

CHINESE SOFT POWER POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

Throughout the last decade, China has gradually mounted its presence in South Asia by using its soft power. This has increasingly become an issue of debate among international media, economists, and policy analysts. Chinese policymakers consider that the country's international image and influence can be enriched by adopting and dynamically endorsing its soft power. China is more and more becoming a significant player in cultural, political, economic, and security issues of South Asia. Historically and culturally, China and the South Asian countries have some linkages. China began by establishing bilateral relation with each South Asian country and it is gradually expanding its financial and technical support in different areas as a part of its soft power policy. Although, there are some critiques about Chinese involvement in South Asia, this involvement is actually helping the countries of this region in different sectors, especially infrastructural and educational sectors which are directly related with their broader development. This paper examines the different techniques of soft power which are being used by China in South Asian region, i.e., cultural diplomacy, people to people exchange program, economic diplomacy, infrastructural, and development assistance. This paper also highlights the underlying factors behind China's use of soft power in different parts of the world along with South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

“To become a hegemonic power a state needs to acquire consent and military force”

-Robert Cox

The international engagement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by using its soft power policy, especially since 2000, has been a focus of attention in international politics. Soft power is a non-coercive tool in international relations which implies the ability to fascinate and co-opt as a means of influence, rather than to coerce and use force. The sources of soft power are the use of- economic tools, cultural practices, political values, and foreign policies. Moreover, these are also called non-coercive sources of power that a country uses to get consent. The geographical position of China makes it easier for the country to strengthen its relations with South Asian countries. Rich culture, state-patronised media, people-to-people exchange program, health diplomacy, and economic assistance are used most of the time by China as soft power tools.

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Although it is said that the Chinese engagement is only for South Asian Market, it also has political, security, and ideological implications. The fundamental objectives of Chinese foreign policy are to achieve modernisation and create a benevolent and peaceful internal and external environment to ensure its peaceful rise. For this reason, Beijing follows soft power policy to ensure its interest in various regions. In South Asia, China and Pakistan have a deep-rooted friendship but China's recent engagement with Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bhutan has become a great concern for the global power like the United States and regional power like India. Geo-strategic and economic importance of South Asia create an appeal to great powers to involve in this region through different means. However, this article is neither about the rise of China nor about the threat it poses to India or to the United States; it is about China's Charm offensive and this is China's soft power in the South Asian region. Therefore, this article will focus on the factors behind China's use of soft power to get involved in this region, the ways through which it is using soft power, and the types of soft power tools the country is using here.

CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER

Prominent Chinese philosophers have emphasised on non-coercive means in their ideas. If we analyse the philosophy of Taoism and Confucianism of China, we will see that both of these philosophies place importance on non-coercive power. Later, in 1939, in the book titled as *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, E. H. Carr distinguished the international power of a state into three categories. These are - military, economic, and power of opinion. Joseph Nye first used the term "soft power" in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* in 1990. In 2004, he further developed the concept of "soft power" in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* and argued, "soft power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want".¹ According to Nye, hard power is "the ability to get others to act in ways that are contrary to their initial preferences and strategies".² In contrast, soft power is "the ability to get others to want the outcomes that you want" and predominantly "the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion".³ Nye did not deny the significance of hard power. Rather, he argued that soft power is as important as hard power. Indeed, instead of military power, soft power tools, such as, culture, economy. and diplomacy enables a transformation of actions in others.

Prominent realist thinker Kenneth Waltz shows a similar hard disposition in defining power. His assessment of power comprises the following elements:

¹ J. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Washington D.C., USA: Public Affairs, 2004, p. 5.

² J. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York, USA: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 11.

³ J. Nye, 2004, *op. cit.* p. 11.

size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence.⁴ Soft power plays an important role in the development and enhancement of comprehensive national power. Comprehensive national power in modern world involves economic power, scientific and technological power, cultural power and military power. Huang Shuofeng, a well-known Chinese scholar, views comprehensive national power as a nation's whole power and international influence including both the material and mental power a nation has for its survival and development.⁵ Hence, soft power is composed of economic, political, cultural and educational, diplomatic and synergic powers.

FACTORS BEHIND CHINA'S CHOICE OF SOFT POWER

China has pursued an array of new relationship by using its soft power policy. Now it can be a question here that why China applies soft power in their foreign policy? Followings are the reasons for that-

PEACEFUL INTENTION

China's previous foreign policy priorities of "War and Revolution" have been dramatically replaced with "Peace and Development". Beijing is trying to persuade the world of its peaceful intentions. Due to continuous economic growth, China needs resources and market of the wider world. At present, there are more than 480 Confucius Institutes operating around the world.⁶ Moreover, China has a plan to establish more than 100 Confucius Institute and language centre to promote its peaceful intentions.⁷ At these institutes, students will be taught simplified Chinese culture and characteristics.

CONFUCIAN NORMS AND VALUES

Most of the Chinese scholars have strongly emphasised the Confucian tradition in China in their strategic culture research, while the existence of Realpolitik subculture has been rejected.⁸ Confucians believe that 'the superiority of the power of attraction by virtue is a hard historical fact, rather than a rosy ideal.'

⁴ K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, United States: McGraw-Hill, 1979, p. 131.

⁵ Z. Majie, "The Role of Soft power in International Relations," in *Cultural Impact on International Relations*, edited by X. Yu, Washington DC: CRVP, 2002, pp. 41-64.

⁶ Available at: <<http://www.confucius.ucla.edu/about-us/confucius-institutes-worldwide>> (accessed on 10 June 2017).

⁷ E. Pan, "China's Soft Power Initiative," available at: <<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-soft-power-initiative>> (accessed on 10 June 2017).

⁸ T. Liu, "Chinese Strategic Culture and the Use of Force: Moral and Political Perspectives," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No.87, 2014, pp. 556-574.