanka despite serious Western charges of human rights crimes during and after the 2009 civil war. China voted against US-sponsored UN resolutions in 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2014¹⁸⁵. China emphasized the significance of maintaining Sri Lanka's sovereignty over its territory and supported military operations by the country that were deemed to have no bearing on world peace and security. Sri Lankans always views Beijing's support at the UN against US-sponsored resolutions with appreciation. Sri Lankan former President Mahinda Rajapaksa appreciated China's role by stating that the Chinese helped them to manage and defeat terrorism in Sri Lanka¹⁸⁶.

3.2.5 Public Diplomacy

In Sri Lanka, China significantly strengthens its soft power through effective public diplomacy. A pivotal strategy to achieve its public diplomacy goals in Sri Lanka involves media outreach, among other approaches. Media entities such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) and China Radio International (CRI) serve as platforms for China to advance its interests and enhance its reputation. Beijing utilizes these channels to communicate its policies and ideals to the Sri Lankan audience.

According to the Freedom House report "China Global Media Influence 2022" Beijing state media efforts are intensified resulting in increased influence. The report states that pro-

¹⁸³Jayasundara, "China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives."

¹⁸⁴Jayasundara.

¹⁸⁵Ben Blanchard, "China Backs Sri Lanka over U.S. Rights Complaint," *Reuters*, January 11, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-srilanka idUSBREA1A0TI20140211>.

¹⁸⁶Jayasundara, "China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives."

Beijing influences are increased amid political change¹⁸⁷. In Sri Lanka Beijing media influence efforts are termed as noticeable scoring 34/85, while local resilience and response are termed as low, scoring 27/85.

Furthermore, COVID-19 played an important role in China's positive image as a public diplomacy tool. Many Sri Lankans viewed China as a friendly power that provided the much-needed COVID-19 aid. China was the first country to come to Sri Lanka's aid. Upon the Sri Lankan government's request, China provided a \$500 million concessionary loan to fight COVID-19¹⁸⁸. Sri Lanka is also considering China as a regional power that can act as a balancing force against Indian and Western influence. This eventually improves Sri Lanka's perception of China's soft power.

3.2.6 Role of China-led Institutions

China's BRI is frequently perceived as an institution that Beijing established to develop international connectivity networks to promote investment and commerce. This institutional setup by China is enhancing its global image. From the platform of BRI Sri Lanka received billions of dollars to improve its infrastructure and connectivity. Countries like Sri Lanka had to participate in CCIC in case they had any dispute or disagreement with BRI projects or other actors who shared the same project or any other.

Likewise, AIIB has a list of five projects for Sri Lanka, three of which are approved while two are proposed projects¹⁸⁹. Furthermore, China's New Development Bank provided loans for multiple projects in Sri Lanka. Chinese EXIM Bank also supports a large number of infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. As a result of a large amount of FDI Chinese institutes are making Sri Lanka intact within China's orbit for economic assistance and diplomatic support while maintaining a balanced relationship between China and India.

3.3 Case Study: Nepal

China-Nepal relations are often described as the model of good neighborliness, between a large and a small country with different political systems, sharing a long border of 1414

¹⁸⁷BC Han, "Beijing Global Media Influence 2022" (Sri Lanka: Freedom House, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sri-lanka/beijings-global-influence/2022>.

¹⁸⁸Jinith de Silva, "How China Came to Sri Lanka's Aid in Dire Times," *Beijing Review*, January 1, 2023.

¹⁸⁹AIIB, "Our Projects," Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2023, https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/list/year/All/member/Sri%20Lanka/sector/All/financing_type/All/status/All.

kilometers¹⁹⁰. The two states not only resolved the border issues amicably in 1961 but also furthered their ages-old ties of friendship and cooperation. Nepal has been confidently committed to the One-China Policy and considers Taiwan an integral part of the People's Republic of China. Due to the strong cordial relations Nepal is the only country having a Consulate General in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)¹⁹¹.

China and Nepal have enjoyed good relations over the centuries however; both countries came even closer in 2015. In 2015, India unofficially imposed an economic embargo to convey its dissatisfaction with the citizenship restrictions outlined in Nepal's new constitution¹⁹². Nepal was significantly affected by the scenario, which resulted in a major gasoline scarcity. The hazards of Nepal's reliance on one powerful player in South Asian affairs were highlighted by India's embargo. By granting it access to Chinese ports, this helped to strengthen ties with China and eliminate its reliance on India for commerce and products. Furthermore, during the same period, Nepal was hit by a shocking earthquake, and in such a situation Nepal found China a responsible and trustworthy friend, by receiving every possible Chinese help.

Furthermore, the two countries are enjoying good relations, which the Nepal Embassy in Beijing terms “the model of good neighborliness”¹⁹³. This is the result of the Chinese use of soft power means attracting cooperation rather than coercion. China is using various strategies to enhance its soft power in Nepal varying from cultural influence to institutional influence.

3.3.1 Economic diplomacy

China is using its economic resources as an instrument of attraction rather than coercion to attract Nepal's elite and common people alike. China's use of economic resources for different infrastructure projects, assistance during natural disasters and at times of emergency, grants, and loans, and creating jobs for the common people by investing in Nepal's different developmental sectors are contributing much to China's soft power in Nepal. According to Dr. Abdur Rehman, Chinese investments have become the prime source of growth and development in Nepal¹⁹⁴. Dr.

¹⁹⁰Embassy of Nepal, “Bilateral Relations,” Embassy of Nepal Beijing, China, 2023, <https://cn.nepalembassy.gov.np/bilateral-relations/#:~:text=Nepal%2DChina%20relations%20are%20described,to%20be%20used%20against%20China.>

¹⁹¹Embassy of Nepal.

¹⁹²Pal, “China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries.”

¹⁹³Embassy of Nepal, “Bilateral Relations.”

¹⁹⁴Abdur Rehman Shah, Online, December 11, 2023.

Rehman explains that China is helping Nepal with developmental projects including roads, highways, airports, and hydropower projects to meet the growing need of energy. He further clarified that Nepal has signed Chinese ambitious project, the BRI to connect China to the rest of South Asian countries through connectivity projects. He also shed light on the tourist points in China and vice versa where hundreds of thousands of tourists visit, contributing to the economies of both the states.

Reports claim that Chinese investments in Nepal may be aimed at asserting its influence in the country¹⁹⁵. Although it is a matter of fact in international relations that one's national interest is supreme over all other interests. Chinese investments in Nepal aimed to enhance its influence, but through soft means of power. Chinese significant investments in Nepal are the nine projects under Chinese BRI. The most valuable among these projects in the Himalayan state is the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity System¹⁹⁶.

For infrastructure projects, the Chinese government are committed to providing Rs80 billion for the execution of various infrastructure projects in Nepal. China wants to release economic and financial assistance that has been given to the landlocked country since 2008¹⁹⁷. China is also the largest FDI provider to Nepal for the last six years¹⁹⁸.

3.3.2 Cultural Influence

Cultural influence plays an important role in China's soft power influence in Nepal. The proximity of the two nations and centuries-old cultural and religious harmony between the nations make it easy for China to enhance its soft power in Nepal through various cultural means. Following politics and economics, culture stands as the third pillar of Chinese diplomacy, as asserted by Sun Jiazheng, the cultural minister at that time, in 2005¹⁹⁹. He underscored China's

¹⁹⁵ANI, "Chinese Investments in Nepal May Be Aimed at Asserting Its Influence in Country: Report," *The Economic Times*, February 10, 2023, https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.economictimes.com/news/international/world-news/chinese-investments-in-nepal-may-be-aimed-at-asserting-its-influence-in-country-report/amp_articleshow/97808420.cms.

¹⁹⁶ANI.

¹⁹⁷Anil Giri, "China to Release Rs80 Billion Pledge to Nepal since 2008," *The Economic Times*, April 30, 2023, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/04/30/china-to-release-rs80-billion-pledged-to-nepal-since-2008>.

¹⁹⁸Rahul Nath Choudhury, "Chinese Investments in Nepal: Capturing the Himalayan Hills," in *Mapping Chinese Investment in South Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, n.d.), 121–44, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-99-1385-5_6#:~:text=China%20has%20committed%20the%20largest,years%20\(Xinhua%2C%202021\)](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-99-1385-5_6#:~:text=China%20has%20committed%20the%20largest,years%20(Xinhua%2C%202021)).

¹⁹⁹Jayasundara, "China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives."

commitment to fostering a peaceful society through people-centered cultural policies. In this context, China and Nepal share favorable cultural bonds.

China has opened two Confucius Institutes in Nepal. According to Xinhua 2023 report the Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University has trained some 50,000 Chinese language professionals in the last 16 years since its inception²⁰⁰. China's Confucius Institutes in Nepal are so active that they launched Chinese language courses in universities, colleges, and even in secondary and primary schools. It also includes special language classes for Nepalese Army and other government officials²⁰¹. Chinese government is also providing scholarships and cultural exchange programs to Nepal's students, journalists, and officials to make the cultural bond more attractive. As a result, China's cultural influence is increasing in Nepal through the active participation of Chinese officials in Nepal's government and its people.

3.3.3 Public Diplomacy

China is pursuing an active public diplomacy in Nepal. The era of Chinese active public diplomacy started with the devastating April 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Within twenty-four hours following the earthquake, China dispatched a rescue team. To evaluate long-term actions, geologists and seismologists also followed up with the rescue crew²⁰². The level of Chinese solidarity with Nepal's government and its people reached its peak when Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the people affected by the devastating earthquake²⁰³. China has actively assisted in the post-earthquake reconstruction efforts in addition to providing financial and humanitarian help. The government of Nepal inked a Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) agreement with China in recognition of China's active involvement in post-earthquake settlements. The agreement aims to give HADR technologies to Nepal and assist it in establishing an earthquake-monitoring project²⁰⁴.

²⁰⁰Xinhua, "Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University Produces 50,000 Chinese-Language Professionals for Nepal," *Xinhuanet*, July 10, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230710/326a1b4b86cf4df6ba50953e44b9c91b/c.html>.

²⁰¹Xinhua.

²⁰²Rishiram Poudel, "Chinese Technicians in the Village of Sindhupalchowk," *Kantipur*, June 9, 2015, <https://ekantipur.com/printedition/2015/06/09/348188.html>.

²⁰³Chandrashekhar Adhikari, "When the Chinese Foreign Minister Reached Tundikhel...", *Kantipur*, June 25, 2015, <https://ekantipur.com/news/2015/06/25/411512.html>.

²⁰⁴Kriti Joshi, "Agreements, MoUs Signed Between Nepal and China," *Himalayan Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/agreements-and-mous-signed-between-nepal-and-china>.

Furthermore, Educational partnership has been expanded between the two countries to a great extent. After the Chinese government committed to pay the wages of the staff members involved in teaching Chinese language courses, several schools in Nepal started offering Chinese language classes as required coursework²⁰⁵. China has also setup three Confucius institutes, four Confucius classrooms²⁰⁶, and several Chinese language centers. These steps reflect how China is increasingly trying to enhance its influence by using various soft powers means, including culture, cuisine, language, and media.

Likewise, Chinese tourists are not only important drivers for growth in Nepal but also in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives. Post-COVID-19 witnessed an increase in Chinese tourists to Nepal by 11 percent year-by-year. According to Consul Kiran Kumar at the Consulate General of Nepal in China, Chinese authorities are the main reason behind the encouragement to visit the country's tourist attractions²⁰⁷. An increased number of Chinese tourists mean faster growth because countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives have a great share of tourism in their respective country's economies. He also highlighted the importance of different cultural initiatives as a means of public diplomacy to attract Nepalese towards the gravity of Chinese reach culture. He considers these initiatives as part of the larger Chinese public diplomacy efforts to gain attraction through soft means of power.

3.3.4 An Alternative Route

China presents itself as an alternative to India in South Asia to the South Asian countries. For instance, Nepal joined BRI as an alternative to India's big-brother attitude in South Asia²⁰⁸. Also, the 2015 blockade made Nepal vulnerable, and the search for an alternative to avoid its increasing over-dependence on India²⁰⁹. In such a scenario the best possible option was China, ready to help Nepal both diplomatically and economically.

²⁰⁵Sabitri Dhakal, "Mandarin Made Mandatory in Many Schools," *Himalayan Times*, June 5, 2019, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/mandarin-made-mandatory-in-many-schools>.

²⁰⁶Pal, "China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries."

²⁰⁷Kiran Kumar Gurung, Online, December 5, 2023.

²⁰⁸Hazarika and Mishra, "South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China."

²⁰⁹Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

As a result, China opened new transit routes for Nepal's goods. Since 2016, China has permitted Nepal to have access to China's three dry ports and four seaports²¹⁰. China has also launched various ambitious projects in Nepal to connect it with the rest of the world. Recently China has launched a new project in Nepal as part of the BRI. These projects which are five in number were launched under a platform called "Silk Roadster" to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the BRI. These projects include the Silk Road Embankment, the Silk Road Empowerment, the Silk Road Enjoyment, the Silk Road Enlightenment, and the Silk Road Enhancement²¹¹. All of the initiatives are intended to strengthen China's soft power establishing connections between the landlocked Himalayan state of Nepal and the global community via China.

3.4 Conclusion

Today China has developed an image of responsible power in South Asian politics. China has deepened its soft power influence by creating and maintaining a positive image in South Asia, especially Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal by making economic, cultural, and diplomatic inroads while avoiding its self-form interference in internal or political affairs. As a result, it projects China's enhancing soft power in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal through various soft power means with Chinese characteristics.

²¹⁰Juanita Rose Thomas, "The History of Soft Power Contest in Nepal: China Vs India," *Asian Institute of Diplomacy Internatioanl Affairs*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.aidiaasia.org/research-article/the-history-of-soft-power-contest-in-nepal-china-vs-india>.

²¹¹Dipanjan Roy Choudhury, "China Lanuches Platform to Promote Its Soft Power in Nepal," *The Economic Times*, July 31, 2023, https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.economicstimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-launches-platform-to-promote-its-soft-power-in-nepal/amp_articleshow/102285502.cms.

Chapter 04

Response of South Asian Countries: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal

The growing influence of China in South Asia is not unchecked. The reactions and responses of the South Asian countries differ from each other²¹². This is because national interests matter the most in international relations. The big powers of South Asia like India and Pakistan respond quite differently. The former is considered as the major contestant of China in South Asia, while the latter is China's all-weather friend. Likewise, the smaller South Asian nations like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan had a wide range of responses to China's growing influence through soft power means.

The nature of responses from South Asian countries varies from learning lessons from other Chinese-funded connectivity initiatives under the BRI to countries developing alternatives to counter Chinese soft power projection through different initiatives. India in this regard is the only actor with profound soft and hard power. India considering the amount of influence over the smaller South Asian countries views China's soft power projection with trepidation and alarm.

Although there's a commonality between the smaller South Asian countries that each of these countries is sensitive to the power dynamics at play. However, there are the local actors too, who are not only affected by the power dynamics between China and India but also want to push their interests as well. The biggest success of Chinese soft power initiatives can be witnessed in Bangladesh, which not only perceives it positively, but also tries to manage the balance between the power giants of South Asia²¹³. The Maldives is the least interested country in South Asia concerning China's economic initiatives and projects. Likewise, Bhutan hasn't any formal diplomatic relations with China. Bhutan had neither joined China's BRI nor received Chinese economic assistance. However, recently China-Bhutan had agreed to resolve the border issues and established formal diplomatic relations²¹⁴. Similarly, the responses of both Nepal and Sri Lanka towards Chinese soft power influence in South Asia fall in-between²¹⁵.

²¹²Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

²¹³Miller.

²¹⁴Shi Jiangtao, "Why Bhutan's Tilt towards China May 'significantly Change' Regional Dynamics," *South China Morning Post*, October 29, 2023,

This can lead to conclude that all South Asian countries can be divided into three categories. First, countries like Pakistan and to some extent, Afghanistan are fully in line with Chinese initiatives of soft power enrichment. The second category of countries includes India and Bhutan, closely aligned to reject China’s profound soft power influence in South Asia. The third category of states falls in-between the two extremes. Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh need Chinese assistance and view China’s economic, diplomatic, and cultural initiatives positively, however, these countries want to have a balanced relationship with the two Asian powers, struggling for dominance in South Asia. The responses of Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are discussed in detail as part of the research work.

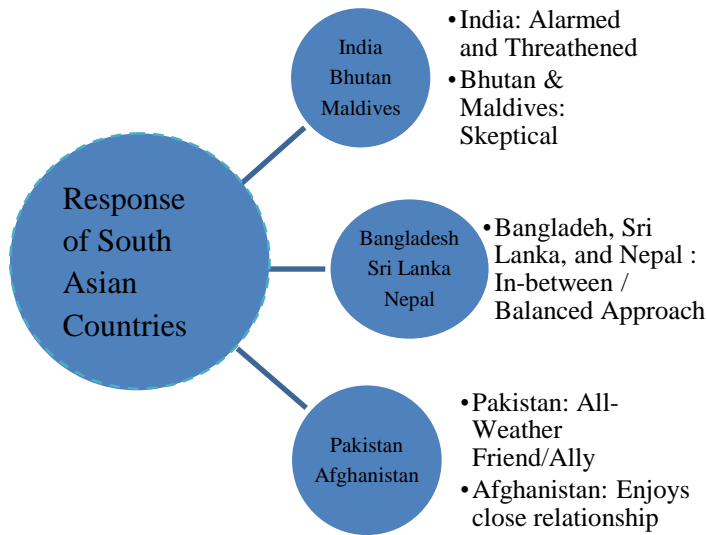


Figure 8 Responses of South Asian Countries

Source: Composed by the Author based on a Discussion Paper, Written by Manjari Chatterjee Miller

4.1 Response of Sri Lanka

China’s primary tool for enhancing its influence in any country is its economic initiatives. Most of the economic initiatives of China in Sri Lanka were considered positive, however, some resulted oppositely. For instance, the Hambantota port project grabbed the attention of policymakers which negatively affected China’s soft image. This resulted in the growing dependence on Chinese loans reinforced the idea that China is practicing "debt-trap

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3239549/why-bhutans-tilt-towards-china-may-significantly-change-regional-dynamics>.

²¹⁵Miller, “China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia.”

diplomacy"²¹⁶. According to this viewpoint, China easily supplies capital for infrastructure projects that ultimately turn out to be unfeasible. As a result, the Chinese lender becomes more powerful and may even seize ownership of the asset by converting debt to equity or by enforcing new conditions. Keeping in view both aspects, this study will take into account both sides of the coin, by examining the positive and negative responses towards Beijing's influence through soft means of power.

4.1.1 Cultural Diplomacy

The recent research conducted by Jayani D. Jayasundar, a student of the University of Turku, which is focused on the perspectives of students of Sri Lankan universities about China's soft power and its implications for Sri Lanka, reveals a noticeable increase in China's overall soft power in recent years. The research concludes that it cannot be denied that China has effectively advanced its interests in Sri Lanka through the non-coercive tools of power²¹⁷. The study also highlights the most prominent factor of influence in Sri Lanka is the cultural diplomacy of China. Many Sri Lankans view Confucius Institutes as an opportunity for Sri Lankans to study Chinese and get scholarships for higher studies in various fields in Chinese institutes. Also, many of the Sri Lankans perceive Chinese cultural initiatives as part of the centuries-old linkages between the two nations to promote and exchange mutual exchange and cooperation.

However, China's cultural diplomacy attempts in Sri Lanka met with opposition from critics, raising objections alleging China that cultural exchanges are employed as a strategy to further its political and economic agendas. Furthermore, apprehensions have been voiced regarding the potential repercussions of China's cultural influence on the traditional practices and customs of Sri Lanka. This reflects the diverse opinions of Sri Lankans regarding China's cultural intake in the country, but the most prominent response observed is the positive perception concerning Beijing's cultural diplomacy in Sri Lanka.

²¹⁶Pal, "China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries."

²¹⁷Jayasundara, "China's Soft Power and Its Cultural Implication for Sri Lanka: Exploring Students' Perspectives."

4.1.2 Economic Diplomacy

The response towards economic diplomacy in Sri Lanka is highly diverse. Many Chinese soft power-oriented economic initiatives are perceived as a threat to Sri Lanka's sovereignty. Some perceive the PRC as engaged in the practice of a "debt trap", by taking control of the Hambantota port. The accusation of debt trap and loss of sovereignty to Chinese companies are widely connected with the allegation of China's hunting for expansion of its political influence in the region of South Asia²¹⁸. The Sri Lankan government and people are responding in different ways from criticizing the negative implications for Sri Lanka to the cancellation of various projects by the government of Sri Lanka. Some of the responses towards China's economic diplomacy are discussed as under.

Chinese infrastructure projects have received harsh criticism from the Sri Lankan community. Many projects witnessed protests due to its ecological and biodiversity implications for Sri Lanka's environment. For instance, the most famous, Hambantota port project received criticism during its initial stage of construction, for not studying the environmental risks and hazards connected to infrastructure projects. Also, the Norocholai power station was condemned by civil society organizations²¹⁹.

On the other front Chinese construction companies are facing allegations of bringing Chinese immigrants to work on infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, when it comes to major infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, Chinese construction corporations frequently choose to import labor straight from China. The noted rise in the proportion of Chinese laborers has sparked worries about possible unauthorized immigration. An estimated 200,000 undocumented migrant laborers, or 2.5 percent of Sri Lanka's labor force, were employed there in 2017²²⁰. With the increasing number of Chinese workers, the Sri Lankan population is responding negatively. This has been observed that during the outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese workers faced racial discrimination in many parts of Sri Lanka²²¹.

²¹⁸Jayasundara.

²¹⁹Wignaraja et al., "Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka."

²²⁰Mario Andree, "Over 200,000 Illegal Migrant Workers in Sri Lanka Now 10,000 Visas Issued Per Year to Import Labour - Former Central Banker," *Ceylon*, October 11, 2017, https://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CT_11Oct_SOE-Launch_Over-200000-illegal-migrant-workers.pdf.

²²¹Chanka Jayasinghe, "Corona virus Stalls Construction Projects in Sri Lanka," *Economy Next*, February 11, 2020, <https://economynext.com/coronavirus-stalls-construction-projects-in-sri-lanka-49226/>.

Another response that can be witnessed from the Sri Lankan's diplomatic moves is its closeness towards India. Recently it was observed that the government of Sri Lanka granted the construction of hybrid energy plants on islands located off the Northern coast, just a short distance from India. However, the project was suspended after a month due to significant pressure from the government of India, referring to security concerns to India²²². After the economic crisis faced by Sri Lanka, India attained the position of largest economic assistance lender to Sri Lanka with \$4 billion to stabilize the country's economic situation. Adani Ports, an Indian multinational enterprise struck a \$700-million contract with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority to collaboratively build Colombo Port's West Container Terminal. Additionally, Sri Lanka authorized Adani Green Energy to develop a \$442-million wind power project²²³. However, looking at China's economic assistance after the default values \$392 million for the logistic hub at the Colombo port.

This reveals that Sri Lanka is responding to China's growing influence by balancing it with India's presence. Although China plays an important role in Sri Lanka's political landscape, the country is providing space to India's soft power initiatives to fill the gap. The official statement of President Wickremesinghe, who considers India a responsible neighbor, a reliable partner, and one ready to extend additional support whenever Sri Lanka requires it²²⁴, unveils the balancing fact of Sri Lanka's response towards China's influence in Sri Lanka through soft means of power.

However, recent studies reveal that Sri Lanka, which is frequently cited as an illustration of debt-trap diplomacy, has a general issue with managing its debt. Despite this and other controversies, China's economic diplomacy is a success story in endorsing its foreign policy interests in Sri Lanka. The strong economic ties between the two countries haven't only resulted in viable economic relations, but also strong government-to-government ties.

²²²Hewage, "China in South Asia: Sri Lanka's Elusive Attempts to Balance Between India and China."

²²³Rathindra Kuruwita, "China Seeks an Image Makeover in Sri Lanka," *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/china-seeks-an-image-makeover-in-sri-lanka/>.

²²⁴Kuruwita.

4.1.3 Public Diplomacy

Sri Lanka's public opinion concerning public diplomacy is average. Recent developments show that China is concerned about its public diplomacy in Sri Lanka to regenerate China's positive image. To makeover its constructive image in Sri Lanka, the China Foundation for Rural Development initiated food packages for children across the country. The move was adopted by China after UNICEF reported that 10,000 families were facing severe food shortages and another 3.9 million experiencing moderate food insecurity²²⁵.

On one hand, the openness of China's aid initiatives in Sri Lanka has drawn criticism. Questions have been raised on how China's media outreach has affected Sri Lanka's journalistic environment, while others have even accused Beijing of trying to sway public sentiments in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, China perceives public diplomacy as an indispensable instrument to advance its soft image in the country.

In short Sri Lanka is considering China as an important actor of the South Asian politics. Beijing's soft power initiatives in Sri Lanka are eye-catching. Despite the above-discussed concerns most of the initiatives are resulting in positive responses and backing from the political, public, and academicians of Sri Lanka. This support is rooted in various factors, including Chinese diversity and expanding public diplomacy as well as the Chinese support to the Sri Lankan government at the time of civil war. However, the most recent developments in Sri Lanka's political and economic landscape have also made Sri Lanka's policymakers to look for other alternatives as well, but not at the expense of China.

4.2 Response of Nepal

Nepal has enthusiastically embraced Chinese soft power initiatives as a viable alternative to its reliance on India. Although there have been minor concerns over China's growing ideological sway in the Himalayan nation. However, the results of Chinese strategies of soft power have been uneven in terms of Nepal's geopolitical and internal interests. This is due to three main reasons why Nepal tilted towards China instead of working closely with India²²⁶. First, Nepal was concerned about its overreliance on India. As a landlocked country with India as its neighbor country on its three sides, trade and the flow of products and goods are always

²²⁵Kuruwita.

²²⁶Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

dependable on India. Second, Kathmandu's political values and interests match with that of China. Nepal's Communist Party in this regard is closely connected with the Chinese Communist Party. Third, Nepal also shares a border with China, having centuries-old cultural linkages.

According to Nepal's Consul at the Consulate General of Nepal at Hong Kong, Nepal welcomes Chinese investments, support, and cooperation for decades. China has also been the main foreign investor in the sectors of infrastructure and services in Nepal. However, a few projects are creating suspicion in the Nepalese population ostensibly because of the secrecy of agreements and the high rate of loans for the infrastructure projects than the international trends and practices. He also mentions that the high number of Chinese workers working on Chinese infrastructure projects in Nepal is also concerning the Nepalese population²²⁷.

The response towards China's influence in Nepal is somehow moderate. However, the growing influence in Nepal is concerning the public. It is widely perceived that the Nepali Communist Party was brought to power with the Chinese Communist Party's uphill struggle in the 2018 elections. In return, China wants to secure the Nepalese government's backing of key issues like Tibet and Taiwan. This and other issues like the border violations and the suspension of cross-border commerce at two important crossing points have made the carefully constructed soft image in Kathmandu²²⁸. Although China has constructed its soft image over the years and its influence has increased over these years, however, Nepal's national interests are supreme to its people and politicians. The response towards Beijing can be best possibly drawn from the most recent survey conducted by the Organization for Research on China and India.

4.2.1 Public Diplomacy

China has crafted its public diplomacy in Nepal in a very unique way to bring the people and government of Nepal close to the people and government of China. China has setup many Confucius Classrooms and institutes in Nepal. It has also helped Nepalese to learn the Chinese language in schools, where teachers are being paid by the Chinese government. A survey conducted of more than 180 Nepalese across Nepal's capital Kathmandu found that Nepali citizens had a stronger personal attachment to New Delhi than to Beijing. This is due to strong cultural links, family ties, and religious ties between the two nations. It was also revealed in the

²²⁷Gurung, interview.

²²⁸Vijay Gokhale, "China's Influence in Nepal Isn't Limitless," *Carnegie India*, April 6, 2022, <https://carnegieindia.org/2022/04/06/china-s-influence-in-nepal-isn-t-limitless-pub-86811>.

survey that India provides more market opportunities for the ordinary people of Nepal compared to China. Generally, it was witnessed during the survey that getting access to India for goods and services is more accessible compared to China²²⁹.

Concerning the positive image building as a result of public diplomacy, 45% see China with a positive image in Nepal. The perception of the Nepalese public regarding China and India can best be visualized from the following info-graphic data of the survey conducted by the Organization for Research on China and India.

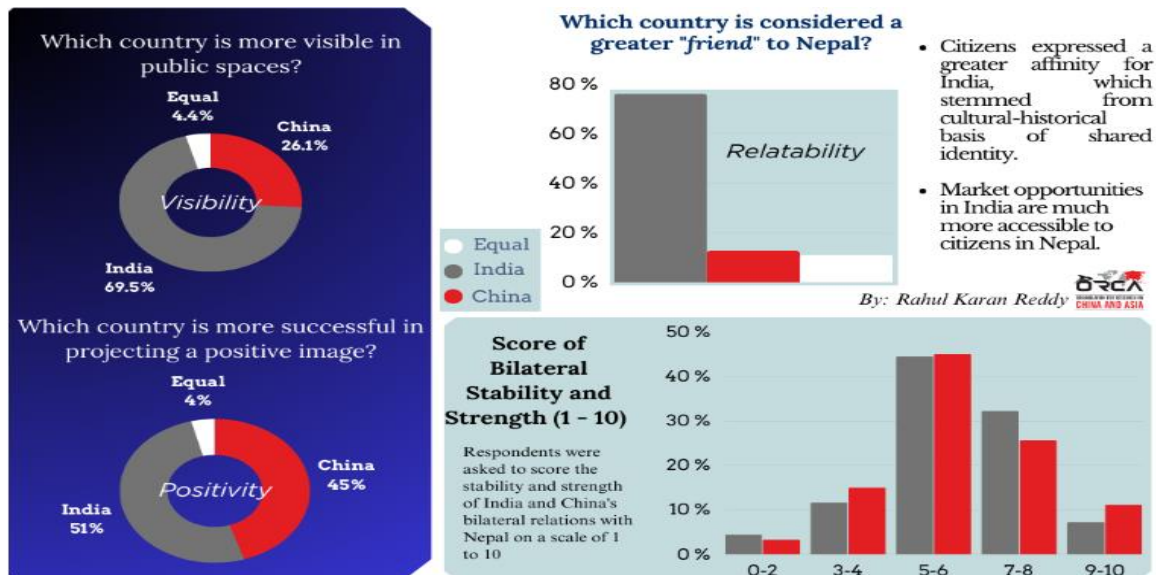


Figure 9 Public Perceptions of India and China in Kathmandu, Nepal

Source: Organization for Research on China and India

4.2.2 Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy is the main pillar of Chinese soft power in Nepal and elsewhere. Economic assistance, trade, aid, and loans bind the two countries economically and give China an edge over other countries in this region. For the last six years, China has been the largest Foreign Direct Investment provider to Nepal. The total FDI received by Nepal for the year 2020-2021 is 22.5 billion Nepali rupees²³⁰. Initially, Chinese investment pledges were focused on small

²²⁹Rahul Karan Reddy, "A Survey of Public Opinion in Nepal: India and China in Competition," *Organization for Research on China and Asia*, August 3, 2023, <https://orcasia.org/article/376/a-survey-of-public-opinion-in-nepal-india-and-china-in-competition>.

²³⁰Xinhua, "China Remains Largest Source of FDI for Nepal for 6 Consecutive Years," *Xinhuanet*, July 21, 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021->

projects, but now the investment pledges are much more diversified covering large projects like the Pokhara airport.

The population of Kathmandu perceives China as an important player in the development of Nepal. The survey conducted reveals that 39% of people view China as the most suitable country for the investment and development of Kathmandu. China is recently expanding its influence through the construction of airports, railways, and roads, and by providing educational opportunities. About 32.7% of people perceive that China should expand its development aid to Nepal, while 25% of the population focused on the educational opportunities offered by China.

It was also revealed during the survey that China is mostly visible in Nepal through huge infrastructure projects. It was observed that only 26% view China as the most visible country in Nepal. The public considers Pokhara Airport, Kathmandu Ring Road, and other connectivity projects constructed by Chinese construction companies as contributions of Chinese in Nepal. This shows the Nepalese response towards China, that its economic initiatives are mostly connected to large infrastructure projects while neglecting to improve the overall infrastructure development at the gross level. For instance, people want to see Chinese building schools, colleges, and healthcare centers in various parts of the Himalayan state.

4.2.3 Balanced Response

More than 50% of the population considers that Nepal should maintain a balanced approach in response to Chinese or Indian influence through soft means of power in the region, particularly in Nepal. The response is largely driven by the importance of economic growth and prosperity of the country. Most of the population view China as an important source of financial assistance and economic development of the country. Nepalese perceive China-Nepal relations as more stable compared to other regional actors.

China has been trying to persuade the government of Nepal to join China's Global Security Initiative, for the endorsement of long-lasting peace and development in the world. However, officials of the Nepalese government view the initiative as a xenophobic security agenda. Also, the officials are concerned about transparency and data insecurity, including unequal division of receiving advantages for the small developing nations. Although the PRC has

persuaded Nepal to join other defense-related initiatives, still China is facing opposition to persuading Nepal to join the Global Security Initiative.

Also, strategic security analysts consider the Chinese invitation to join the global security initiative as a xenophobic security agenda. There's still no official statement of confirmation from the Nepalese officials about joining China's Global Security Initiative, despite the Chinese ambassador's to Nepal statements that Nepal actively holds up to the Beijing initiative of Global Security Initiative. Also Nepalese criticize the initiative for transparency issues.

In short Nepal like Sri Lanka wants to have a balanced approach towards Chinese and other regional powers' soft influence. Nepal is a small but strategically important state, sharing a border with India on its three sides, while the fourth side is bordered by China. Nepal did not respond unenthusiastically to China's growing influence in the region. However, it also did not want to be considered as tilted toward China or for that reason toward India. This neutral response of the Nepalese government is helping Nepal to gain maximum benefits from all the regional powers at play in South Asia.

4.3 Response of Bangladesh

Bangladesh enjoys good relations with the People's Republic of China compared to Nepal and Sri Lanka. Despite early difficulties, ties between the two nations have significantly improved because of China's policy of extensive financial backing and the rising of anti-India sentiments among the general public of Bangladesh. Scholars consider Bangladesh as the only country among the smaller South Asian countries that has dealt with China's soft power engagements in the best possible way, by practicing a good relationship with the PRC, while at the same time being insightful about India's interests in the region²³¹.

Chinese soft power initiatives, especially economic are resulting a positive response from both the government and the people of Bangladesh. Dhaka has used the BRI not only to attract capital from China but also from India. This shows Dhaka's commitment and skillful handling of its interests as well as the interests of China and India in the region²³². Bangladesh has a historical relationship with India, as the latter helped Dhaka get independence from

²³¹Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir and Md. Zahid ur Rahman, "Strategic Implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): The Case of Bangladesh," *China and the World* 2, no. 3 (2019), <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/abs/10.1142/S2591729319500202?journalCode=cwsr>.

²³²Pal, "China's Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries."

Pakistan in 1971. Both the states developed and enjoyed good relations, however, at the same time Dhaka didn't want an overdependence on New Delhi. As a result, Bangladesh over time builds a strong and viable economic and military relationship with China.

4.3.1 Political Response

Bangladesh's political response to China's growing soft power initiatives and influence is so far optimistic. Chinese Communist Party enjoys good relations with both the governing and opposition parties of Bangladesh. Since 2010 Chinese influence in the decision-making process of the Awami League at the party and government level has witnessed an increase²³³. This indicates the resonance of both the country's and the government's interests.

Politically the government of Bangladesh had signed various agreements with the People's Republic of China. Bangladesh's major trading partner at present is China. Chinese investments are anticipated to be more than USD 40 billion in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's largest FDI came from China with \$940 million in FDI in the fiscal year 2021–2022²³⁴. The expanding economic collaboration at the government level is also resulting in strong defense ties. For instance, Bangladesh's military and police personnel receive advanced training in China. The deepening economic and military ties concern India, which security analysts considers as putting pressure on India²³⁵.

Chinese strategies for gaining soft power influence in Bangladesh are perceived with encouraging responses. Even scholars consider Bangladesh's response in South Asia as tilted towards China. This is due to the continued support from China in the shape of economic initiatives, scholarships, public diplomacy, and cultural initiatives in Bangladesh. Scholars consider Beijing's Soft power in Dhaka as a shared interest instead of considering it as a debt trap²³⁶. It is widely believed that the soft power initiatives of China in Bangladesh to enhance its influence are a result of the shared interests of both states rather than a debt trap.

²³³Sourabh Sen, "Bangladesh Elections Mark a Pro-China Tipping Point in South Asia," *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/4/bangladesh-elections-mark-a-pro-china-tipping-point-in-south-asia>.

²³⁴Mostofa, "China in South Asia: Bangladesh Is Tilting towards China."

²³⁵Mostofa.

²³⁶Jasmin, Sakib, and Shishir, "Chinese Soft Power in Bangladesh: Debt Trap or Shared Interests?"

4.3.2 Chicken Neck Corridor

The Siliguri Corridor, a thin stretch of territory that links India's northeastern provinces to the rest of the nation, is referred to as the "Chicken's Neck."²³⁷ This corridor is strategically significant for Bangladesh and India. Connects the northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh to the Indian mainland makes it easier to move people, products, and services across important roads and railroads has importance for India's defense and security because it borders Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

The Siliguri Corridor is perceived as a strategic vulnerability by Bangladesh, as it demarcates the country's eastern border with India, potentially compromising its territorial integrity. Bangladesh has consistently expressed concerns regarding India's potential leverage of the corridor to exert pressure or restrict access to its eastern border²³⁸. Moreover, the corridor holds significant economic importance for Bangladesh, facilitating trade and commerce by connecting the country's eastern regions to external markets. From a geopolitical perspective, the Chicken's Neck area is a critical nexus for both India and Bangladesh, with far-reaching implications for trade, security, and defense strategies.

The Chicken's Neck area serves as a vital conduit connecting China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Bangladesh, forging a crucial strategic link between the two nations. Furthermore, this corridor enables trade exchange between China and Bangladesh, holding immense potential to amplify economic cooperation and stimulate regional economic expansion.

In short, Dhaka is aware of the complexities of South Asian politics. The increasing role of Beijing in South Asia through its soft means of power and India's traditional diplomatic influence is convincing Bangladesh to stay neutral and not take sides. This balancing approach of Bangladesh is benefiting the people of Bangladesh to get maximum benefits from both the powers. However, it is witnessed that Bangladesh in recent years has been tilted towards China, by perceiving it as the main source and ally for economic and defense cooperation.

²³⁷ Lt Gen (Retd) Shankar Prasad Mukherjee, "The Siliguri Corridor: A Critical Analysis of Its Strategic Importance," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, 2018.

²³⁸ A. K. M. Abdus Sabur, "The Chicken's Neck: A Geopolitical Perspective," *Journal of Geopolitics and International Relations*, 2020.

4.4 Challenges faced by China in South Asia

The Chinese soft power strategy is based on harmony, through which China wants to support its peaceful rise and development in South Asia and beyond. However, China faces several challenges and limitations in South Asia from the South Asian governments. First of all, India is considered as a major power playing pivotal role in South Asian affairs²³⁹. The hegemonic power of South Asia considers China as a threat and challenge to its interests in South Asian region. India, which considers South Asian countries as its backyard countries, has launched its own developmental initiatives with its friends and allies. Keeping a watchful eye on China's soft power maneuvers in its strategic neighborhood, India is determined to respond to each soft power move with India's alternative soft power initiatives. India has introduced a range of initiatives aimed at providing alternative solutions to China's initiatives in South Asia, fostering a more equitable regional landscape. Some of prominent initiatives by India to counter Chinese soft power influence are mentioned: India's Neighborhood First, Asia-Africa Growth corridor (India and Japan), Indian-Arab Mediterranean Corridor, and India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

China is also facing a serious challenge from the South Asian countries of illegal Chinese workers. China is being criticized for its importation of labor force for the Chinese funded projects. For instance, in Sri Lanka more than 200,000 Chinese workers are working in different Chinese developmental projects. According to 2017 reports, 2.5 percent of Sri Lanka's labor force was founded as undocumented Chinese migrant laborers²⁴⁰. This phenomena of illegal Chinese workers working in projects which are funded by Chinese firms is affecting the social fabrics of the host countries. Likewise China is also facing the challenge from other countries including Nepal. A survey conducted by the Organization for Research on China and India reveals that Nepali citizens had a stronger personal attachment to New Delhi compared to Beijing.

Concerns regarding Chinese soft power projection in South Asia are another challenge for the People Republic of China in South Asia. Although the response is different from country to country however, most of the South Asian countries are conscious with respect to Chinese loans and developmental economic assistance. The Sri Lankan experience of Chinese

²³⁹ Hazarika and Mishra, "South Asia as a Battleground: Soft Power Contestation between India And China."

²⁴⁰ Wignaraja et al., "Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka."

infrastructure investment offers useful lessons for other developing country recipients of Chinese investment. The challenge China is facing is how to further its reputation as a responsible economic partner in the region.

Furthermore, China is facing the urgency to alter its image from foreign policy bully and threat to a peace-loving and benign power at global level. Every move by China is being watched critically. Theories like China Threat are posing serious challenge to the Chinese leadership to fulfill the Chinese Dream of peaceful rise in the harmonious world of shared interests. Scholars considers Chinese international image as its biggest problem.

In a nutshell China is also facing some challenges along with its success stories of soft power projection. China needs to respond to these challenges by avoiding any kind of competition in case of India's approach towards smaller South Asian countries and to portray its positive image to counter conspiracy theories regarding the peaceful rise of China.

4.5 Conclusion

To conclude all the South Asian states, including India has close economic relations with the PRC. However, as far as China's soft power influence is concerned in South Asia, the South Asian countries can be divided into three; countries that did not support or see Chinese influence in this region positively, then countries that support the growing influence of Beijing in South Asia, and last but not the least those countries which follows a balanced response and fall in-between the two. The last category of states includes, the three small countries of Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Among these three countries, Bangladesh is tilted towards China compared to Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Findings of the Study

Soft Power Strategies Evolution

China's South Asian soft power policies have changed over time to accommodate shifting geopolitical environments and regional dynamics. China is using various soft power strategies, including the use of economic resources to boost its soft power in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Chinese exercise of economic tools to promote its soft power has played a dual role in increasing China's soft power in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as well as its position as a major economic power

Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy Landscape

In the realm of contemporary Chinese foreign policy, there is a notable emphasis on leveraging soft power to bolster its global standing and augment its influence in countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Chinese leadership and policymakers are idealizing the use of soft power influence power to achieve China's foreign policy goals in South Asia and beyond.

Comparison with other Actors

China's impact in South Asia with soft power is different from, and occasionally enhances, that of other regional and global players including the US, and India.

Local Perceptions and Reception

How the local populace view and react to China's soft power measures in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal will determine their level of success. Stated differently, the efficacy of China's soft power initiatives is greatly influenced by how local stakeholders—such as governments, civil society, and the general public receive and understand Chinese soft power initiatives.

Smaller South Asian Countries Conduct

The smaller South Asian countries, particularly those under research: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are following the strategy of balancing both the regional powers, which are at contestation to influence these countries employing soft power. Looking upon both the great power centers the smaller South Asian countries are not taking sides, but to gain maximum advantage, especially economic benefits.

Analysis

Over the years China has tried hard to solidify its standing in the global arena through global means. China for the said purpose has adopted all the possible means and ways of enhancing its image both at home and abroad. China's blend of economic investments, infrastructure projects, and cultural exchanges has fostered a significant increase in its regional influence. This strategy has not only challenged India's longstanding dominance in South Asia but also enhanced China's reputation as a dependable regional power. China's approach is deeply rooted in pragmatic partnerships and tangible benefits, resonating well with the developmental needs of these nations. Consequently, the effectiveness of China's distinct soft power tactics is amplifying its influence and reshaping regional dynamics merits. The soft power official reports

released by Brand Finance every year show China's gradual rise on the list of the world's most powerful nations concerning soft power.

The recent report (2024) published by Brand Finance highlights China's position as "the fastest-growing nation brand" of the year 2024. China has increased its soft power scores from 65.0 to 71.2 making place on the list of top three. China ranking has been raised from 5th to 3rd worldwide. The report also highlights that China scored well in all the eight pillars set by Brand Finance except people and values. China's economic influence has advanced its soft power influence across the globe. For instance, Chinese economic assistance has made possible the construction of Confucius institutes in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Today China has two Confucius Institutes in Bangladesh, two in Sri Lanka, and two in Nepal, with numerous Chinese Language Centers. This indicates the increasing presence of Chinese soft power tactics around the world. Here is the Brand Finance report of the past four years to analyze China's position over the years as a dominant soft power nation.

| Year | Number of Countries | China's Soft Power Index (score) | China's Position (Worldwide) |
|------|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2024 | 193 | 71.2 | 3 rd |
| 2023 | 121 | 56 | 5 th |
| 2022 | 136 | 64.2 | 4 th |
| 2021 | 100 | 54.3 | 8 th |
| 2020 | 60 | 58.7 | 5 th |

Source: Compiled by the Author, based on Brand Finance Reports from 2020-2024

Additionally, China has gradually increased its soft power influence both at regional and global levels. The case study of the South Asian nations, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal highlights China's relative advantage in wielding its soft power in these nations. This relative advantage is due to several factors including, China's geographical proximity, its economy, and cultural affinity with South Asian countries, strategic location, developmental assistance, soft power institutions, and the non-interference policy of China in the internal matters of the neighboring sovereign states. Although these countries had economic relationships

with other regional powers like India, China enjoys the upper hand due to various economic and other factors that contribute in favor of China's soft power influence.

The latest trade data available highlights China having the largest export partner share (21.53%) in trade with Bangladesh compared to India having a partner share of 12.24%. Likewise with Sri Lanka China's export trade share is 23.70% of the total while India's is 22.05%. However, in the case of Nepal India is leading. Similarly, China is the largest source of FDI for Bangladesh and Nepal. Additionally, China is gaining attraction through its Confucius institutes and Chinese language centers established in almost all South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. China is also engaged in developmental projects by providing loans and grants to the smaller South Asian countries. This points out that the gradual decrease in relations with India suggests the gradual increase in relations with China as a liable partner with immense power of attraction.

Economic development is traditionally viewed as an aspect of hard power, which involves tangible assets like military strength and economic might that a country can wield to influence other nations. However, China has effectively repurposed its economic development as a tool of soft power to enhance its global image and build positive relationships through economic engagement. For instance, China's developmental initiatives like the BRI, its trade agreements, FDI, aid and developmental assistance, cultural exchanges, scholarships, Confucius institutes, and its mass media are contributing to its positive global image, foreign influence, cultural diplomacy, and reputation as a responsible partner both at the governmental and public to public levels in the international politics of South Asia.

Likewise, Beijing's use of economic development to enhance its soft power is having significant impacts on countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. These impacts can be observed on multiple fronts ranging from increasing cultural exchange and understanding, economic cooperation, infrastructure improvement, promotion, and spreading of the Chinese language and culture in South Asian countries, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

As a result, China is gradually increasing its soft power influence in South Asian countries by using different soft power tools including its economic engagements which can be seen in its projection of soft power in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Although Strategic

alliances and regional organizations are crucial for influencing the behavior of others, in the case of China it is using soft means of cultural and economic diplomacy to get the leverage. China's soft power influence may create a China-centric regional order by reshaping regional relationships through its projection of soft power in South Asia through its economic, political, and cultural partnerships.

Comparing Chinese Soft Power Indicators with India's

India possesses the potential for soft power influence because of its rich cultural legacy and well-developed civilization. However, China, on the other hand, seems to have a more positive image throughout the South Asian region. Given the difficulties India is facing in its neighborhood, this disparity in the dynamics of soft power has been increasingly apparent in recent years. South Asian nations often view India as the dominant force in the vicinity, so they search for other ways to build trade and other relationships. India's passivity and occasionally apathy have left a space that is readily filled by China.

Public diplomacy is important, and the Indian government understands that, but its execution and promotion in the area fall behind China's. This discrepancy can be partially explained by China's huge capital surplus, which makes it possible for more ambitious public diplomacy programs. Moreover, China's significant economic and military might often outweigh India's hard power capabilities, making it more difficult for India to successfully use soft power in the area.

Chinese programs, which are associated with soft power, are carried out with great care, intention, and polish, as seen at the Beijing Olympics. In the field of culture and language centers, China's soft power surpasses India's. Numerous Confucius institutes have been founded across the world. There are already more than 1,172 Confucius Classrooms and 550 Confucius Institutes worldwide. The Indian counterpart, the Indian Council for Cultural Research, has only set up 35 of these facilities. Due to a lack of financial resources, India is also unable to successfully compete with China in the field of soft power projection through assistance and development funds at a corresponding level.

In terms of economic relations, China has emerged as the paramount trading partner for numerous South Asian countries, with bilateral trade volumes surpassing \$100 billion in 2020.

Furthermore, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in South Asia has reached significant levels, exceeding \$10 billion in 2020, primarily in the sectors of telecommunications, energy, and infrastructure. This substantial investment has positioned China as a leading source of FDI in the region, underscoring its increasingly prominent economic role in South Asia.

The above indicators of soft power in South Asia are relative and it cannot for granted that Chinese influence in South Asian region is established. China is relatively a new player in South Asian politics compares to India. The effectiveness of the China's soft power influence in the region is also dependent on India behaviors towards the smaller South Asian countries and can negatively affect China's soft power influence in the region. Although the indicators are in favors of China, but a relative phenomena depends on the national interests of the South Asian countries which can alter it in favor of India or for that matter any other country.

Conclusion

South Asia today is significant for major powers like China and India, including the US. China through its BRI is making inroads in South Asia by pushing its interests. South Asia is important to both China and India, the regional powers of Asia. The region encompasses strategically important areas like the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), home to two antagonistic nuclear powers, huge markets, mammoth resources, and non-state actors that result in terrorism²⁴¹. The region of South Asia presents immense opportunities and challenges to the big powers for projection of influence either by using hard means of power or soft.

However, unlike the US which uses soft power to legitimize its usage of hard power, China is actively working to cultivate a positive global image through means of soft power influence. Soft power plays a crucial role in China's foreign policy as it seeks to portray a benign image on the international stage. Despite its ascent as a major player in global politics, China grapples with challenges, prominently the "China Threat Theory"²⁴², which proposes that China as a dissident power is a threat to the traditional international rules and norms, thus challenging the democratic international world order. Scholars consider that China's international image is

²⁴¹Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

²⁴²Wang Yiwei, "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power," *Sage Journals* 616, no. 1 (March 1, 2008), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002716207312757>.

the biggest problem it faces in the international arena²⁴³. To counter China's threat theory, it opted for soft power. The escalation of China's soft power influence is akin to enhancing its international reputation.

As a consequence, 'soft power' plays a pivotal role in China's interactions with other nations, encompassing those in South Asia. China's global and regional foreign policies are characterized by deliberate efforts to portray the People's Republic of China as a peace-loving, people-centric, and responsible force in both the regional and international arenas²⁴⁴. By using all the available means of soft power China is trying hard to inject China's elements into the world²⁴⁵. South Asia is no exception to China's growing soft power influence. All the South Asian countries, except India and Bhutan, which are vulnerable to China's soft power influence, resulted in China's increasing influence in all the small South Asian countries, including Pakistan.

China's projection of Soft power in South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal is the result of the use of different means of soft power and strategies that result in China's influence. For instance, China is using economic assistance, FDI, infrastructure development, aid and grants, trade and investment, cultural diplomacy, institutional setups, public diplomacy, and debt restructuring as different strategies to enhance its soft power influence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

However, the increase of China's soft power influence is not in a vacuum. India which is the most powerful and borders most of the South Asian countries in South Asia sees the presence of China and its growing influence in its backyard as the biggest geopolitical threat to its interests²⁴⁶. To counter China's soft power influence, India is developing its connectivity projects as an alternative to Chinese projects and to bypass China's BRI. On the other side, the small South Asian countries are trying to balance between China and India, by avoiding sides, to gain maximum benefits and advantages.

²⁴³Joshua Cooper Ramo, "Brand China" (London: Foreign Policy Centre., 2007), <https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/827.pdf>.

²⁴⁴Pang Zhongying, "The Beijing Olympics and China's Soft Power," *Brookings*, September 4, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-beijing-olympics-and-chinas-soft-power/>.

²⁴⁵Palit, "China's Soft Power in South Asia," June 8, 2010.

²⁴⁶Miller, "China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."

Recommendations

To achieve the desired goals of China's soft power projection in South Asia and beyond the People's Republic of China needs to recognize and follow the recommendations presented in this study after thorough investigations and detailed research.

First of all, the PRC need to develop a nuanced media strategy that includes positive narratives about China. Such media strategy should focus on airing China's success stories, cultural highlights, and collaborative initiatives to counteract any negative perceptions. Although Western media criticizes China's longing for global outreach of its media outlets, China needs to establish an independent and impartial Chinese media platforms like the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera News, etc. to portray China's image to the globe having global audience.

Second, China needs to develop an active disaster relief and aid strategy. It is very important to note the major shift between the PRC and Nepal diplomatic ties occurred after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Chinese aid and disaster relief in emergencies tilts Nepal towards China. Likewise, India's embargo over Nepal during the 2015 earthquake worked as a centrifugal force moving Nepal away from the Diplomatic influence of India. Keeping in view the importance of disaster relief and aid, China needs to develop a compressive strategy with a special focus on checks about aid provided to the recipient countries.

Third, China needs to consider and emphasize those projects which are environmentally sustainable. It is widely believed that China's developmental projects are not environmentally friendly and do not follow international standards. With the growing awareness regarding SDGs and environmentally friendly techniques, China needs to consider environmental challenges and address them according to the resolutions and conventions of the United States and other regional and international organizations.

Fourth, all the South Asian nations, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal need to avoid alignment with all major powers of the region, and adopt a strategy of balanced approach keeping in view the national interests of the their respective states. This will help all the South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to preserve strategic autonomy and engaged in active diplomacy.

Last but not the least; China needs to develop a system to continuously monitor the effectiveness of China's soft power initiatives especially all the means of soft power which comes under economic cooperation. China is mostly criticized due to irregularities in its funds provided to the recipient countries without any kind of strings attached. Funds provided by the government of PRC to authoritarian states did not meet the required criteria of the developmental projects or the funds were diverted to meet other challenges faced by the country rather than those promised under the deal.

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