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Chapter 13

Soft Power Competition: A Comparative Analysis of China and the US in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

In the current multipolar world, China has emerged as a formidable competitor to the United States, employing soft power strategies to expand its influence, particularly in South Asia—a region of strategic importance for both nations. This study utilizes Joseph Nye’s soft power theory to comparatively analyze the approaches of China and the US. Employing case study analysis, including document research and content analysis, the research reveals that China strategically utilizes soft power by promoting its culture in educational institutions and leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for trade infrastructure development in South Asia. Conversely, the US relies on its renowned education system, attracting students from the region, and implements soft power through foreign aid, trade, investment, and security cooperation. As the global order undergoes transformations, comprehending these soft power dynamics is crucial for deciphering the intricacies of contemporary international relations.

INTRODUCTION

Hegemony has dissipated, and the global landscape is no longer bipolar. Following the Soviet Union’s collapse in the 1990s, multipolarity emerged. Presently, power is not confined to a single or dual nation; instead, numerous countries exhibit comparable power and capability (Ashford & Cooper, 2023; Dee, 2015; Varisco, 2013). Consequently, the dynamics of power in international relations have evolved into a more intricate and multifaceted paradigm. Power is no longer solely reliant on military strength or economic dominance (Bloor, 2022). In recent times, experts talk about two types of power: “hard” and

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Soft Power Competition

“soft.” Hard power comes from military and economic strength, while soft power is about persuading others to share your values and goals for global order and security. The idea to distinguish between these concepts was first introduced by Nye (Nye, 2017).

As the global stage witnesses a paradigm shift towards nuanced diplomacy, the strategic deployment of soft power has become a paramount instrument in a nation’s arsenal. Since the end of the Cold War, the ascent of China over the last three decades has been remarkable across economic, military, cultural, and political dimensions, alongside a notable presence in the international arena (Roland, 2021). The escalating influence of China is widely recognized as the “most geopolitically significant development of this century” for both Western and non-Western nations. Undoubtedly, China possesses the preeminent global hard power, exemplified by its formidable military. Nevertheless, it is actively seeking methods to transcend this hard power preeminence in order to execute a more remarkable “soft power” campaign (Islam, 2022).

Moreover, the United States has also been implementing a soft power strategy, even though it still relies significantly on its formidable hard power capabilities (deLisle, 2020). China has harbored enduring geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests in South Asia. Conversely, India and China have maintained a strained relationship, while the United States and India share overlapping vital national interests, including the promotion of peace and stability in South Asia, the combatting of international terrorism, and the prevention of the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The US desires strong allies in this area to impede China’s elevation in the Indo-Pacific region. The region: South Asia, known for its geopolitical significance and cultural diversity, serves as a fertile ground for the exercise of soft power (Zreik, 2022). As China’s Belt and Road Initiative extends its reach and the US recalibrates its foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, the competition for influence in South Asia takes center stage. So, both China and the US have interests in South Asia to safeguard their influence and interests.

The rationale for this study lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding of contemporary global politics, with a specific focus on the strategic competition unfolding in South Asia. By dissecting the soft power strategies of China and the US, the study aims to offer valuable perspectives on the evolving geopolitical landscape, regional power dynamics, and the implications for both the countries involved and the broader international community.

This research aims to explore the soft power competition between two powerful competitors, China and the United States, within South Asia. It delves into their soft power strategies and conducts a comparative analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The competition for soft power has become increasingly significant in the context of global geopolitics, with China and the US emerging as major contenders (Winkler & Nye, 2005). Soft power is defined as the ability to shape and influence others through political values, cultural elements, and legislation. Additionally, it refers to the capacity to impact and shape the opinions and behaviors of others by appealing to their interests and values, rather than resorting to force or financial incentives (Nye, 2019). Several previous studies indicate that the soft power of China and the United States has a significant impact on the South Asian region.

Soft Power Competition

SOFT POWER COMPETITION BETWEEN CHINA AND US

China's Soft Power in South Asia

China's strategic pursuit of expanding influence in South Asia is intricately connected to the deployment of soft power (Berdiyev & Can, 2020). Chinese leaders consistently travel to Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, affirming their ongoing commitment to actively engage in the affairs of South Asia (Malik, 2001). Importantly, the resurgence and revitalization of China in this region are not linked to military tactics, but rather to a long-term commitment to cultural inclusivity (Chakrovorty, 2020). The country aims to build an optimal balance of power in South Asia and the surrounding waterways to limit the expansion of India (Mohan & Abraham, 2020). Also, China is looking to expand its influence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly through projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Sharma & Khatri, 2019). The expanding influence of China in Pakistan, primarily through diplomatic initiatives and development aid, is an important aspect in this region (Hussain & Mehmood, 2018).

Apart from that, China seeks to expand its soft power in Bangladesh by highlighting its inclusive cultural strategy and promoting mutually beneficial relations (Chakrovorty, 2020). The extent of its cultural impact on Bangladesh is determined by factors such as the level of press freedom, the economic involvement, development initiatives, and the societal prosperity (Sparks, 2018). Besides, the "String of Pearl" strategy by China is one of the determinants of Bangladesh's present stance (Mannan, 2019). The primary reason for employing soft power is to facilitate the reshaping of Beijing's geopolitical alliances, thus expediting its ascent to a global power position (Huang & Ding, 2006).

United States' (US) Soft Power in South Asia

The use of Hollywood films, notably the Rocky tales, was a strategy for projecting U.S. soft power during the Cold War (Dautbašić, 2022). The provision of increased aid by the United States government elicits favorable reactions in terms of individual-level evaluations in seven Asian countries, namely China, Malaysia, Japan, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and South Korea (Kim, 2009).

The dissemination of the United States' soft power within each state has a notable impact on diminishing the perceived immediacy of the threat posed by China (Machida, 2010). The US utilizes a multifaceted approach in South Asia to exert its soft power, which encompasses cultural, economic, and military aspects. This strategy aims to oppose China's influence and uphold its own regional supremacy (Rashid & Ikram, 2023). Expressing significant apprehension at China's increasing influence through non-military means in the area, the US has been actively investigating strategies to counteract it (Yao, 2009). Moreover, it is capitalizing on Indian skepticism against Chinese policies to gain support against China in the South Asian region (Afridi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the US grants duty-free tariff protection to specific components from designated developing nations as a way of exerting its soft power in trade (Blanchard & Hakobyan, 2015). This practice was previously implemented in several South Asian countries, including Bangladesh and India, suggesting a commitment by the U.S. to exert its soft power influence in this region (Kathuria, 2022).

On the contrary, our current understanding reveals a gap in scholarly exploration regarding the soft power strategies of the US in this region. Notably, recent observations indicate a growing U.S. involve-

Soft Power Competition

ment in the internal affairs of specific countries within South Asia. Moreover, the differences between the US and China's soft power approaches in this region is remained unexplored. Consequently, our paper aims to fill this void by scrutinizing and comparing the soft power strategies employed by China and the United States in the South Asian context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is based on soft power. It serves as the foundation for understanding how states can influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2017; Nye, 1990). Nye asserts that "*Soft power relies on the capacity to influence the preferences of others.*" He simplifies this notion by stating that, "*In practical terms, soft power equates to the power of attraction.*" However, he deliberately excludes economics from the scope of soft power, regarding national economic strength as a coercive asset. He aligns it with hard power, contending that both economic sanctions and military might serve to intimidate defiant nations. Nye emphasizes culture, political values, and a nation's foreign policies as the primary components of soft power. Conversely, some analysts broaden the concept, incorporating the power of economic allure — termed as "*sticky*" power — within the realm of soft power. This perspective denotes influence that proves challenging to relinquish once drawn into its sphere (Mead, 2004).

Another scholar Joshua Kurlantzick offers a deeper exploration of the concept by highlighting the evolving nature of soft power. He explained that soft power has evolved beyond military realms, now encompassing popular culture, public diplomacy, and seemingly coercive tools in economic and diplomatic arenas, like aid, investment, and multilateral engagement (Kurlantzick, 2007).

According to (Nye, 2004) three fundamental components through which a nation can project its soft power: political values, especially when practiced both domestically and internationally; cultural values that resonate with other societies; and foreign policies, particularly effective when perceived as possessing moral authority and enjoying legitimacy. Indeed, Nye presents four tools for exerting soft power: values, culture, policies, and institutions.

The study's observations align with the framework: China strategically employs soft power by promoting its culture in educational institutions. This resonates with Nye's emphasis on cultural values as a component of soft power. Moreover, China's use of the BRI for infrastructure development aligns with the evolving debate on whether economic engagement, like the BRI, falls within the realm of soft power. This contrasts with Nye's exclusion of economics from soft power. But similar to the opinion of (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Our study also notes the U.S.'s emphasis on its education system and aid provisions. This corresponds with Nye's concept of attracting students through educational excellence and employing policies like foreign aid for soft power projection. However, China's focus on cultural education and infrastructure development differs from the U.S.'s emphasis on educational appeal, aid provisions, and broader strategic engagements. This illustrates the divergence in their soft power approaches. Both China and the U.S. leverage elements of Nye's soft power components: China emphasizing cultural values and infrastructure while the U.S. focuses on education, aid, and strategic engagements.

Soft Power Competition

METHODOLOGY

This study outlines the case study analysis, which includes archival research and content analysis. Data triangulation and the case study method constitute the primary methodologies utilized in this book chapter. These methodologies are pivotal in assessing the validity and reliability of the research data, aligning with Berg et al.'s (2004) contention about the critical aspects of trustworthiness in case study research (Berg et al., 2004). This encompasses considerations of generalizability, reliability, and objectivity. In addition, research observations and a robust theoretical framework serve as indispensable tools in substantiating the credibility of the research (Bryman, 2008).

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research method delves into real-world issues (Moser & Korstjens, 2017), offering in-depth insights by addressing the how's and whys rather than focusing on how many or how much (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Jackson et al., 2007). The qualitative research endeavors to comprehensively understand the soft power literature and conduct a comparative analysis of China and the US's soft power strategies. Additionally, it aims to identify and compare the strategies of China's soft power approach in contrast to that of the US in South Asia. The research uses a triangulating qualitative method to examine and assess issues and fundamental questions with the two methodological components: content analysis, document, and literature analysis.

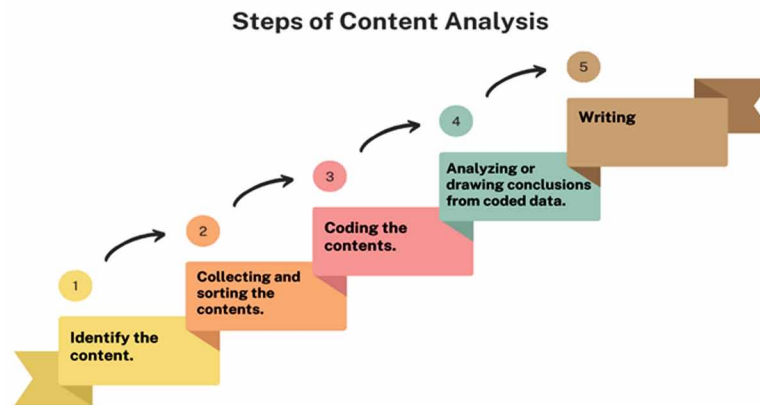
Qualitative Content analysis "It is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of analysis extends beyond word counting or extracting factual content from texts. Instead, it delves into uncovering meanings, themes, and patterns—both apparent and underlying—in specific texts. This approach enables researchers to grasp social realities in a subjective yet scientific manner. It is a method of analyzing written, verbal, or visual communication messages (Cole, 1988). Downe-Wamboldt (1992) provided an extensive definition, stating that "content analysis, as a research method, represents a systematic and objective approach for describing and quantifying phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992)." In order to find out the contents regarding the soft power strategy of China and the US in South Asia, the qualitative secondary data has been collected from the previous literature related to soft power, China and the US's soft power strategy, content analysis of documents, and media sources, interviews, focus groups, and case studies, document analysis, and observation.

Steps of Content Analysis

These steps are derived from a combination of two sources (Hurst, 2023; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005) and the author's synthesis.

Document analysis served as a key methodology to investigate China and the US's soft power influence in the South Asian region. Stokes (2003) posited that "*document analysis is extensively utilized in the humanities, social sciences, as well as in media and cultural industries research.* (Stokes, 2003)" Within this chapter, this method played a pivotal role in acquiring primary and secondary data. It facilitated the identification of information concerning the regulatory environment, historical and present soft power strategies, and gaps within existing academic discourse. Various sources including policies, regulations, and reports related to the cultural, political, and economic engagements of China and the US with South Asia were accessed.

Three types of documents are focused on:

Soft Power Competition*Figure 1. Steps of content analysis*

- Academic works and national reports.
- The policies, litigations, and regulations issued by governmental offices, notably those disseminated by state institutions like ministries and state press publications.
- Non-academic publications encompassing documents, assessments, reports, working papers, internet-based articles from journals, newspapers, magazines, and blog entries.

SOFT POWER STRATEGIES OF CHINA IN SOUTH ASIA**Overview of China's Soft Power Approach****Culture as a Soft Power Tool**

Culture is indeed a vital tool for wielding soft power. China, too, harnesses this approach, utilizing cultural instruments like the Chinese language, traditional, and contemporary cultures to project its soft power. Cultural diplomacy is seen as an effective strategy not only to enhance understanding of China's ideals but also to reinforce its economic goals and fortify national security through subtle and lasting means (You, 2018; Zreik, 2024a). In recent years Chinese leaders are also emphasizing to push their culture as a soft power.

We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture.

The statement was articulated by former Chinese President Hu Jintao during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. This marked the initial explicit declaration by China concerning its employment of soft power as a foreign policy instrument (China Today, 2007). At the

Soft Power Competition

outset, China commenced its emphasis on applying its culture as a form of soft power, primarily directed towards safeguarding the rights and interests of its populace.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping outlined China's ambition to enhance its soft power by spreading its culture and popularity, aiming to advance the idea of the "Chinese Dream" and the "China Model. (Islam, 2023)" He stated, "*We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world.*" Even, China's financial commitment to its soft power diplomacy was estimated at approximately \$10 billion annually (Albert, 2018). Moreover, China's top leadership has advocated for significant reforms within its soft power framework. This strategy has led to the integration of additional platforms, including internet celebrities, into China's soft power toolkit (Jinping, 2017).

China perceives its culture as inherently a global heritage (Gill & Huang, 2006), rooted in a profound and ancient civilization spanning millennia. This heritage manifests in remarkable architectural wonders like the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, as well as in its diverse artistic expressions, spanning calligraphy, painting, Peking opera, and dragon dances.

Apart from that, an integral component of China's strategy for soft power lies in its cuisine, recognized globally as one of the most popular and influential (Zreik, 2023). Chinese culinary artistry, renowned for both its quality ingredients and health benefits, is celebrated for its rich and complex flavors. Elevating Chinese cuisine serves as a means to showcase the country's cultural diversity and richness. As part of its soft power initiatives, the Chinese government and affiliated organizations actively propagate the appreciation of Chinese cuisine worldwide. Notably, the China Cuisine Association plays a pivotal role by fostering international collaboration among chefs and actively promoting Chinese culinary traditions. Through its initiatives, this association has significantly contributed to disseminating knowledge and fostering enthusiasm for Chinese cuisine on a global scale (Demgenski, 2020).

Confucius Institute and Soft Power

China possesses a rich history of soft power epitomized by the legacy of Confucius. His philosophy, deeply rooted in the principles of soft power, advocates for the promotion of harmony, obedience, and benevolence. Confucius believed that leaders employing moral influence rather than physical force would garner the affection of the populace and wield a more significant long-term impact.

Aligned with this ideology, China has established Confucius Institutes (CIs) globally, commencing in 2004 (Chaziza, 2023). These educational entities serve as hubs for disseminating Chinese language and culture, thereby fostering multiculturalism, and playing a pivotal role in the cultivation of a harmonious global community. These Institutes, along with various Chinese nongovernmental organizations linked to the state through the Ministry of Education, offer an array of cultural courses. Such as: Mandarin language instruction, tutorials on traditional Chinese culinary arts, teaching Chinese calligraphy, and orchestrating celebrations for Chinese national holidays. Essentially, these Institutes mirror counterparts in cultural diplomacy, such as the British Councils (Britain), Alliance Française (France), Goethe Institutes (Germany), Yunus Emre Institutes (Turkey), and Cervantes Institutes (Spain). The Confucius Institute typically collaborates with universities, providing substantial annual support of at least \$100,000 for programs, while Confucius Classrooms are predominantly established within primary and secondary educational institutions (Albert, 2018). Over 540 Confucius Institutes have been established in 160 countries (Ekstrom, 2021). According to another study, China has established more than 700 Confucius

Soft Power Competition*Table 1. Number of Confucius Institutes worldwide*

Region	Number of Institutes
Asia	132
Europe	189
Africa	71
America	130
Oceania	20
Total	542

Institutes and Confucius Classrooms worldwide, strategically aimed at promoting its language and culture (Hartig, 2012).

The Evolution of Chinese Educational Excellence and Soft Power

In conjunction with its swift economic advancement and expanding political influence globally, China is actively advancing its soft power capabilities through education, considering it a pivotal instrument to enhance its influence on the international stage. This has been achieved through the implementation of two primary strategies. Firstly, by establishing Chinese educational institutions across various nations worldwide. Secondly, by offering enticing programs and providing support through scholarships for students globally, encouraging their enrollment in Chinese universities (Markleku, 2019).

Over time, China has emerged as one of the foremost global destinations for a myriad of international students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate studies. Chinese universities are recognized for delivering high-quality higher education. As per the 2024 Times Higher Education ranking, China boasts seven universities within the top 100 globally. Many students finance their studies in China through self-funding or partial funding. However, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) extends full free scholarships to international students pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate studies in the country. Notably, in 2018, China accommodated an impressive count of 492,185 international students from 205 countries, marking a substantial increase from the figures in 2010 (Biney & Cheng, 2021). Please refer to the table below for detailed statistics.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A Catalyst for China's Soft Power

China has effectively utilized its economic prowess to extend its soft power influence. Among the most significant undertakings in the history of human civilization is the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 (Clarke, 2017). This ambitious initiative seeks to enhance connectivity across continents, fostering partnerships among the 150 signatory nations of the BRI, particularly in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The primary objective of the BRI project is to bolster inter-regional and intercontinental connectivity through an interconnected network encompassing roads, railways, pipelines, and ports.

Indeed, the ambitious establishment of the BRI is recognized as an integral component of China's soft power foreign policy strategy, aimed at expanding its influence on the global political stage. Scholars perceive China's efforts as a modern revival of the ancient Silk Road (Garlick, 2020; Hobson &

Soft Power Competition*Table 2. Number of international students in China*

Year	International Students
2010	265090
2011	292611
2012	328330
2013	356499
2014	377054
2015	397635
2016	442773
2017	489200
2018	492185

Zhang, 2022; Ling, 2020; Mishra, 2020). Albert (2018) delineates the financial commitment to these international endeavors, noting that China allocated \$50 billion to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank during its inception, constituting half of the bank's initial capital. Additionally, Beijing pledged \$40 billion for its Silk Road Fund, \$25 billion for the Maritime Silk Road, and an additional \$41 billion to the New Development Bank established by BRICS states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Albert, 2018).

The goal of the project is for China to forge new connections while reinforcing existing bilateral relationships. The BRI holds the potential to serve as a catalyst in enticing other nations to foster stronger bilateral connections with China. This capability lies in its capacity to cultivate trust among participating countries, recognized as a crucial element by scholars in defining China's "soft power. (Islam, 2023)"

Injecting "Soft Power", Vaccine Diplomacy, and COVID-19

While the emergence of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a curse, it inadvertently presented China with an opportunity to advance its soft power strategy through humanitarian aid, drawing significant attention from the international media. The Chinese government characterized its response as "*the most intensive and wide-ranging emergency humanitarian operation since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949*" (Fengyuan, 2020). Notably, this isn't the first instance; China has played pivotal humanitarian roles during previous crises, including the SARS outbreak in 2003, the 2004 Tsunami, the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and the Ebola outbreaks in 2014 and 2018.

By March 2020, China had furnished COVID-19 response equipment, including N95 respirators, ventilators, personal protective gear, and test kits, to 120 countries and 4 international organizations. Additionally, Chinese municipalities donated medical supplies to over 50 cities worldwide and dispatched medical staff to nations like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Pakistan to aid in the pandemic response (Xinhua, 2020a, 2020b). Chinese companies specializing in medical equipment manufacturing extended donations to over 100 countries (Hossain, 2021). Prominent Chinese philanthropists, including the Jack Ma and Alibaba foundations, played pivotal roles in COVID-19 responses by dispatching medical supplies to over 100 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. As well, they translated and distributed diagnostic manuals in eight languages through various internet platforms,

Soft Power Competition

including social media and Google (Sellen & Jaumont, 2020) China even supplied complimentary vaccines to the United States' close allies, shipping over 115 million vaccine doses to various nations. This action posed a significant challenge to the traditional perception of US exceptionalism. Consequently, countries started pivoting towards China instead of the US.

Hence, China has broadened its soft power diplomacy by leveraging existing platforms like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including initiatives like the Health Silk Road, to extend COVID-19 aid to 120 states (Escobar, 2020). Thus, the pandemic outbreak has accelerated Chinese endeavors to assert a more prominent global leadership role (Guardian, 2020). This COVID-19-driven soft power initiative of China has notably surged in developing regions heavily indebted to Beijing, where China holds substantial investments (Hossain, 2021).

International Media

International Media significantly shapes the global narrative surrounding a country's image. Recognizing this, Beijing has made substantial investments in Chinese international media outlets, encompassing radio, television, and print media. The establishment of these affiliated outlets has granted China access to a wider global audience, allowing the country to highlight its positive yet often overlooked global initiatives in peace and development. For instance, the government-owned media agency, Xinhua, has experienced rapid expansion, boasting branches in 170 foreign bureaus, with plans to reach 200 by 2020 (Albert, 2018). Moreover, the launch of the China Global Television Network (CGTN) in December 2016 further augmented China's media reach. CGTN operates six channels, including two in English, as well as Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and French, with broadcasting teams spanning across more than 70 countries worldwide, covering all continents (Ye & Albornoz, 2018; Zreik, 2024b).

Soft Power Strategies of China in South Asia

China is extending its influence both towards the east and west. However, its focus lies in its neighboring regions including South Asia. This region encompasses eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The country also extends its influence over the Indian Ocean, especially its eastern parts, which have implications for the entire region. China's connections to this area have deep historical roots predating the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 (USIP, 2020). But at the start of this century, China's connections with South Asia quickly intensified using soft power as part of its wider push to engage globally.

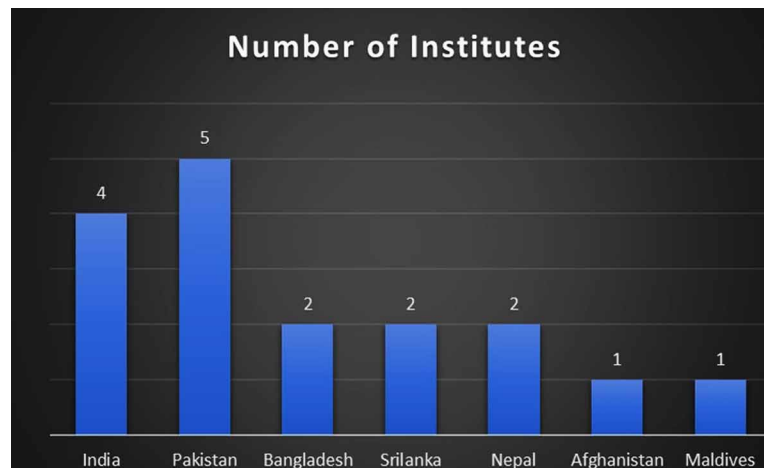
Chinese Culture and South Asia

China takes pride in its diverse and ancient cultural heritage. When a country celebrates a culture that promotes shared values and interests, it fosters appealing and obligational relationships, thereby enhancing the likelihood of achieving desired goals (Nye, 2004). Moreover, China's "cultural soft power" is thought to be appealing due to its distinctive nature, potentially mitigating adverse external perceptions that view China's rise as threatening (Lai & Lu, 2012).

China is advancing its cultural soft power in South Asia through three primary approaches. Firstly, it employs formal official programs directed at enhancing China's global image through policies and initiatives that facilitate the long-term development and export of cultural products. Secondly, it engages

Soft Power Competition

Figure 2. Number of Confucious Institutes in South Asia



in international cultural exchange programs, promoting various forms of arts, entertainment (such as movies), cuisine, and more. Thirdly, it actively encourages the Chinese language and encourages the study of China.

China primarily disseminates its language and culture through the Confucius Institute, serving as a pivotal medium. This is evident in its efforts to engage smaller South Asian nations, with 17 institutes established across the region. For instance, Nepal welcomed first Confucius Institute in June 2007 (Chinese Embassy, 2007), complemented by a China Study Center in Jhapa (east Nepal) to support local entrepreneurs' interactions with China. Sri Lanka's University of Kelaniya integrates Chinese culture into its credit award system through the Confucius Institute. Similar institutes have been established in Afghanistan, Bangladesh (at the University of Dhaka and North South University), and other South Asian nations. Expanding its reach, China Radio International (CRI), the state-owned overseas broadcaster, launched on-air Confucius Institutes in the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, fostering deeper cultural and educational connections in South Asia (Pal, 2021).

Education as a Soft Power Tool

In the 21st century, alongside its growth in hard power, including military and economic prowess, China has strategically emphasized particularly in education as soft power (Duan & Qiu, 2023). Higher education stands as a crucial platform for propagating Chinese culture, language, and civilizational values not only within the South Asian region but also on a global scale.

Nepal, situated uniquely between India and China in South Asia, experiences influence from both nations. However, China has effectively utilized education as a soft power tool within Nepal. Several schools in Nepal have integrated mandatory Chinese-language courses, supported by the Chinese government covering teachers' salaries (The Times of India, 2019). By 2019, an estimated 6,400 Nepali students were pursuing studies in China, contributing to a continuous influx of technocrats and experts trained there into Nepal's professional circles, potentially shaping a generational pattern (Pal, 2021). A total of 71 Nepali students were awarded Chinese government scholarships for studies in Chinese universities in the 2023/2024 academic year (Xinhua, 2023).

Soft Power Competition

China is implementing the geointellect model in Pakistan and Sri Lanka as part of its expanding educational and research endeavors catalyzed by The Belt and Road Initiative (Jain, 2022). The China Scholarship Council (CSC) has established a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC). This collaboration aims to identify approximately 1,000 college teachers or scientific researchers to pursue doctoral studies at Chinese higher education institutions. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, there are over 28,000 students currently enrolled in China, positioning Pakistan as the third-largest source of international students in the country (The Express Tribune, 2019). This surge in Pakistani students can be attributed to preferential policies initiated by the Chinese government following the introduction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Additionally, 24 students from Sri Lanka were awarded scholarships by the Chinese government to study in China annually. By 2023, this number had increased to 40 (Ceylon Today, 2023). China actively engages with Bangladesh through scholarships and educational programs. Bangladeshi students are offered summer courses in China, visits to the Confucius Institute, and journalists receive funded fellowships. Newspapers collaborate with the Chinese embassy to discuss BRI benefits. Notably, 55 Bangladeshi students secured the Chinese Government Scholarship for the 2023-2024 academic year (The Business Standard, 2023). Also, an estimated 20,000-25,000 Indian students are studying in China currently (Venugopalan & Verma, 2020).

BRI: Economic Collaboration and Soft Influence

Economic engagement, perceived as facets of soft power, is the key tool employed by China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's economic prowess notably surged following the global financial crisis of 2008, bolstering its appeal (Li et al., 2012). China's focus on promoting a stable regional environment is partly driven by its ambition for sustained economic growth.

Engaging with South Asia economically serves multiple purposes, particularly as several underdeveloped regions in Western China share proximities with South Asian nations. Xinjiang shares borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, while Tibet borders Nepal, Bhutan, and the northeastern part of India. China's imperative to develop its western regions propels efforts to forge stronger economic ties with neighboring South Asian countries.

China-Bangladesh bilateral engagement started in early 1979s. Under the framework of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), China removed tariff barriers on 84 types of commodities imported from Bangladesh, including jute and textiles (chief exports of Bangladesh). The landlocked Yunnan province of China has sought economic cooperation with Bangladesh to help gain access to the Bay of Bengal. The country has become a major investor in Bangladesh in sectors such as textiles, power generation, and construction, with investments made under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Baghernia & Meraji, 2020). According to data from The Observatory of Economic Complexity, China stood as the primary source of imports for Bangladesh in 2021, amounting to \$24.1 billion. Recently, in the backdrop of strained relations between Bangladesh and the United States, where the U.S. has been exerting pressure on Bangladesh to ensure fair, credible, and human rights-centered elections (Kugelman, 2023), China has emerged as a supportive partner to Bangladesh in this context (Krishnan & Bhattacharjee, 2023).

The data from the William and Mary Global Research Institute illustrates a substantial increase in aid and credit commitments from Beijing to Dhaka. Specifically, the annual aid and credit disbursements, which amounted to \$994 million from 2014 to 2017, witnessed a remarkable upsurge, reaching US\$3.4 billion between 2018 and 2021 (Rahman, 2023). According to the data of Bangladesh Bank, Chinese

Soft Power Competition

loans in the nation's private sector amounting to slightly over \$2.33 billion, with a significant portion allocated to the power and energy sector (Noyon, 2023).

In Nepal, China has extended concessional loans and provided economic as well as technical assistance. Chinese officials, leaders, journalists, and academics frequently visit Nepal as part of their public diplomacy initiatives. Moreover, China is actively involved in the development of rail networks, hospitals, polytechnic institutes, and communication infrastructure within Nepal. In 2011, both nations signed the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, and concurrently, the China-Nepal Youth Exchange Mechanism was officially inaugurated (Hazarika & Mishra, 2016).

The free trade agreement (FTA) between Pakistan and China was initially signed in 2006. Subsequently, Chinese corporations, such as China's Mobile, have made significant investments in Pakistan, an investment of US\$1.7 billion, reportedly generating 41,700 employment opportunities. Presently, approximately 10,000 resident Chinese personnel are involved in various business ventures across Pakistan. Furthermore, The CPEC, valued at \$62 billion in Chinese investments in Pakistan, is a pivotal initiative. Beijing continues to invest extensively to bolster China's soft power, aiming to foster a positive image among BRI partner nations, including Pakistan. Pakistan's English-language press actively promotes China's goodwill, emphasizing its cultural contributions, diplomatic support, and investments. This approach aligns with China's evolving stance on India-Pakistan disputes, increasingly favoring Pakistan to curb Indian influence in Asia rather than maintaining a neutral position (Ittefaq et al., 2023).

By the late 2000s, China became Sri Lanka's top donor, providing a consistent annual aid of over \$1 billion since 2008, without imposing conditions tied to internal governance reforms. This robust economic relationship saw significant Chinese investments in various mega projects, including the Hambantota Port. By 2011, China became the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Sri Lanka, surpassing Japan, and took the lead as the principal provider of development assistance (Singh, 2021). Notably, a concessional loan of \$500 million was granted to support Sri Lanka's efforts in combating the pandemic. Additionally, the Chinese government and associated companies engaged in major projects in Sri Lanka contributed masks, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and test kits (Tewari, 2021). China's proactive involvement, in contrast to the absence of America and inaction from India, has significantly amplified its goodwill in Sri Lanka.

China and Afghanistan have shared a longstanding historical relationship, maintaining ties from ancient times to the present. During critical junctures like the Soviet and US invasions in Afghanistan, China remained remarkably supportive of Afghanistan. Post the US withdrawal and a devastating earthquake in Afghanistan, China extended substantial humanitarian aid, offering \$7.5 million in assistance. Expressing gratitude, the Taliban acknowledged Chinese officials' support in a press conference during this period. In a significant move, China appointed Zhao Xing as its Ambassador in Afghanistan in September 2023, the first appointment after the Taliban's 2021 victory, although without formal recognition of the Taliban government, signaling China's interest in deepening relations. Diplomats serving as Ambassadors in Kabul were appointed before August 2021, distinguishing China's approach from other nations that designated individuals as charge d'affaires after their ambassadors' terms expired. China's recent \$10 billion agreement with the Taliban, securing access to lithium deposits, aims to create 120,000 employment opportunities and support infrastructure development. Moreover, in May 2023, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan agreed to extend the CPEC as part of the BRI into Afghanistan, an expansion plan initially proposed in 2017, illustrating ongoing efforts to integrate Afghanistan into regional economic initiatives (Obaidullah, 2023).

THE US'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY

Overview of the US's Soft Power Approach

Movies as a Soft Power Tool of the US

Numerous countries have invested in their film industries to build cultural soft power tool. Movies are the most viable means of communication by transmitting images, stories, culture, and values to worldwide audiences (Crane, 2014a; Vlassis, 2016). Therefore, American music, film, and television asserted significant sway, prevailing within local markets across a spectrum of nations, spanning from India to Indonesia (Kurlantzick & Minxin, 2006). The largest film industry in Hollywood in the US which is renowned worldwide for its captivating and dazzling movie to the world.

The Hollywood film industry serves as an archetype, effectively showcasing how the United States can propagate its societal norms and values on a global scale (Edelstein, 2022; Nye, 2008). These films serve to portray the US as a “universal nation,” comprised of immigrants engaged in cultural exchange (Zoysa & Newman, 2002), while also suggesting that foreign social and political lifestyles can align with American values (Sun, 2008). So, Hollywood cinema portrays the American way of life as a form of global culture, emphasizing liberty as a universal value (Crane, 2014b). This depiction has contributed to heightened global recognition and receptivity toward American ideals.

When individuals watch Hollywood movies like *“Pearl Harbor,” “The Pianist,” “The Patriot,”* and *“Saving Private Ryan,”* they often resonate with the narrative that implies America’s neutrality during the Second World War. Similarly, in numerous American movies themed around World War II such as *“Operation Rogue”* and *“Tears of the Sun,”* there’s a recurring use of storytelling strategies that portray Americans as global saviors, liberators, and rescuers of refugees from dictatorial regimes. This pattern underscores a prevalent theme of Americans depicted as those who save the world, champion freedom, and offer salvation to those oppressed by dictators (Barrech & Khan, 2023). Additionally, audiences may perceive Japan and Germany as aggressors during wartime, potentially leading to negative attitudes toward these nations and their people. In more extreme cases, such portrayals in movies could foster adverse sentiments among viewers towards Japan and Germany.

Similarly, during the Cold War, the US utilized its film industry to counter Communism led by the Soviet Union. The Hollywood movie *“Ninotchka,”* became the most popular film promoting the US’s official ideology of anti-communism. The US government enacted the “Smith-Mundt Act” and “Motion Picture Production Code” to utilize the film industry in disseminating American values against communist countries (Hussain, 2021).

Cultural Diplomacy

The US uses cultural diplomacy to promote American ideals of individuality, tolerance, and opportunity. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs uses cultural diplomacy to forge lasting connections between the US and other countries (The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2023). It achieves remarkable results with a budget of around \$770 million, raising global connections by granting Americans exposure to international artists while sharing America’s vibrant performing and visual arts culture worldwide (Hochberg, 2023). Government-sponsored cultural initiatives primarily aim to cultivate relationships beyond U.S. borders, ensuring open access to American culture encompassing movies, fashion,

Soft Power Competition

and ideas. Programs like the Fulbright exchange is pivotal in amplifying U.S. soft power through cultural exchanges (Bettie, 2015b). Additionally, the U.S. prioritizes media and the export of pop culture, which has transcended to become a significant component of global popular culture.

Education Is (Soft) Power

There are two educational avenues through which the US utilizes as tools of soft power. The first involves attracting talented students to study within the United States. The US is home to nearly 5000 universities, hosting a significant number of top-ranking institutions globally. As per the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2024, 36 American universities are positioned within the top 100, with 7 of these universities securing spots among the top 10 worldwide (The Times Higher Education, 2023). The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 16 advanced economies, revealing that a median of 59% of adults across these societies regards US universities as the best in the world (Silver, 2021). Despite the ongoing tensions between the US and China, Chinese students comprised roughly one-third of all international students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities, totaling approximately 370,000 students, according to data gathered by IIE before 2020 (Nuwer, 2023).

Another method involves establishing branches of U.S. universities in various countries. The initiative to propagate American-style higher education stands as one of the enduring and longstanding elements of U.S. foreign policy. Currently, there are approximately 70 American-style universities situated in different countries, with the Middle East region hosting the highest number of such institutions. Universities shifted their focus and expanded their roles to engage in philanthropic endeavors, particularly in fields like health, education, and social development. This philanthropic effort aimed to bolster the soft power of the US within universities by delivering tangible benefits to students and their families (Gautam et al., 2023). Even, approximately 300 current and former heads of state were educated in the U.S., highlighting education as a service export that influences global leadership (Hochberg, 2023).

Media's Influence on Soft Power Dynamics

Media: radio, television, and social media, serves as a pivotal instrument for the United States to wield soft power, promoting its own ideology while impeding the dissemination of opposing ideologies such as those from Russia or China (Mavrodieva et al., 2019; Rugh, 2017). This strategic utilization of media traces its origins to World War II seen in initiatives like Voice of America, aimed at countering Nazi propaganda. Subsequently, this practice expanded during the Cold War era with the establishment of Radio Free Europe (RFE), an outlet geared towards combatting the proliferation of communism (Sowiński, 2023).

Initially supported by the CIA and denounced by the Soviet Union as U.S. propaganda, RFE played a significant role in disseminating information within Eastern European nations where local media was censored and dissent was suppressed. RFE's reporting spotlighted the contributions of exiled intellectuals and artists, along with news concerning pro-democracy movements and notable Soviet shortcomings like the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. These efforts strategically aligned with U.S. interests by discrediting the Soviet government and undermining communism as a viable political ideology.

Soft Power Competition

Foreign Assistance

In pursuit of advancing their national interests and bolstering soft power internationally, governments frequently allocate resources, including financial aid, goods, and services, to other nations (Blair et al., 2022). The US exemplifies this practice, demonstrated in its post-World War II assistance to Europe through the Marshall Plan. This initiative aimed not only to aid in the reconstruction of Europe but also to curtail the spread of communism in the region (Grünbacher, 2012; McCourt & Mudge, 2023). The alignment of interests between the U.S. and Europe in reinforcing democratic principles and containing communism led to a convergence of goals, significantly enhancing America's soft power influence. Through U.S. support, nations like Germany and Japan successfully recuperated from the devastations of World War II, concurrently fostering strong economic ties and security alliances advantageous to the US. Notably, 11 out of the United States' current top 15 trading partners were once beneficiaries of U.S. foreign assistance (Runde, 2020).

Apart from that, the establishment of the U.S. Peace Corps in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy marked a pivotal step in deploying American humanitarian workers globally. Beyond its primary mission of aiding development initiatives, the Peace Corps was explicitly founded to cultivate a better understanding of American culture and values in the countries where its volunteers served. Over its history, more than 240,000 Americans have participated in the Peace Corps, contributing their services across 142 countries (US Embassy, 2023b).

Soft Power Strategies of the US in South Asia

Within the spectrum of US multilateral institutions, bilateral relationships have assumed a significance commensurate with that of ballistic missiles and aircraft carriers. This connotes the elevation of soft power to a level of importance akin to hard power within the US strategic purview. In the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration has taken significant steps through soft-power initiatives: boosting ties with Vietnam, strengthening trilateral cooperation with the US, Japan, and South Korea, reinforcing the US-Philippines alliance, and expanding diplomatic presence throughout the Pacific (Krishnamoorthi, 2023). South Asia is vital for the US due to its strategic trade position, its role in fighting terrorism, supporting democracy, protecting human rights, and balancing power to counter China's influence in the broader Asian landscape (Smith, 2022).

Education and Cultural Exchange

Education stands as a tool through which the US leverages its soft power in the South Asian region. Given the prestige of the US education system as a global leader, students from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh pursue various levels of higher education—ranging from bachelor's to doctoral degrees—both through fully funded scholarships and self-financed means. In line with the utilization of education as a tool of soft power, there has been a notable surge in the enrollment of international students from South Asian nations in the US. Specifically, the figures reveal a significant rise in the number of Indian students, marking a 35% increase, reaching a record high of 268,923 in 2022/23 (The Hindu Business Line, 2023). Moreover, Bangladesh has experienced a remarkable 300% increase in the number of students studying

Soft Power Competition

in the US over the past decade, solidifying its position as the 13th top sending country of origin for US students (Palma, 2023). Furthermore, there has been a substantial sixteen percent increase in the count of Pakistani students pursuing education in the United States in 2023 (Radio Pakistan, 2023).

Moreover, the Fulbright scholarship, a prominent initiative of the US, serves as a magnet for graduate students, budding professionals, and artists globally, inviting them to pursue studies and research there. Operating across over 160 countries, the program annually bestows approximately 8,000 Fulbright scholarships worldwide. Since its establishment, the Program has generously supported more than 400,000 students globally. In Bangladesh, about 650 scholars have availed themselves of this opportunity to study in the US, while in India, the program has benefited over 25,000 students and scholars. Additionally, 4,100 individuals from Pakistan have received Fulbright grants. The overarching aim of this program is to foster mutual understanding and cultivate amicable and peaceful relations between the people of the United States and those from other nations (Bettie, 2015a; Gallarotti, 2022).

Additionally, the US has set up 650 Spaces across 150 countries globally. These American Spaces serve as inviting hubs where visitors can engage and familiarize themselves with American culture through a variety of programs, lectures, and resources such as books, movies, and magazines (US Embassy, 2023a). These Spaces, hosted within embassies, schools, libraries, and other collaborating institutions worldwide, serve as essential platforms for disseminating information and encouraging active engagement through diverse activities. Moreover, alongside these initiatives, the burgeoning popularity of Hollywood movies in South Asia has significantly escalated, contributing to the cultural influence and outreach efforts in the region (Govil, 2021).

Assistance for South Asian Nations

Foreign assistance remains a fundamental soft power tool for the US, with USAID spearheading diverse projects across South Asia. These initiatives span health, education, infrastructure, and economic development, aiming to enhance lives and foster goodwill towards the US. Notably, the US stands as the fourth-largest official development assistance (ODA) donor in India, with a contribution of \$132.3 million. In specific terms, the US Government through the USAID provided \$64.59 million in 2021 and \$10.28 million in 2022, while Johns Hopkins University allocated \$12.41 million in the same period (US Government, 2023). Particularly during the pandemic, USAID has played a pivotal role, allocating over \$200 million to support India's COVID-19 relief and response efforts (USAID, 2022).

In the landscape of Asian aid recipients, Bangladesh holds a pivotal position, having received over eight billion dollars from the US in the last five decades, aimed at enhancing the country's quality of life (US Department of State, 2022). The US has notably been a leading supporter in responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis, extending humanitarian aid to both the refugees and the host communities within Bangladesh. Furthermore, Bangladesh has emerged as a significant beneficiary of U.S.-donated COVID-19 vaccines via COVAX. Moreover, since the pandemic's onset in March 2020, the United States has contributed over \$121 million in additional COVID-19-related assistance to Bangladesh (US Department of State, 2022). Alongside, while the US stands as the second-largest official development assistance (ODA) donor in Pakistan, providing a substantial \$236.6 million, its contribution to Sri Lanka amounts to \$54 million.

Soft Power Competition

Trade and Investment Partnerships

Promoting trade and investment between the US and South Asian nations fosters economic interdependence and creates shared interests. Such as, the US stands as the largest importer of Bangladeshi products. In 2022, U.S. goods imports from Bangladesh totaled \$11.2 billion, showcasing a notable increase from \$8.3 billion in 2021 (US Department of State, 2022). Conversely, Bangladesh's imports in 2022 amounted to \$3.0 billion, marking a significant surge of 26.0 percent (\$612 million) from the figures recorded in 2021 (USTR, 2023a). In 2021, the US also stood as Bangladesh's primary export partner.

In 2022, the trade between the United States and India reached an estimated \$191.8 billion, with exports valued at \$73.0 billion and imports at \$118.8 billion. Additionally, U.S. FDI in India amounted to \$51.6 billion in 2022, marking a 15.1 percent increase from the previous year (USTR, 2023b). Conversely, the US has consistently served as Pakistan's largest export market, importing over \$5 billion in Pakistani goods in 2021, surpassing imports from any other country. Besides, it has maintained a significant role as a leading investor in Pakistan for the last two decades. In the latest fiscal year, U.S. direct investment in Pakistan escalated by 50 percent, reaching its highest point in over ten years (US Department of State, 2022b).

Security Cooperation

Joint military exercises and training programs not only foster trust and cooperation but also bolster regional security. Over five decades, the US and Bangladesh have maintained amicable diplomatic ties and collaborated on various security matters, encompassing border and maritime security, counterterrorism efforts, peacekeeping, defense trade, and the development of defense institutions. Since 2014, the country has allocated \$78.45 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$14.5 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) aid to Bangladesh. Within the FMF assistance, \$54.8 million has been directed to bilateral programs, while \$23.6 million has supported the Bay of Bengal Initiative Regional FMF (US Department of State, 2023). Through the Department of State's Bay of Bengal Initiative, facilitated by FMF aid, efforts aim to enhance the capabilities of both civilian and military entities in detecting illicit activities within their borders and the wider region. This initiative focuses on fostering networks, promoting cooperation for information sharing, building prompt response capacities to counter illicit activities, and supporting partners in establishing a rules-based order within the Indian Ocean Region.

Continuing the strategic trajectory, the United States designated India as a Major Defense Partner in 2016. This designation led to India's elevation to Strategic Trade Authorization tier 1 status in 2018, granting the country license-free access to a broad spectrum of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce. Over the years, the PM Bureau has actively supported the substantial growth of defense trade with India, escalating from negligible figures in 2008 to surpassing \$20 billion in 2020. India's engagement in the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program has been consistent, with annual funding of at least \$1 million since 2003 (US Department of State, 2021).

On the other hand, the enduring relationship between Pakistan and the US dates back to the 1950s. During the two-decade War on Terror, US military bases in Pakistan served as access points, primarily for logistics, relief operations, and as launching platforms for drone missions (Woods, 2011). Pakistan falls within the operational ambit of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), with the Afghanistan-Pakistan Center of Excellence operating under its purview, focusing on operational analy-

Soft Power Competition

sis within Pakistan and Afghanistan (formerly recognized as the AfPak theatre). Presently, there are no active US bases within Pakistan.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN SOFT POWER STRATEGIES OF THE US AND CHINA IN SOUTH ASIA

The rivalry for dominance in South Asia between China and the United States is an intricate and diverse matter (Afridi et al., 2022). Both countries emphasize the importance of higher education as a means to enhance their global influence, offering opportunities for foreign students (Thao, 2020; Yang, 2010). Higher education generates essential soft power in the linked global community, enabling negotiation in the face of new challenges (Li, 2018). Moreover, the US aimed to establish hegemony over China through the implementation of tariff and non-tariff measures, resulting in a conflict over trade (M. Hussain & Mehmood, 2018). The consequences of this competition have wide-ranging effects: influencing the stability of diplomatic affairs in South Asia (Tehseen, 2017). The rapid economic expansion and growing military power of China seem to be strategically directed at countering the US in the South Asian region (Khuhro, 2019). However, this competition for supremacy in South Asia poses a potential threat to triggering instability in the region (Tehseen, 2017).

In South Asia, China strategically employs soft power by leveraging its rich cultural heritage to cultivate a favorable perception. This approach involves establishing various language and cultural centers, notably exemplified by the Confucius Institutes. Additionally, higher education plays a pivotal role in disseminating Chinese culture, language, and civilizational principles. Annually, China offers scholarships to students from nations in this region—such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka—facilitating cultural exchange and promoting its values and language among the younger generation in these countries.

China's engagement in South Asia extends beyond cultural efforts through investments, aid, and infrastructure projects, positioning itself as a significant economic and diplomatic player in the region. At the heart of its influence lies the flagship program BRI, functioning as a pivotal economic tool and a widely discussed soft power mechanism employed by China. Through BRI, China strategically implements investments, aid, and infrastructure development, shaping the economic and diplomatic dynamics of South Asia.

Similarly, the US utilizes education as a soft power tool, leveraging its renowned education system and numerous top-ranked universities. Many students from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh pursue fully funded scholarship opportunities in the US, which also offers extensive part-time job prospects. Moreover, the Fulbright scholarship, a prominent initiative, attracts graduate students, emerging professionals, and artists globally, aiming to foster mutual understanding and cultivate amicable relations between the US and other nations. Additionally, the US has established America Spaces, serving as inviting hubs for visitors to engage with American culture through diverse programs, lectures, and resources like books, movies, and magazines.

The US employs foreign assistance effectively as a soft power tool, providing aid in health, education, infrastructure, and economic development to enhance lives and foster goodwill. Notably, the US has been a leading supporter in responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis, extending humanitarian aid to both the refugees and host communities within Bangladesh, earning global acclaim. Promoting trade and investment between the US and South Asian nations enhances economic interdependence and fosters shared interests. The US maintains strong bilateral relations with India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri

Soft Power Competition

Lanka. Finally, security cooperation, such as providing monetary assistance for military strengthening and training, contributes to enhancing US soft influence in the region.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have delved into the intricate landscape of global power dynamics within the context of a multipolar world. The emergence of numerous influential powers has reshaped international relations, leading to a nuanced discussion surrounding the notions of hard power and the more recently introduced concept of soft power. While hard power remains a conventional approach, the inception of soft power gained prominence in the 1990s, despite its practical and theoretical existence before that period. The historical shift from the United States' hegemonic position to China's rising competition underscores the evolving global order. Amidst this transition, the region of South Asia has emerged as a pivotal arena for both these powerhouses due to its significance in trade, security, geopolitical positioning, and strategic interests.

Notably, both the United States and China have actively adopted soft power strategies within the South Asian context. This chapter aimed to comprehensively explore and analyze these strategies, offering a comparative understanding of their applications.

China strategically employs soft power tactics in South Asia through the promotion of Chinese culture in educational institutions and universities, attracting students from countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Additionally, China utilizes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand trade infrastructure and bolster commercial activities across the region. In contrast, education serves as a pivotal tool through which the United States exerts its soft power in South Asia. Benefiting from the esteemed reputation of the US education system on the global stage, students from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh pursue various levels of higher education in the United States. Moreover, the US significantly contributes foreign aid to this region, alongside employing strategies involving trade, investment, and security cooperation.

This dichotomy between China's emphasis on cultural education and infrastructure development and the US focus on educational appeal, substantial aid provisions, and strategic engagements underscores the divergent soft power approaches adopted by these nations in extending their influence and interests within the crucial South Asian landscape.

Through this exploration, we endeavor to contribute to the broader discourse on international relations, power dynamics, and the strategic maneuvering of key global actors in one of the world's most crucial regions. As the global order continues to evolve, understanding and analyzing these soft power strategies become increasingly vital in deciphering the complexities of contemporary international relations. This study acknowledges certain limitations concerning the evaluation of the comparative effectiveness of soft power strategies between countries in the South Asian region and the exploration of challenges faced by these nations. The examination of which country's soft power holds greater influence in the region and an in-depth analysis of the challenges encountered were not within the scope of this research.

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