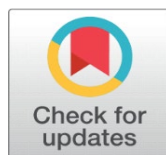


CHINA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: STRATEGIES, MEANS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ramesh Chandra¹ , Dr. Manasi Sinha²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, School of Liberal Education, Galgotias University

²PhD, JNU, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Galgotias University



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ABSTRACT

The concept of soft power has become increasingly significant in the realm of international politics. As nations seek to exert their influence on the global stage, the ability to shape the preferences and perceptions of others through non-coercive means has emerged as a vital tool. China, with its rapidly growing economic and political clout, has substantially engaged in exercising strategies and means as soft power politics to accomplish its presence in the global politics. This research paper examines China's soft power diplomacy in international politics, focusing on the strategies and means employed by the Chinese government to enhance its global influence. The primary objective of this research is to investigate how China strategically employs soft power and assess the implications of these strategies on international politics. To achieve this, the study utilizes a qualitative approach, considering key indicators such as culture, diplomacy, education, and public opinion. By examining China's soft power initiatives and their effects, this research sheds light on the evolving dynamics of international politics in the 21st century, where soft power plays a significant role in shaping global perceptions and relations.

Keywords: Soft Power, China's Foreign Policy, International Politics, Cultural Diplomacy, Public diplomacy, Global perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

China's emergence as a global superpower is not solely attributed to its military might or economic prowess. In recent decades, the world has witnessed China's deliberate efforts to harness and project its soft power on a global scale. China's soft power has become a formidable force, shaping international perceptions, influencing cultural trends, and expanding its global reach. One of China's most significant soft power assets is its rich and millennia-old cultural heritage. From Confucianism to traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts, Chinese culture has captivated the imagination of people worldwide. The global appeal of Chinese cuisine, with its diverse regional flavors, has turned Chinese restaurants into ubiquitous fixtures in cities across the globe. Chinese cinema, led by directors like Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou, has earned international acclaim and brought Chinese storytelling to a global audience (Blanchard, 2012).

Language also plays a pivotal role in China's soft power strategy. Mandarin Chinese is one of the most spoken languages globally, and the Chinese government has invested heavily in promoting its study worldwide. Confucius Institutes have sprung up in numerous countries, offering Chinese language courses and cultural exchanges, fostering a deeper understanding of China's culture and values (Lo & Pan, 2016). China's economic might has not only reshaped the global

economic landscape but also allowed it to wield soft power through economic diplomacy. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have extended China's influence by facilitating infrastructure development and trade partnerships across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Through these economic engagements, China has positioned itself as a partner for development, enhancing its soft power appeal (Wuthnow, 2008).

Diplomacy is another avenue through which China projects its soft power. The Chinese government engages in diplomatic efforts, often offering foreign aid, participating in peacekeeping missions, and fostering international cooperation. This approach helps China build positive relationships and portrays itself as a responsible global actor. Media and technology are crucial tools in China's soft power arsenal (Rothman, 2011). State-run media outlets like Xinhua and CGTN have expanded their global presence, providing international news and promoting China's perspective on global issues. Meanwhile, Chinese tech giants like Huawei and Tik Tok have achieved global prominence, showcasing China's technological innovation and creativity.

China's political system and ideology, often referred to as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," have attracted some countries and individuals as an alternative to Western democracy and capitalism. China presents itself as a model of economic growth and stability, further enhancing its soft power. Cultural exchanges and educational opportunities for international students are vital components of China's soft power strategy. Thousands of students from around the world come to study in China each year, fostering cross-cultural understanding and building personal connections that can last a lifetime.

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

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has been fundamental in shaping the discourse surrounding international relations and the strategies employed by nations in their pursuit of global influence. Soft power, as coined by Nye, is characterized by a nation's capacity to attract and persuade others through its culture, values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). At its core, soft power represents the ability of a nation to shape the behavior and preferences of other international actors through non-coercive means. This concept is in stark contrast to hard power, which relies on military and economic strength, as well as coercive tactics, to achieve international objectives. In the realm of soft power, the emphasis shifts from imposing one's will through force or economic dominance to creating a positive image and narrative that resonates with the global community. Joseph Nye distinguishes soft power from hard power by highlighting the importance of attraction and persuasion. Soft power is not about coercion or intimidation, but rather about winning the hearts and minds of others (Nye, 2004). It operates by making a nation and its culture, values, and policies appealing, so other nations voluntarily align their interests with those of the soft power nation. To better understand the concept of soft power, Nye provides examples of the various tools and assets that can constitute a nation's soft power resources. These include cultural exports, educational and exchange programs, diplomacy, foreign aid, and media influence. These resources serve as the means through which a nation projects its soft power and influences the behavior of other international actors. Nye's distinction between hard and soft power underscores the idea that, in the contemporary world, the ability to attract and persuade is as important as the ability to coerce or incentivize (Nye, 2004). Soft power has become increasingly important in international politics, as it enables nations to shape global perceptions and secure their interests without resorting to military force or economic domination. Understanding the concept of soft power and how it operates is crucial in analyzing China's efforts to enhance its global influence through non-coercive means, as explored in this research paper.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, as articulated in his seminal work "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" (2004), provides a profound lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of international relations.

Soft power represents a nation's ability to attract and persuade others through a repertoire of non-coercive means, primarily centered around culture, values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). At its core, soft power is a departure from traditional, coercive power dynamics. Instead of relying on military force, economic dominance, or punitive actions, it hinges on the power of attraction, shaping global perceptions and willingly influencing the behavior and preferences of other international actors. Nye's conceptualization of soft power draws a clear distinction between this approach and hard power. While hard power is often associated with military capabilities and economic strength, soft power operates through a different mechanism, emphasizing the importance of creating a positive image and narrative that resonates with other nations (Nye, 2004). Nye highlights the essence of soft power by stating, "It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2004, p. x). In essence, it underscores that nations projecting soft power aim to win the hearts and minds of others, building relationships based on shared values, culture, and ideals. The ultimate goal is to have other nations voluntarily align their interests and policies with those of the nation projecting soft power. The assets and tools that constitute a nation's soft power resources are multifaceted. They encompass cultural exports, including art, music, literature, and cinema, which have a global appeal and convey a nation's creativity, values, and culture. Educational exchange programs, international scholarships, and academic collaborations promote cross-cultural understanding and build goodwill, making them integral elements of soft power projection. Diplomacy and foreign policy initiatives that seek to foster cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution serve to enhance a nation's image and influence. Media influence, especially through international media outlets and digital platforms, enables the dissemination of a nation's narratives, values, and viewpoints to a global audience. Public diplomacy campaigns further the positive image of a nation and its values. Economic aid, development assistance, and mutually beneficial trade relationships also form a crucial part of a nation's soft power strategy when they are framed as benevolent and collaborative initiatives. In today's complex, interconnected world, the concept of soft power has gained increasing significance. It recognizes that a nation's ability to attract and persuade others is just as critical as its military and economic capabilities. Understanding this conceptual framework is vital for analyzing China's comprehensive efforts to bolster its global influence through strategies encompassing culture, diplomacy, education, and public diplomacy. It provides a lens through which we can comprehend the intricate dynamics of contemporary international relations, where the power to shape global perceptions holds immense significance.

3. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

China's latest diplomatic instrument is culture. It has also been one of the main instruments China has employed in recent years to project soft power. In the 2000s, China aggressively pushed cultural exchange programmes, festivals, films, music, religious forums, sports, and tourism with the outside world by capitalising on its distinctive culture and making use of venues for cultural interaction. Enhancing its soft power and projecting a picture of a nonviolent uprising have been its goals (Lai, (2012). One of the pillars of China's soft power strategy is cultural diplomacy. China has a rich history and cultural heritage, and it has made deliberate efforts to promote its culture worldwide (Finlay, 2013). Several mechanisms drive this aspect of soft power:

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION: China has established Confucius Institutes in numerous countries to teach Mandarin and promote Chinese culture. Additionally, it offers scholarships for foreign students to study in China, fostering a deeper understanding of its culture and values. Language and education play a pivotal role in China's soft power strategy. The Chinese government has recognized the importance of language as a means to promote its culture, values, and influence worldwide (Kurlantzick, 2007). Here, we delve deeper into how language and education are employed as tools of China's soft power strategy: Confucius Institutes: One of the most prominent tools for promoting the Chinese language and culture is the network of Confucius Institutes established in numerous countries around the world. These institutes offer language courses, cultural programs, and academic resources to facilitate the learning of Mandarin (Rui, 2012). In addition to Confucius Institutes at universities, Confucius Classrooms are established in primary and secondary schools. They provide Mandarin language education and promote Chinese culture to young students.

Scholarships and Exchange Programs: China offers scholarships to foreign students who wish to study Mandarin or pursue higher education in China. This incentivizes individuals to engage with the Chinese language and culture. **Student and Teacher Exchanges:** China encourages the exchange of students and educators with other countries. This fosters cultural understanding and provides an opportunity for individuals to experience China firsthand. China organizes cultural events, such as traditional performances, art exhibitions, and showcases of contemporary Chinese culture. These

events create opportunities for people from different nations to engage with Chinese culture and traditions (Zhang, 2010).

Integration into Curriculum: Some countries have introduced Mandarin as part of their school curriculum, recognizing the economic and cultural importance of China. This ensures that a new generation of students has exposure to the language from an early age. Many universities worldwide offer Mandarin language courses as part of their curriculum. China actively promotes these programs, making it easier for students to access Mandarin education (Bergsten, 2008).
HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi): The HSK is an internationally recognized Chinese proficiency test. China actively promotes and sponsors HSK tests, which help individuals assess and showcase their Mandarin language skills.
collaborations with Educational Institutions: China forms partnerships with foreign universities and institutions to promote educational exchanges, research collaborations, and joint academic programs. These partnerships often include Mandarin language education as a core component.
Media and Entertainment: Chinese films, television shows, music, and literature have gained international popularity. These cultural exports not only entertain but also provide a window into Chinese culture and society. China promotes both its rich historical culture, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and traditional arts, as well as its modern innovations in technology, fashion, and cuisine. This showcases the diversity of Chinese culture.

Proficiency in Mandarin can enhance job prospects, particularly in businesses with ties to China. This economic incentive encourages individuals to learn the language. As China plays a central role in global trade and investment, knowledge of Mandarin can facilitate business negotiations and partnerships, making it a valuable asset for professionals. Collaborative research projects between Chinese and foreign institutions often require language proficiency. This encourages scholars and researchers to learn Mandarin to engage in meaningful academic collaborations.

Interactions with Chinese Diplomats: Proficiency in Mandarin can enhance diplomatic interactions and negotiations with Chinese officials, fostering better diplomatic relations.

Cross-Cultural Understanding: Learning the language helps diplomats and foreign policy experts better understand Chinese culture, perspectives, and policies, leading to more informed and effective diplomacy.

Finally we can say language and education are integral tools of China's soft power strategy, allowing it to promote its culture, values, and global influence. Through Confucius Institutes, cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, and other initiatives, China actively encourages the learning of Mandarin and engagement with its culture. This not only enhances China's soft power but also facilitates cross-cultural understanding and cooperation on the international stage.

CULTURAL EXCHANGES: Cultural exchanges play a significant role in China's soft power strategy, serving as a powerful tool to promote its culture, values, and influence on the global stage. These exchanges encompass a wide range of activities and initiatives that facilitate cross-cultural interactions and enhance China's positive image internationally. Here's a closer look at how cultural exchanges are employed as a tool of China's soft power strategy:

Chinese New Year Celebrations: Chinese embassies and cultural centers worldwide organize vibrant Lunar New Year festivals, including dragon dances, traditional music performances, and cultural exhibitions. These celebrations provide a platform for people from different cultures to experience Chinese traditions. China frequently hosts and participates in international exhibitions that showcase its cultural heritage, art, and innovation. These exhibitions attract diverse audiences and foster an appreciation for Chinese culture.

Chinese Art Exhibitions: Chinese contemporary art, traditional paintings, calligraphy, and sculpture are exhibited globally, allowing international audiences to engage with Chinese artistic expressions (Huang, 2007). China sponsors performing arts troupes that tour internationally, featuring traditional Chinese music, dance, opera, and theater. These performances showcase the richness of Chinese performing arts.

Chinese cinema and television have gained international recognition, with films like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero" becoming global successes. These media exports introduce Chinese storytelling and cinematography to a wide audience. **International Film Festivals:** China hosts international film festivals and participates in others, showcasing its filmmaking talent and fostering cooperation in the global film industry. Chinese music, both traditional and contemporary, is promoted through concerts, festivals, and digital platforms, attracting global audiences.

Chinese cuisine, with its diverse regional flavors, is readily available worldwide. Chinese restaurants serve as cultural ambassadors, introducing people to Chinese culinary traditions. Chinese food festivals and cooking demonstrations provide opportunities for people to experience the flavors and culinary techniques of Chinese cuisine. **Protection of Cultural Heritage:** China actively participates in international efforts to protect cultural heritage sites, artifacts, and traditions. This commitment to preserving cultural heritage enhances its image as a responsible custodian of world culture.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM): TCM practices, including acupuncture and herbal medicine, are promoted globally, contributing to China's soft power by showcasing its holistic approach to healthcare. Writers and Intellectuals: Chinese authors, thinkers, and intellectuals engage in international literary events, book tours, and intellectual discussions, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. Ping Pong Diplomacy: Table tennis exchanges played a pivotal role in thawing relations between China and the United States in the 1970s, demonstrating the power of sports as a cultural exchange tool (Cull, 2008).

In conclusion, cultural exchanges are a versatile and influential tool within China's soft power strategy. They facilitate cross-cultural understanding, promote positive perceptions of China, and encourage international cooperation. By showcasing its cultural heritage, arts, and values, China engages with the global community on a deeper level, contributing to its influence in the realms of diplomacy, education, and international relations (Akli, 2012). China's economic prowess is a central element of its soft power strategy. The following mechanisms illustrate how China leverages its economic influence to enhance its global appeal:

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI): The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a cornerstone of China's soft power strategy, offering a comprehensive framework for expanding its influence and promoting its economic and political interests globally. Launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI aims to enhance connectivity, trade, and development across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. While primarily an economic initiative, the BRI is deeply intertwined with China's soft power efforts. Here's an exploration of how the Belt and Road Initiative serves as a tool of China's soft power strategy (Duarte, & Ferreira-Pereira, 2022).

The BRI involves massive infrastructure development projects, including railways, highways, ports, and energy facilities, in partner countries. These investments provide economic opportunities, create jobs, and stimulate growth, making China an attractive economic partner. By improving transportation and logistics networks, the BRI reduces trade barriers and promotes economic cooperation. China's role as a trade facilitator enhances its reputation as a key player in global commerce (Siddique & Shafqat, 2021). The BRI encourages economic interdependence between China and partner countries, reducing the likelihood of conflict and enhancing stability. This economic cooperation aligns with China's image as a responsible and cooperative global actor (Miao, 2021).

Infrastructure projects under the BRI strengthen diplomatic ties between China and partner nations. This diplomatic engagement fosters goodwill and strengthens China's political influence in the region. The BRI promotes multilateral cooperation through mechanisms like the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, where countries can discuss development, trade, and regional stability. This forum enhances China's role in shaping global governance. The BRI facilitates cultural exchanges between China and participating nations. This cultural diplomacy includes activities such as art exhibitions, cultural festivals, and educational exchanges, promoting a deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

China uses state-owned media outlets like Xinhua and CGTN to promote the BRI and highlight its benefits. This media presence helps shape global narratives about China's role in global development. China actively engages in diplomatic dialogues, summit meetings, and international forums related to the BRI, showcasing its commitment to global cooperation and development. As part of the BRI, China provides financial aid, investment, and development assistance to partner countries. This support enhances China's image as a responsible and generous global player, contributing to its soft power. The BRI encourages educational and research exchanges between Chinese and foreign institutions. Scholarships and collaborative research projects facilitate people-to-people connections and foster goodwill (Bräutigam, & Xiaoyang, 2012).

In summary, the Belt and Road Initiative serves as a multifaceted tool of China's soft power strategy. It combines economic development, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and public relations efforts to promote China's image as a responsible global leader and enhance its influence on the international stage. By offering economic benefits and fostering cooperation, China is positioning itself as a key player in shaping the future of global connectivity and development, thereby advancing its soft power agenda (Junior & Rodrigues, 2020).

TRADE AND INVESTMENT: Trade and investment serve as powerful tools in China's soft power strategy. Through economic engagement with other nations, China has been able to exert influence, shape perceptions, and enhance its global standing. Here's an exploration of how trade and investment contribute to China's soft power. China's remarkable economic growth over the past few decades has made it an attractive partner for countries seeking economic opportunities (Shambaugh, 2015). By engaging in trade and investment with China, nations can benefit from its market size, manufacturing capabilities, and consumer base. China's economic prosperity creates an image of a stable and dynamic country, which in turn enhances its soft power appeal. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a prime example

of how it uses investment in infrastructure development as a soft power tool. Through BRI projects, China invests in building roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure in partner countries. This fosters economic development and strengthens diplomatic ties, positioning China as a contributor to global development and stability (Cooke, 2009).

Access to China's vast consumer market is a powerful incentive for countries to establish trade relationships. By exporting goods and services to China, nations can boost their own economic growth and job creation. China's role as a significant market for international businesses enhances its soft power by making it a key player in the global economy. China's investments in technology and innovation are attractive to countries seeking to collaborate in research and development. Partnerships with Chinese tech giants like Huawei and Alibaba offer access to cutting-edge technology and expertise, enhancing China's soft power in the tech sector (Bodomo, 2009).

China's position as the world's manufacturing hub has made it a linchpin in global supply chains. Many industries rely on Chinese manufacturing and production, which gives China substantial leverage. By maintaining a stable and efficient supply chain, China contributes to global economic stability and, in doing so, strengthens its soft power. China's willingness to engage in trade with countries that have been marginalized by Western powers can build positive relationships. For many developing nations, China offers an alternative to traditional Western markets, reducing dependence and creating a sense of solidarity.

China's economic diplomacy, which includes providing loans, grants, and investments to other countries, can help create goodwill and enhance its soft power. These financial instruments are often used strategically to build relationships and secure access to resources. Trade and investment bring people from different countries together, facilitating cultural exchanges and fostering cross-cultural understanding. As businesspeople and entrepreneurs interact, they create personal connections that can lead to deeper cultural ties.

However, China's use of trade and investment as a soft power tool is not without controversy. Concerns about debt diplomacy, environmental impact, and labor practices in some Chinese-led projects have raised questions about China's motives and methods. Additionally, economic dependencies on China can lead to political tensions, as seen in disputes over trade practices and intellectual property rights. Trade and investment are integral components of China's soft power strategy. Through economic engagement, China enhances its global influence, presents itself as a partner for development, and fosters economic prosperity for both itself and its trade partners. Nevertheless, China must navigate challenges and address concerns to maintain and expand its soft power influence in the global economic landscape.

4. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Since World War I, governments have been engaged in international propaganda. Governments of all shapes and sizes, from authoritarian to democratic nations, have more or less used propagandistic techniques to sway public opinion at home and abroad in support of their policies, ideas, or national interests or to defame other countries during times of war, international crises, and conflicts (Chang & Lin, 2014). Public diplomacy involves shaping public perceptions of a nation through various means. China utilizes several mechanisms to project its image and influence global opinion

Public Communication: Public communication is a crucial tool within China's soft power strategy, allowing the country to shape its image, convey its policies, and influence global narratives. China employs various means and channels to engage in public communication at both the domestic and international levels. Here's an exploration of how public communication serves as a key element of China's soft power strategy. (Nye, 2023). As China's official news agency, Xinhua (Xinhua News Agency) plays a central role in disseminating news and information. It operates in multiple languages and maintains a global presence, allowing China to share its perspective on international events. China Global Television Network (CGTN) (formerly CCTV) is an international news channel owned by the Chinese state. It provides news, documentaries, and cultural programming to audiences worldwide, presenting China's viewpoint on global issues. China's extensive internet censorship and control mechanisms shape online narratives both domestically and internationally. It allows China to manage its image and restrict the flow of information it deems unfavorable. Chinese diplomats and state-affiliated accounts actively use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to convey China's stance on international issues, engage with global audiences, and promote its policies (Wong, & Meng-Lewis, 2023). Chinese diplomats engage in public diplomacy through speeches, press conferences, and official statements, presenting China's perspective on key international matters. China actively participates in international forums, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, to communicate its positions on global governance and policies.

China organizes cultural events, such as art exhibitions, film festivals, and performing arts tours, to showcase its cultural heritage and contemporary achievements. China hosts and participates in international media events and forums,

allowing for dialogue and collaboration with global media professionals. China conducts public relations campaigns to improve its global image, emphasizing its economic successes, technological advancements, and contributions to global development. China highlights its humanitarian efforts, including disaster relief missions and medical assistance during global crises, as part of its public relations strategy (Chen, 2023).

Public communication is a multifaceted tool in China's soft power strategy, enabling the country to project its image, engage with international audiences, and shape global narratives. By utilizing state-owned media, digital channels, diplomatic outreach, cultural exchanges, public relations campaigns, and educational initiatives, China seeks to enhance its influence and foster understanding and cooperation with other nations. Public communication plays a critical role in shaping how China is perceived on the global stage and advancing its soft power objectives.

DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH

Diplomatic outreach is a significant tool in China's soft power strategy, contributing to its efforts to enhance its global influence and shape international perceptions. China has increasingly leveraged diplomatic engagement to project a positive image, build alliances, and advance its interests on the world stage. Here's how diplomatic outreach serves as a tool of China's soft power (Repnikova, 2023). China engages in diplomatic outreach to establish and strengthen relationships with other nations. By fostering diplomatic ties, China seeks to create an environment of cooperation and trust, which can enhance its soft power by presenting itself as a reliable and responsible global actor. China launches various diplomatic initiatives to address global challenges and promote its interests. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involves diplomatic engagement with countries along the routes, facilitating infrastructure development and economic cooperation. These initiatives not only promote China's economic interests but also position it as a leader in addressing global issues, such as development and connectivity.

Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution: China's participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions and its involvement in conflict resolution efforts demonstrate its commitment to maintaining global peace and stability. This diplomatic role fosters a positive image of China as a contributor to international security. (Takhirov, 2023). Economic diplomacy is a crucial component of China's soft power strategy. By engaging in economic partnerships and trade agreements with other countries, China presents itself as an economic powerhouse and a key player in global trade. Its diplomatic efforts can create economic opportunities for partner nations, contributing to a favorable perception of China. China promotes cultural exchanges and educational opportunities for people from other countries. Programs like Confucius Institutes provide language and cultural education, fostering cross-cultural understanding. These initiatives build goodwill and influence people-to-people connections, strengthening China's soft power. China's distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to various countries has been a form of diplomatic outreach during the pandemic. This "vaccine diplomacy" aims to bolster China's global reputation as a provider of public goods and showcase its willingness to help in times of crisis. (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023).

China actively participates in international organizations, such as the United Nations, and hosts international conferences like the Belt and Road Forum. These engagements allow China to shape global agendas, advocate for its interests, and present its viewpoints on international issues. China's diplomatic efforts in addressing climate change and environmental issues, including its commitments under the Paris Agreement, demonstrate its dedication to global environmental sustainability. This positions China as a responsible and forward-thinking global leader. China provides humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to countries in need. This form of diplomatic outreach showcases China's compassion and willingness to assist during crises, contributing to its soft power.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, it's important to note that China's foreign policy and diplomatic actions have generated both positive and negative reactions from the international community. Controversies related to human rights, territorial disputes, and concerns about debt diplomacy have led to mixed perceptions of China's soft power projection. Diplomatic outreach plays a significant role in China's soft power strategy. By engaging in diplomatic initiatives, building relationships, and contributing to global issues, China aims to enhance its influence, strengthen its image as a responsible global actor, and expand its soft power on the world stage.

5. AID AND DEVELOPMENT

China offers medical assistance, training, and supplies, particularly during global health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its commitment to global public health. Aid and development assistance have become increasingly important tools in China's soft power strategy. China has expanded its foreign aid and development efforts as a means of enhancing its global influence, fostering positive perceptions of the country, and building partnerships with other nations. Here's how aid and development play a role in China's soft power strategy: Aid and development

assistance have become increasingly important tools in China's soft power strategy. China has expanded its foreign aid and development efforts as a means of enhancing its global influence, fostering positive perceptions of the country, and building partnerships with other nations. Here's how aid and development play a role in China's soft power strategy (Kahveci-Özgür & Duan, 2023).

China provides financial aid, loans, and grants to developing countries for infrastructure projects, economic development, and poverty reduction. This assistance helps recipient countries address their pressing economic and social challenges, fostering goodwill and gratitude towards China. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China invests in the construction of roads, railways, ports, and energy projects in partner countries. These infrastructure projects not only promote economic growth but also enhance connectivity and trade, boosting China's reputation as a contributor to global development.

China offers humanitarian assistance (Humanitarian Aid) during natural disasters and emergencies, providing relief in the form of medical supplies, food aid, and disaster relief teams. This assistance showcases China's willingness to help in times of crisis and promotes a positive image of the country as a responsible global actor. China's provision of medical supplies, expertise, and COVID-19 vaccine distribution during the pandemic has been part of its soft power strategy. It positions China as a provider of public health solutions and strengthens its global reputation.

China's significant role in supporting its neighboring countries during the COVID-19 pandemic is evident through its extensive vaccine distribution efforts. The data shows that China provided substantial quantities of vaccines, with the Philippines receiving the highest amount at 25 million doses, followed by Pakistan with 15 million doses (Smith, 2021). This large-scale distribution underscores China's capacity to produce and supply vaccines rapidly (Jones, 2022). The distribution to countries like Pakistan, Nepal, and Cambodia reflects China's strategic partnerships and efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties through health diplomacy (Lee, 2021). For instance, the joint production facilities set up in Pakistan indicate a long-term commitment to bilateral cooperation in healthcare (Chen, 2021). By providing vaccines to a wide range of neighboring countries, China not only addressed immediate public health needs but also enhanced its geopolitical influence, particularly in countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (Wang, 2022). China's donations to countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka highlight its humanitarian approach during the pandemic, supporting countries with limited access to vaccines and medical supplies. Beyond vaccine provision, China's support included medical supplies and expertise, which were vital in managing the pandemic's impact. This comprehensive approach helped build resilience in the healthcare systems of recipient countries. In summary, China's vaccine distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic was a multifaceted effort that combined humanitarian aid, strategic partnerships, and geopolitical influence, strengthening its position as a key player in global health diplomacy.

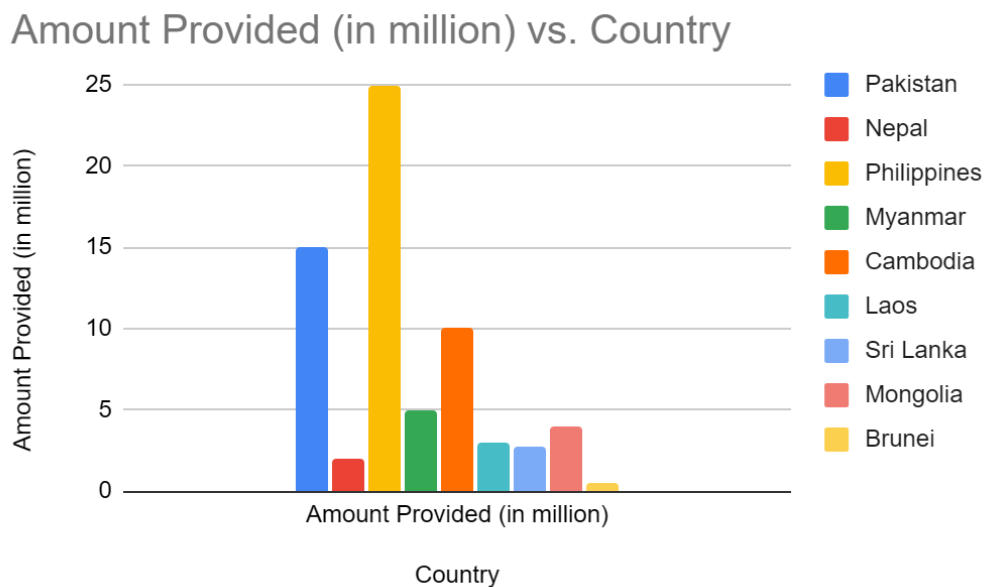


Fig 1: Vaccines provided by China to its neighboring countries during the COVID-19 pandemic

China aligns its aid and development projects with the United Nations' SDGs. By contributing to the achievement of these goals, China portrays itself as a responsible partner committed to addressing global challenges. China's overseas investments in natural resources, such as minerals and energy, secure access to critical resources for its economic

development. This economic engagement can lead to diplomatic partnerships and enhance China's global standing (Rakhmat, 2023). China promotes South-South cooperation, emphasizing collaboration among developing countries. This approach enhances China's reputation as a leader in the Global South and strengthens its influence within international organizations. China has occasionally offered debt relief or forgiveness to heavily indebted countries, particularly in Africa. These actions can alleviate financial burdens on recipient nations and engender goodwill.

Despite its soft power benefits, China's aid and development efforts have also faced criticism and scrutiny. Concerns about debt sustainability, transparency, environmental impacts, and the potential for recipient countries to become economically dependent on China have been raised by various stakeholders. Aid and development assistance are important tools in China's soft power strategy, enabling the country to project a positive image, build diplomatic relationships, and enhance its global influence. However, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on how they are received by recipient countries and the international community, and they are subject to ongoing debate and evaluation. (Peters, 2023).

6. ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

Environmental initiatives have emerged as a significant tool in China's soft power strategy in recent years. As the global community increasingly recognizes the importance of addressing environmental challenges, China has sought to position itself as a responsible and proactive leader in environmental protection and sustainability. Here's how environmental initiatives serve as a tool of China's soft power. China's efforts to combat climate change have become a cornerstone of its soft power strategy. As the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, China's commitment to reducing emissions and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 has been widely applauded. By taking a leadership role in climate action, China enhances its image as a responsible global citizen.

China's involvement in international environmental agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, demonstrates its willingness to collaborate with the international community to address global challenges. This participation fosters cooperation, builds diplomatic relationships, and showcases China's commitment to multilateralism.

China has made substantial investments in renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power. By promoting the development and export of clean energy technologies, China positions itself as a leader in the transition to a low-carbon economy, creating opportunities for collaboration with other nations. China's efforts to protect and restore ecosystems and biodiversity, such as the giant panda conservation program, contribute to its soft power. These initiatives demonstrate China's commitment to preserving the natural world and garner positive international attention. Green Finance and Investment: China has been actively promoting green finance and sustainable investment practices. The country's commitment to green bonds and sustainable investment projects encourages responsible financial practices and positions China as a key player in the global green finance market.

China's development and export of environmental technologies, including electric vehicles and renewable energy infrastructure, contribute to its soft power by presenting the country as an innovator in sustainable solutions. This also creates economic opportunities and partnerships with other nations. China engages in environmental diplomacy by hosting international conferences and forums focused on environmental issues. These events provide platforms for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and cooperation, enhancing China's diplomatic influence.

China's efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade and protect natural resources, such as its ivory ban, contribute to its image as a leader in conservation and environmental protection. China's investments in clean energy projects in other countries, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promote green development and sustainability in partner nations, furthering its soft power goals. China's humanitarian assistance during natural disasters, such as providing aid and relief in the aftermath of earthquakes and typhoons, showcases its commitment to disaster response and resilience-building. While China's environmental initiatives have garnered international recognition and support, there are also criticisms and concerns, including issues related to domestic environmental practices, pollution, and environmental governance. Balancing its soft power goals with addressing these challenges remains an ongoing endeavor for China.

7. CHALLENGES IN CHINA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY

1. Cultural Barriers China's efforts to promote its culture abroad often encounter significant cultural barriers. The collectivist nature of Chinese society may not resonate well in more individualistic cultures, leading to limited acceptance and influence (Kurlantzick, 2017). Additionally, the language barrier and differing cultural values can hinder effective communication and cultural exchange.

One of the primary cultural barriers is the contrast between China's collectivist society and the more individualistic cultures prevalent in many Western countries. Collectivism emphasizes group harmony, social cohesion, and collective well-being, which are deeply ingrained in Chinese culture. In contrast, individualistic cultures prioritize personal freedom, individual rights, and self-expression (Kurlantzick, 2017). This fundamental difference can lead to misunderstandings and limited acceptance of Chinese cultural initiatives.

For example, Chinese cultural products such as films, literature, and art often reflect collectivist values, which may not resonate with audiences in individualistic societies. The emphasis on community and collective achievements in Chinese narratives might be perceived as less appealing or relatable to individuals who value personal autonomy and individual success. This cultural disconnect can hinder the effectiveness of China's soft power efforts, as the intended messages and values may not be fully appreciated or understood by foreign audiences.

The language barrier is another significant challenge in China's soft power diplomacy. Mandarin Chinese, the official language of China, is one of the most spoken languages globally. However, it remains relatively inaccessible to non-Chinese speakers due to its complexity and the significant effort required to learn it. This linguistic barrier can limit the reach and impact of Chinese cultural products and initiatives.

Efforts to promote the Chinese language abroad, such as through Confucius Institutes, have had mixed results. While these institutes aim to teach Mandarin and promote Chinese culture, they often face resistance due to concerns about political influence and academic freedom (Nordin & Hagström, 2020). Additionally, the effectiveness of language promotion is limited by the willingness and ability of foreign audiences to learn Mandarin, which can be a daunting task for many.

Differing cultural values between China and other countries can also pose challenges to China's soft power diplomacy. Chinese cultural values, such as respect for authority, filial piety, and the importance of social harmony, may not align with the values of other societies. For instance, in Western cultures that prioritize individual rights and freedoms, the emphasis on respect for authority and social hierarchy in Chinese culture might be viewed with skepticism or even opposition. These differing values can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Chinese cultural initiatives. For example, traditional Chinese practices such as Confucianism, which emphasizes hierarchical relationships and social harmony, might be perceived as promoting authoritarianism or suppressing individual freedoms in more liberal societies. This perception can create resistance to China's cultural promotion efforts and limit their effectiveness.

The establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide illustrates the challenges posed by cultural barriers. These institutes aim to promote Chinese language and culture through educational programs and cultural exchanges. However, they have faced significant criticism and controversy, particularly in Western countries. Critics argue that Confucius Institutes serve as tools for Chinese government propaganda, promoting a sanitized version of Chinese history and politics while avoiding sensitive topics such as human rights abuses and political dissent (Nordin & Hagström, 2020). This perception can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of these institutes, as foreign audiences may view them with suspicion and skepticism.

Moreover, the cultural content promoted by Confucius Institutes may not always resonate with local audiences. For example, traditional Chinese festivals, arts, and customs might be appreciated for their novelty but may not lead to a deeper understanding or acceptance of Chinese cultural values. The lack of cultural relevance and resonance can limit the impact of these initiatives on enhancing China's soft power. Cultural barriers pose significant challenges to China's soft power diplomacy. The differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures, language barriers, and differing cultural values can hinder the acceptance and effectiveness of China's cultural promotion efforts. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and a strategic approach to cultural diplomacy that respects and adapts to the values and preferences of diverse global audiences.

2. Political System and Ideology China's political system, characterized by one-party rule and limited political freedoms, often clashes with the democratic values upheld by many Western nations. This ideological difference can create skepticism and resistance towards China's soft power initiatives (Albert, 2018). The lack of political freedoms and human rights issues further complicate China's efforts to project a positive image internationally. China's political system is defined by the dominance of the CCP, which maintains strict control over the country's political, social, and economic life. This one-party rule limits political pluralism and restricts freedoms such as speech, assembly, and the press. In

contrast, many Western nations prioritize democratic governance, political competition, and individual liberties. This fundamental difference in political systems can lead to a lack of trust and acceptance of China's soft power efforts (Albert, 2018). For instance, China's promotion of its political model as an alternative to Western democracy can be perceived as a challenge to democratic values. This perception can generate resistance and skepticism among countries that value democratic principles, making it difficult for China to gain soft power influence in these regions. The ideological clash can also lead to negative media coverage and public opinion, further hindering China's soft power diplomacy.

China's human rights record is another major factor that complicates its soft power diplomacy. The international community has frequently criticized China for its treatment of ethnic minorities, political dissidents, and human rights activists. Issues such as the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the crackdown on pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong, and the censorship of dissenting voices have drawn widespread condemnation (Albert, 2018). These human rights concerns undermine China's efforts to project a positive and harmonious image. Countries and organizations that prioritize human rights may view China's soft power initiatives with suspicion, questioning the authenticity of its cultural and diplomatic outreach. The negative perception of China's human rights practices can overshadow its cultural diplomacy efforts, limiting their effectiveness.

China's control over media and information is a clear example of how its political system and ideology impact its soft power diplomacy. The CCP maintains strict oversight of domestic media, ensuring that content aligns with party narratives and suppressing dissenting views. This control extends to China's international media presence, where state-run outlets promote China's perspective on global issues. However, this approach can backfire in the context of soft power diplomacy. The global audience often views Chinese media as lacking credibility and independence, which can diminish the impact of China's cultural and informational outreach. The perception of Chinese media as propaganda tools can lead to skepticism and resistance, particularly in countries with a free press and a tradition of independent journalism (Nye, 2004).

China's influence operations and propaganda efforts have also sparked controversy. Accusations of interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, such as through political lobbying, media influence, and cyber operations, have raised concerns about China's intentions. These activities can be perceived as attempts to undermine democratic processes and manipulate public opinion, further complicating China's soft power diplomacy (Nye, 2004). For example, allegations of Chinese interference in elections and political processes in various countries have led to increased scrutiny and resistance to China's soft power initiatives. The perception of China as a manipulative and intrusive actor can erode trust and hinder its ability to build positive relationships through cultural and diplomatic means.

China's political system and ideology present significant challenges to its soft power diplomacy. The contrast between one-party rule and democratic values, coupled with human rights issues and media control, creates skepticism and resistance towards China's soft power initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges and respects the political and cultural values of diverse global audiences.

3. Media and Information Control China's strict control over media and information poses a significant challenge to its soft power diplomacy. The global community often views China's media as state-controlled and lacking credibility. This perception undermines China's efforts to use media as a tool for soft power (Nye, 2004). The censorship and propaganda associated with Chinese media can also lead to mistrust and skepticism. The perception of Chinese media as state-controlled and lacking independence is a major obstacle to China's soft power diplomacy. In many countries, particularly those with a free press and a tradition of independent journalism, media credibility is paramount. Audiences are more likely to trust and engage with media that they perceive as unbiased and free from government influence. In contrast, Chinese media outlets, such as China Central Television (CCTV) and Xinhua News Agency, are often seen as mouthpieces for the CCP, leading to skepticism and mistrust (Nye, 2004). This lack of credibility can significantly diminish the impact of China's media outreach efforts. For example, when Chinese media report on international events or promote Chinese culture, foreign audiences may question the accuracy and objectivity of the information. This skepticism can hinder China's ability to effectively communicate its messages and build a positive image abroad.

China's media control is characterized by extensive censorship and the use of propaganda. The Chinese government censors content that it deems politically sensitive or harmful to its interests, including topics such as human rights abuses, political dissent, and territorial disputes. This censorship extends to the internet, where the Great Firewall of China blocks access to many foreign websites and social media platforms. The use of propaganda further complicates China's soft power diplomacy. Propaganda efforts aim to shape international perceptions of China by promoting positive narratives and suppressing negative ones. However, these efforts can be counterproductive, as they often lead to accusations of manipulation and deceit. For instance, China's portrayal of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a win-win

development strategy is sometimes viewed as a strategic move to expand its influence and create economic dependencies (Albert, 2018).

China has invested heavily in expanding its global media presence as part of its soft power strategy. This includes launching international versions of state-run media outlets, such as CGTN (China Global Television Network), and acquiring stakes in foreign media companies. The goal is to present China's perspective on global issues and promote Chinese culture to international audiences. However, these efforts have faced significant challenges. In many countries, Chinese media outlets struggle to gain a foothold due to their perceived lack of independence and credibility. For example, CGTN has faced regulatory scrutiny and accusations of biased reporting in several countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom. These challenges highlight the difficulties China faces in using media as an effective tool for soft power.

The strict control over media and information undermines China's soft power diplomacy in several ways. First, it limits the ability of Chinese media to engage with foreign audiences in a credible and trustworthy manner. Second, it creates a perception of China as a repressive and manipulative state, which can overshadow its cultural and diplomatic initiatives. Finally, it restricts the flow of information and ideas, hindering China's ability to build genuine and lasting relationships with other countries.

China's strict control over media and information poses significant challenges to its soft power diplomacy. The global perception of Chinese media as state-controlled and lacking credibility, coupled with extensive censorship and propaganda efforts, undermines China's ability to use media as an effective tool for soft power. Addressing these challenges requires a more open and transparent approach to media and information, which respects the values of free expression and independent journalism.

4. Regional Tensions and Conflicts China's territorial disputes and regional tensions, particularly in the South China Sea and with neighboring countries, pose significant challenges to its soft power diplomacy. These conflicts can overshadow China's soft power efforts and create a negative perception of its intentions (Albert, 2018). The aggressive stance in these disputes often contradicts the harmonious image China seeks to project. The South China Sea is a major flashpoint in China's regional tensions. China claims nearly the entire South China Sea, a claim contested by several neighboring countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. These countries also have overlapping claims in the region, which is rich in natural resources and holds strategic maritime importance. China's actions in the South China Sea, such as building artificial islands and militarizing them, have escalated tensions and drawn international criticism. These actions are perceived as aggressive and expansionist, undermining China's efforts to portray itself as a peaceful and cooperative global power. The international community, including the United States and other Western nations, has expressed concerns over China's assertive behavior, which they view as a threat to regional stability and freedom of navigation (Albert, 2018).

China's territorial disputes are not limited to the South China Sea. The country has ongoing border disputes with several of its neighbors, including India, Japan, and Taiwan. These disputes often lead to heightened tensions and conflicts, further complicating China's soft power diplomacy. For instance, the border conflict with India in the Himalayan region has resulted in several military standoffs and skirmishes. These incidents strain bilateral relations and create a negative perception of China in India and other countries that view China's actions as aggressive and destabilizing. Similarly, China's territorial claims over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have led to tensions with Japan, affecting diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.

The regional tensions and conflicts involving China have a significant impact on its soft power diplomacy. These disputes overshadow China's cultural and diplomatic initiatives, as the international community often focuses on China's aggressive actions rather than its efforts to promote cultural exchange and cooperation. The negative perception of China's intentions can lead to resistance and skepticism towards its soft power initiatives. For example, countries involved in territorial disputes with China may be less receptive to Chinese cultural programs, educational exchanges, and media outreach. The perception of China as a regional aggressor can also influence public opinion and media coverage, further complicating China's soft power efforts. Additionally, the international criticism and diplomatic fallout from these disputes can undermine China's efforts to build positive relationships and enhance its global image.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cornerstone of China's soft power strategy, has also been affected by regional tensions and conflicts. While the BRI aims to promote economic development and connectivity through infrastructure projects, it has faced criticism for creating debt dependencies and undermining the sovereignty of participating countries. These concerns are exacerbated by China's territorial disputes and aggressive actions, which can lead to

suspicion and resistance towards BRI projects (Albert, 2018). For instance, countries involved in territorial disputes with China may view BRI projects with skepticism, fearing that they could be used to expand China's influence and control. The negative perception of China's intentions can hinder the success of BRI projects and limit their impact on enhancing China's soft power.

China's regional tensions and conflicts pose significant challenges to its soft power diplomacy. The territorial disputes in the South China Sea and with neighboring countries create a negative perception of China's intentions, overshadowing its efforts to project a positive and harmonious image. Addressing these challenges requires a more conciliatory and cooperative approach to regional issues, which respects the sovereignty and interests of other countries.

8. CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING CHINA'S SOFT POWER

China's soft power strategy, designed to enhance its global influence through cultural diplomacy, has sparked significant debate. A key component of this strategy is the role of Confucius Institutes—Chinese government-funded cultural and language centers established in universities worldwide. Critics argue that these institutes are tools for the Chinese government to exert influence and control over academic freedom. For instance, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has raised concerns that Confucius Institutes function as extensions of the Chinese state, advancing a state agenda by influencing the recruitment and control of academic staff, curriculum choices, and the restriction of debate (BBC News, 2014). This has led academic bodies in Canada and the United States to call for universities to sever ties with these institutes.

Another contentious aspect is China's media expansion. Beijing has invested heavily in modernizing and expanding Chinese media outlets overseas to present a favorable image of China. However, these efforts have been criticized for promoting state-controlled narratives and suppressing dissenting voices. The Council on Foreign Relations notes that while these media outlets aim to bolster China's reputation, they often face skepticism and resistance due to their perceived lack of independence (Kurlantzick, 2017). This skepticism is further compounded by China's domestic censorship practices, which undermine the credibility of its international media efforts.

Furthermore, China's soft power initiatives in developing regions, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, have elicited mixed reactions. While these efforts include substantial aid and infrastructure projects, they are often viewed with suspicion and seen as attempts to gain strategic advantages. The Diplomat highlights that China's top-down approach to building soft power, which heavily relies on state-directed initiatives, has limited the organic growth of civil society-driven cultural exchanges (Nye, 2017). This approach contrasts with the more grassroots-driven soft power strategies of other nations, raising questions about the authenticity and sustainability of China's soft power. While China's soft power strategy aims to enhance its global influence, it faces significant controversies related to academic freedom, media independence, and the authenticity of its cultural diplomacy efforts. These issues underscore the challenges and limitations of China's approach to soft power in the international arena.

CONCLUSION

China's soft power diplomacy is a multifaceted strategy that leverages its cultural, economic, and political assets to enhance its global influence and shape international politics. Understanding the mechanisms behind China's soft power provides insights into its evolving role in the global arena and the complex dynamics of international relations in the 21st century. As China continues to refine its soft power strategy, it will remain a central player in shaping the future of international politics. China's soft power diplomacy remains a dynamic and evolving strategy. As China continues to assert its presence on the world stage, it will need to address these challenges and controversies while building on its successes. The effectiveness of China's soft power will depend on its ability to align its actions with its soft power narratives, foster trust among international partners, and adapt to changing global dynamics. Ultimately, the impact of China's soft power diplomacy will shape its role in the international community and its relations with other nations in the years to come.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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