

## Evaluating China's Soft Power Discourse: Assumptions, Strategies, and Objectives



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**Abstract** *China claims that its rise is different from other great powers: a benign and responsible power striving for just order and peaceful development. This paper raises question that why has China resorted to soft power mechanisms? What are the strategies that it employs to project soft image? And finally, how is soft power helpful in portraying China as a power distinct from the status quo powers? While utilising qualitative content analysis, this study focuses upon the origins of soft power conception, characteristics of Chinese soft power discourse and strategies that it has adopted to attain its objectives. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, has paid a profound attention to soft power as a means to realise the 'China Dream'. China's efforts to enhance regional and trans-regional connectivity, infrastructure investment and formula for poverty alleviation have contributed to brilliance of China.*

**Key Words:** Aid Diplomacy, Confucianism, Cultural Diplomacy, Discourse, Peaceful Development, Soft Power

### Introduction

'Century of Humiliation' (Ogden, 2019) is over. With miraculous economic growth and military modernization in the background, China is trying to recognise its role and position in the world. It is attempting to acquire a great power status through its portrayal as a non-coercive power. In order to do so, it has returned to its ancient philosophical traditions, notions, and principles of appeal and attraction. In parallel, it has seemingly given up the revolutionary and offensive outlook of Maoist era and has travelled from 'keeping a low profile' to 'peaceful development' and 'development together.' China's soft power rests upon its rising economic potential which has become a major tool of China's foreign policy in the new millennium.

China's soft power is greatly manifested in its diplomatic strategy. The 'rejuvenation of the nation' is achieved through Beijing consensus, partnership initiatives, and spread of cultural values through Confucius institutes. It has focused upon the mechanisms of attraction. Diplomatically, it has started a 'charm offensive' towards partners and building their confidence in Chinese policy discourses, strategies and initiatives. Soft power as enunciated by Joseph Nye is essentially "non-coercive and co-optive," (Nye Jr., 2005, p. 7) in nature and is different from hard power as it is based on attracting others towards a country's political outlook, status and policy for a common understanding and cooperation on a win-win level. This study raises questions that why has China resorted to soft power mechanisms? What are the strategies to project Chinese soft image? And

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finally, how is soft power helpful in portraying China as a power distinct from the status quo powers? In order to answer these questions, this – qualitative content analysis based – study is divided into four sections: the first section discusses the theoretical notions of soft power and its application. The primary focus is on the ontological discussion of soft power and the utility and mechanisms of its working. The second section focuses on the Chinese notions and conceptions of power. It mainly addresses the question that what Chinese think about the nature and use of soft power and what is the difference between the Chinese and Western conceptions of soft power. The third section traces out the sources of Chinese soft power from historical and modern thinking patterns, philosophical thoughts and practices. The final section delineates the practice of Chinese soft power and its implications on China's foreign policy and national security strategy.

### **Soft Power: Genealogy of the Concept**

National power is regarded as the ability of a state to acquire its desired objectives by affecting the behaviour of other states or actors. Dahl considers power as the ability of actor A to make B do, what B would not do otherwise ([Dahl, 1957, pp. 201–203](#)). Similarly Nye defines power as “the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers, and that can be accomplished by coercion, payment, or attraction and persuasion” (Nye Jr., 2017). Historical and conventional notion of power is linked mainly with material capabilities and the resources of coercion and competition. In this configuration of power, it is the relational dynamic of power parity that defines bilateral relations characterised by influence and coercion.

As opposed to defining power in terms of coercive capabilities, it is argued that national interests can also be achieved without recourse to coercion and the use of hard power. Nye points out that “sometimes people influence others by ideas and attraction that sets the agenda for the others or gets them to want what you want” (Nye Jr., 2017). He further opines that “soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye Jr., 2017). He notes another place that “It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced” (Nye Jr., 1990).

Soft power can also be regarded as an analytical tool. It is a concept that fills the gap in the thought process about the concept of power and that it is integrated into political resonance, but it has mainly a practical utility. Nye himself, provides, “I thought of soft power as an analytic concept to fill a deficiency in the way analysts thought about power, but it gradually took on political resonance” (Nye Jr., 2017). But at the same time, it is a comprehensive concept that cannot be defined and applied only in cultural and commercial terms (Ferguson, 2009).

Major powers are usually hesitant to adopt it as a ‘sole’ instrument of national policy. Nye emphasized that states use it for some specific purposes – hence it is more of practical use than being a rhetoric only. He declares that if states adopt soft power – a part of the grand strategy – they will acquire various benefits in the modern world. “Soft power is just as important as hard power potential. If a state establishes its power legitimacy, through soft power means, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes” (Nye Jr., 1990).

Since the inception of the concept of soft power, it has been accepted and utilized by various leaders, policy makers and intellectuals as a part of international diplomacy ([Cooper et al., 2013](#)). In recent times, as a part of the cultural and public diplomacy, the United States and China have integrated this notion in policy discourses and initiatives. It was under President Hu Jintao that China took a decisive turn in attending to soft power as an instrument of national policy laying emphasis on the perpetuation of its soft-image and the promotion of cultural values in its foreign relations (“Hu Jintao,” 2007). It may be asserted here that soft power is not new to Chinese diplomacy. Historically Confucianist China emphasized heavily on the virtues of kind rule, generosity, respect, and inclusiveness in domestic as well as in foreign relations (“Hu Jintao,” 2007). It had been the evident policy of ancient China to rule the periphery through attraction and the

use of soft means had helped the Chinese establish 'Tianxia' - a hierarchical system and order in East Asia (Kang, 2003).

### Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics

China's turn towards recourse and expansion of soft power have witnessed an unprecedented growth. Though, historically, various Chinese dynasties have remained a centre of attraction and charm for others, predominantly in East Asia and the geographical area it controlled in ancient times, but modern China has been regarded as a revolutionary, revisionist and hard-power oriented state since 1949 (Ding, 2010, p. 255). Less focus has been given to the soft means of power till the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though significant focus is given to the enhancement of soft aspects of power, it is believed by many that China lacked a comprehensive and coherent strategy of soft power projection and its utility until the global economic depression of 2008 (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). Chinese soft power has remained without clear vision and regarded as inconsistent and largely reactive (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

Chinese scholars and leaders, keeping historical and ideational factors in mind, did not accept democracy, individual freedom and openness in culture as key components of soft power as emphasized and promoted by Joseph Nye (Nye Jr., 2003). They considered Nye's assumptions of the soft power concept as flawed. They were attracted mainly to the key idea that "soft power provided a way of influencing other states through non-coercive means" (Nye Jr., 2004). It is imperative then that one understands, first, the Chinese self-definition of soft power and its various concomitants.

China's notion of soft power is based on three components of attraction: benignity, brilliance, and beauty (Vuving, 2009). Chinese thinkers, scholars and leaders proclaim that China's power is based on benign values, traditions, and approaches alongside the practice (Huang, 2013). This notion of benignity is evidenced in the writings and teachings of Confucius who expressed admiration for a king who relies on moral authority and moral force as opposed to coercion and use of force. For the Chinese, *wang dao* (the kingly way) is preferable and will ultimately triumph over *ba dao* (the hegemonic way) (Hu, 2007; Mirza & Khan, 2020) with the latter the practice of the world's foremost superpower, the United States. Thus, Chinese conception of soft power is inherently peaceful and co-optive in nature, distinct from the American self-definition which they considered as hegemonic in nature.

Second, Chinese soft power is based on the notion of brilliance. Chinese brilliance is manifested in its economic model and growth which helped it survive the global financial crisis, while at the same time assisting in the global economic recovery in the post-crisis phase. Chinese brilliance is also manifest in its drive towards pulling out millions of its people from conditions of abject poverty (McGiffert, 2009). Moreover, as a great rising power, it has avoided meddling in the domestic affairs of other states and adhered strictly to the five principles of peaceful co-existence and non-interference ("Hu Jintao," 2007).

Third, the beauty of Chinese soft power is embodied in the manifestation of its unique model of development. It attracts the world regardless of different culture, political, and economic systems. Chinese soft power is based on the cultural and civilizational coordinates. Hongying and Yeh-Chung have clearly differentiated the Chinese soft power from the western and especially American conceptions. They note that where American soft power is based on the modern cultural traits, Chinese notions of soft power are derived from traditional Chinese cultural values. American soft power promotes liberal political and civic values whereas Chinese is based on attraction of economic and developmental models mainly (Beeson & Xu, 2016). Chinese concept of soft power has been expanded in its resources, nature, approach, and utility. It is regarded as re-invented and new to the recent globalized world and being promoted on the premise that it would be more acceptable to the world because its mechanisms are regarded as benign. It is a common perception that China's soft power strategy is mainly based on the culture as a core resource. But the exact depiction is different. Though culture is the dominant part of the Chinese soft power

policy, it is not the only aspect. There are a variety of sources and instruments of the soft power approach and practice of China.

The beauty of the Chinese soft power is also manifested in traditional cultural and Confucian values of benignity and virtue, and its recent win-win approach in its dealings with the outside world. Wang Hunning writes that the basic thing about soft power is, if a country possesses admirable cultural traits and traditions and an ideological system, it will attract the following of the others (Huning, 1993). China believes that it is moral authority and moral principles that are the true resource of attraction that strengthen the base of influence in comparison to American soft power.

China has incorporated foreign policy mechanisms and economic statecraft in its domain of soft power approach. For them, foreign policy initiatives, such as relations based on equality and partnerships and economic diplomatic initiatives like trade, aid, investment and integration model of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are the components of the beauty of China based on attraction. It can be proved vital for the enhancement of Chinese distinction of the soft power and its effective use. It can be argued here that China's notions of soft power are based on the cultural and economic diplomacy as well as soft foreign policy ventures of cooperation and integration. Hence, the need is to trace out and evaluate the strategies of Chinese soft power and its link with the foreign policy at length.

### **Embracing Soft Power: Cultural and Economic Diplomacy**

China has pursued various strategies to promote cultural and socio-economic resources in order to establish its soft power. Its strategy not only entails promotion of the cultural potentials and traits but also economic and trade initiatives, including strategies of regional cooperation and development. Sound estimation is that China spends more than \$10 billion annually on soft power promotion projects (Shambaugh, 2015).

#### **Cultural Diplomacy**

Chinese ancient historical and cultural patterns, traditions and values are seminal sources of attraction for the region and also for the international community (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). The leading proponent of this school of thought, Yu Xintian asserts that it is important for the nation to enhance its cultural and social attractions. The more attractive its cultural traits and model, more it gets acceptability by others and resultantly, there are greater chances to establish country's soft image and power (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). China's emphasis on peaceful development, peaceful co-existence, and harmony provides a foundational basis universal in its appeal and can create a new set of principles that can facilitate the acceptance of morality in international politics.

Like his predecessor, Xi Jinping has proactively engaged in the promotion of Chinese cultural values to the world. He has emphasized on China to obtain soft power potentials. Xi administration seems more focused on the promotion of the Chinese social, economic and cultural development to the world (Sayama, 2016). In this endeavour, China has heavily invested in the media networks for propagation of its narratives and strengthened and enhanced people-to people contacts.

#### **Confucius Institutes: Promotion of Cultural Values**

Establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in various parts of the world can be considered as the notable manifestation of China's diplomacy of cultural promotion. Confucian Institute Annual Development Report provides that more than 525 CIs and 1113 Confucius Classrooms had been established by the end of 2017 and till now these institutions and related mechanisms held around 42,000 various cultural events with 12.72 million audience worldwide ([Confucian Institute Annual Development Report, 2017](#)). The purpose of the CIs is to promote Chinese language teaching and culture, and promote harmony among people and also to assist in setting educational programs ([About Us: Confucius Institutes, 2020](#)).

**Table 1.** Annual Development Report of Confucian Institute

|                              | Asia | Africa | Europe | Americas | Oceania |
|------------------------------|------|--------|--------|----------|---------|
| Confucius Institutes (CIs)   | 118  | 54     | 173    | 161      | 19      |
| Confucian Class rooms (CCRs) | 101  | 30     | 307    | 574      | 101     |
| Total Number CIs + CCRs      | 219  | 84     | 480    | 735      | 120     |

Source: (Confucian Institute Annual Development Report, 2017)

Most of the CIs are operated through collaborative ventures with locals in different universities, secondary and higher secondary schools. The major audience is young public and students. These institutes aimed at creating a platform that can create an attraction towards Chinese culture through various activities and encouraging students to participate in cultural and educational exchange programs. This effort is primarily aimed at promoting Chinese culture as a distinctive, peaceful, and value-laden (Lo & Pan, 2016, pp. 512–532).

Confucius Institutes are meant to attract the world public towards modern China and its characteristics of historic culture and civilization. Osamu Sayama writes that main purpose of CIs has been to promote positive characterisation of Chinese society and pacifist legacy of Confucius traditions, and hence to support the enhancement of Chinese soft image (Mirza & Khan, 2020; Sayama, 2016). Where CIs are being spread all over the world, many critics in the west believe that these institutes suppress discussion on sensitive issues like Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong and others and also scrutinize the curriculum and freedom of thought (Sayama, 2016). Amid criticism and suspicion, CIs are continuously developing all over the world, though with modest speed, and serving the purpose of their establishment, the mean of soft power to create attraction for China.

### Media and Soft Power: Propagating the message

Media also plays a vital role in shaping, communicating and attracting public opinion through positive characterization of China; its state, society and development. According to Chinese academics, Chinese external soft power consumption includes projecting and communicating its foreign policy positions on world issues, to build a good international image for China and moderating the external environment (Sayama, 2016). As a part of Chinese ‘going out’ and ‘go global’ strategy, China has encouraged the mainstream media to enhance the coverage and generate potential favourable influence on the world opinion. Through this, China endeavours to potentially form a source of public influencing mechanisms ([“17th Party Congress Demands Boosting Cultural Creativity ‘Soft Power.’” 2007](#)).

Under Xi Jinping, China has started a proactive drive to expand the outreach of Chinese media and hence its influence. Through the expansion of media outreach China would aim to attain two basic purposes. First, it will reach to a larger audience overseas and communicate the narrative of peaceful and responsible China and resultantly that would assist in countering perception of ‘China threat’ in western countries and bring a positive image for China. Second, it would provide competition to the Western narrative dominated media. Most important development in this regard is the expansion of the Xinhua News Agency’s bureaus in different parts of the world. Now, it maintains 170 bureaus and thousands of employees (Shambaugh, 2015). Besides the bureaus, it operates online in audio and video content (Shambaugh, 2015). On the other hand, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) has also expanded in outreach and content. It has extended worldwide coverage since the start of the twenty-first century and now it broadcasts in more than six languages and has established production units in different parts of Asia, Americas and Africa (Shambaugh, 2015). Interesting fact with Chinese media is that wherever it is established enough to compete with the mainstream international media, it is owned and monopolized by Chinese CCP and Chinese state.

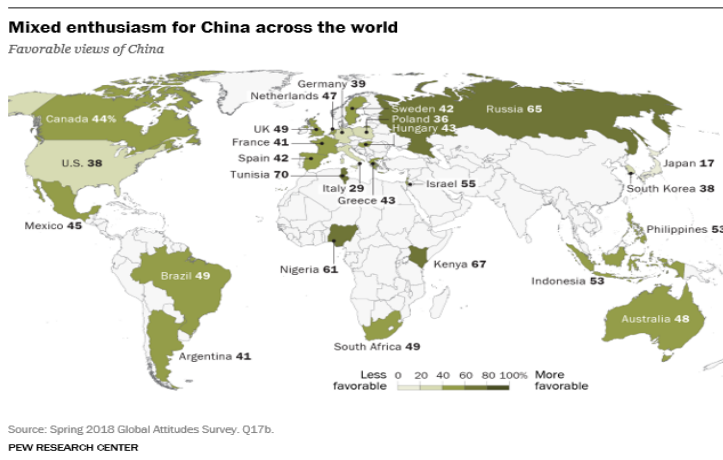
State backing to Chinese media gives it an edge over other international media outlets as it is carefree from budgetary and market pressures. Through the global outreach of the Chinese international media, Chinese state possesses the strong media tools and methods to propagate its narratives and image to the world public.

### People-to-people Diplomacy

People to people exchanges and interpersonal relations have gained a prominent part in the establishment of the country's soft image. China has recently employed it as one of the means but in reality it still is lacking behind in this domain, as it is being conducted mainly through the hands of state-owned traditional official methods of diplomacy (Sayama, 2016).

China has created many for a to promote its culture, language and traditions to the world through cultural exchange programs, sports, arts and performing art, music, film and literature. It also provides a platform for countless governmental and non-governmental seminars, conferences and dialogue centres for the interaction, cooperation and discussion of the Chinese people with the outside world. In this regard, Beijing Forum, Boao Forum for Asia, and China Development Forum can be mentioned as the few interactive dialogue sites with the purpose of developing a positive image for China (Shambaugh, 2015). Besides these initiatives, China's heavy investment on educational exchanges, scholarships and research collaborations have earned a repute. Chinese government offers more than 20,000 scholarships to foreign students annually (Shambaugh, 2015), on a variety of subjects from science and technology to arts and social sciences. More specifically, scholarships for learning of Chinese language, literature and culture are more enthusiastically provided in China as well as in different foreign countries through the Confucian Institutes. China also offers a series of short diplomas and courses, research visits and professional development opportunities to foreign government servants, diplomatic staff and even to military cadets and officers of friendly and partner states across the globe (Shambaugh, 2015).

The premise for the initiatives and investments is believed to rest on the hope to win over the public of the friendly as well as non-friendly or less-friendly nations. With the passage of time this formula seems working. The favourability of China as a positive nation has grown in various regions of the world, though unequally. It has shown positive signs in Africa, Latin America, and Europe (Devlin, 2018). Following Figure of 2018, issued by the Pew Research Centre manifests that China's instruments of soft power building are helping in the creation of the positive image and impact of its power.



**Figure:** Map showing Enthusiasm for China across the world  
*source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey*

## Economic Diplomacy

Though cultural diplomacy is imperative for China, but its real soft power rests with its economic diplomacy. China's rapid economic development, alleviation of poverty, enhancement of trade and economic cooperation through regional and trans-regional integration has attracted various leaders of the world. Various countries have started seeing China as an emerging great power that has the ability to defy US and Western pressures and that has become successful in ensuring the security, stability of the nation and prosperity of the public (Sayama, 2016). It has provided other nations with incentives to get benefits from socio-economic initiatives. Focusing on economic prosperity and development while maintaining stability, is the model that has attracted many of the countries across the globe.

## Global Connectivity and Integration: BRI

Most profound initiative under Xi's leadership is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is known as president Xi's personal signature initiative that consists of diplomatic and developmental conceptions for the realization of 'China Dream'. The BRI represents Chinese new discursive thinking about "open development and going-abroad" (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 325). This project is believed to be based on the concept of 'inclusive development.' It is hoped that it will help maximize China's influence and resultantly raise its position to the desired place in the international community through better collaborative socio-economic programs, trade deals, and infrastructural and developmental projects (Xin & Matheson, 2018).

BRI consists of two mega projects: Silk Road Economic Belt and a New Maritime Silk Road. These two projects were unveiled and inaugurated by President Xi in September 2013 in Kazakhstan and October 2013 in Indonesia respectively. These potential notions paved the way for an inclusive, mutually beneficial and cooperative ventures of land and sea-based economic and trade corridors connecting Asian with the Eurasian and European markets (Swaine, 2015). Under BRI, China has endeavoured to build a web of roads and railway networks along with pipelines, fibre optics and communication networks across the 11,000 km of the Eurasian continent (Farwa & Siddiq, 2017, p. 83). Another part of the BRI, 'the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' has envisioned to connect China with the seashores of major regions like South East Asia, South Asia, North Africa, Middle East and Europe through sea passages of South China, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea (Farwa & Siddiq, 2017).



Figure: Map showing China's One Belt, One Road Initiative (source: Bloomberg)

China believes that the existing global governing system inherits a clear disparity and gap between the developed and developing, and land-locked and maritime nations and believes that

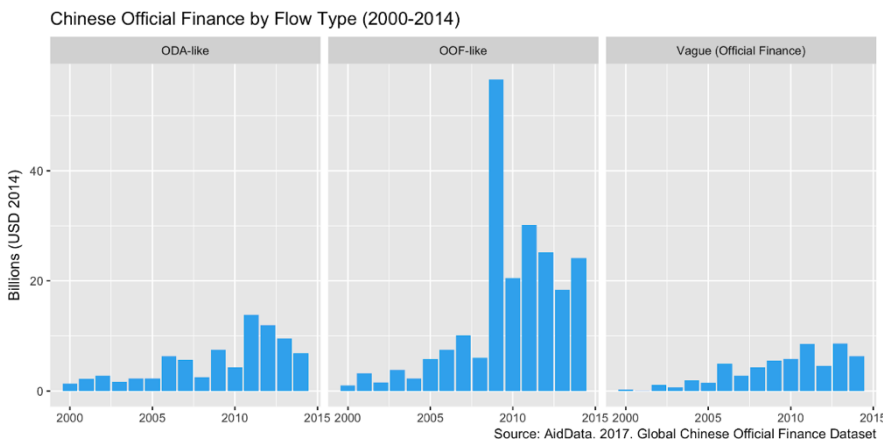
the need is to rectify the anomaly and to rebalance and reorder it (Brown & Jingjing, 2016). BRI has created an innovative platform for all nations without discrimination through which they can capitalise their energies and attain their socio-economic and developmental goals.

Where this land and maritime projects have created opportunity for cooperation and common development, there, it has been viewed by many like the US, Japan, India and others as a geopolitical project bent on establishing hegemony in the region and beyond. China portrays its global connectivity discourse as inclusive and non-threatening but some Western leaders and academics associate it with geo-politics (Urio, 2018, p. 218). They believe that through BRI and other related projects, China is trying to develop its geo-political strengths to attain its interests and goals (Donnan, 2014). Xi himself emphasized that China would not seek geopolitical competition with any state of the world regarding the trade, investment and infrastructure projects (Jinping, 2017).

### Aid and Assistance Programs: Economic Vehicle of Soft Power

China has also employed aid as a tool of attraction as a part of foreign policy to enhance its soft power. It, along with other initiatives, has also adopted the premise of creating a feasible and favourable international condition for peaceful development of the country. Aid and assistance are typically focused on underdeveloped and developing countries of the world. It is in equation with Chinese notion of South-South development, that is an innovative conception and is based on attracting the countries of the southern hemisphere and its neighbours, proximate or distant. China's aid and assistance programs are believed to be based on bi-lateral linkages and financial grants, low and interest free loans, assistance and other variants of government financing and funding (Albert, 2018). Chinese aid and assistance preference is to developing countries for poverty reduction, improving health and living standards and also for humanitarian aid in the event of natural disasters (Fuch & Rudyak, 2019). Aid Data, an organization working on the collection and analysis of the aid programs, portrays that "during the period between 2000 and 2014, China committed \$354.3 billion to 140 countries" (Dreher et al., 2017). It has narrowed the gap of US aid spending that "stood at \$394.6 billion" (Dreher et al., 2017).

In the data set by Aid Data organization, it is witnessed that China has increased both Official Assistance Flow (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF) as well as vague financial support that cannot be categorized in the aid and assistance definitions. The resource "other official flows (OOF) are those official transactions that are not under the purview of official development assistance procedure and criteria. These official financial flows are committed for commercial purposes (Dreher et al., 2017).



**Figure:** Bar chart showing China's Official Assistance Flow (source: AidData, 2017), Legend: ODA= Official Assistance Flow & OOF=Other Official Flows



It can be inferred here that China has committed huge sums of financial aid and assistance to the developing countries even going 'out of the way' methods. It has significantly won the hearts and minds of the countries that are under pressure from the Western countries due to their political system, human right conditions, and restrained relations.

## Conclusion

Soft power is the power of persuasion and attraction. As it is dependent upon soft-image and international standing, China's soft national image building strategy is aimed at enhancing its soft power through public policy, promotion of culture and economic diplomacy. China is utilising its soft power to attain the final goal of 'the rejuvenation of the nation'. Alongside the conventional purposes, China is also bent upon pursuing the goal of establishing domestic attraction, pacification of the popular nationalism and legitimacy of the CCP regime. The question here is, has China's soft power diplomacy been effective in attaining its goals? Answer is not straightforward because there is divided opinion regarding the effectiveness of the Chinese soft power. On the one hand China has managed to establish friendly relations with many of the developing countries of the world but its favourability in the developed and major powers of the world has yet to be increased. It has potential tension with its neighbours over territorial issues and its hard stance on the 'core interests' has made the situation even more complicated. Some western scholars see Chinese soft power diplomacy not in the real equation of its goals. For example, David Shambaugh notes that Chinese soft power and public diplomacy efforts have not been very successful and that the results of the strategy are not worth its investment (Nye Jr. et al., 2016). Others like Liz Economy consider results of its effort a mix bag. She notes that only Chinese economic policies, especially its poverty alleviation plan has established limited attraction to various countries of the region like Africa, Latin America and parts of South Asia and the Arab world (Nye Jr. et al., 2016).

On the other hand, keeping in mind the medium- and long-term goals of China, it can be provided that it has accumulated and projected its soft power in many countries of the world especially in Africa and Latin America (Nye Jr. et al., 2016). With the exception of a few countries in the South China Sea region, China has won the confidence of the nations and their leaders in Africa, Asia, Latin America and even in Europe through aid and assistance and BRI diplomacy, as is evident from the favourability index. The favourability of China as a positive nation has grown in various regions of the world though unequally (Devlin, 2018).

Various states consider China a powerful country with capacity and ability to withstand the global challenges and can defy the threats and pressures posed by the powerful states such as the US. It can ensure the prosperity of its citizens and greater good for the world populace. It has also become a healthy contribution in the list of great powers that can resist the unilateral trends in the international system and ensure the stability of the international order (Sayama, 2016). Its rise has provided other nations the opportunity to benefit from the socio-economic, developmental and infrastructure initiatives of China. Domestically, Chinese economic development patterns are on ascending. Through various regional initiatives like BRI and CPEC along with regional partnerships and collaboration it has overcome its economic inequality between the coastal and rural areas. Its economic and diplomatic success has promoted a sense of pride and confidence among the population and has satisfied the ever-rising nationalism. Its promotion of cultural values and language has gained her a soft-image and a status of a benign power in many regions of the world.

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