



Competing for the Global South: Soft power strategies of China and India

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Abstract

This paper analyses the application of soft power by China and India to increase their influence in the Global South in a changed multipolar world. Whereas China uses state-led cultural outreach, massive infusion of capital into development, and the Belt and Road Initiative as tools to bask in a model of rapid modernisation, India uses civilizational identity, democratic and diaspora networks and capacity-building programmes like ITEC and the International Solar Alliance. Based on a comparative analytical framework, the study weighs instruments, narratives and perceptions that make up individual country soft power maps on the African, Asian, and Latin American continents. The paper proposes that the resource-intensive policy of China offers a quick payoff, but it must be worried about transparency and increasing geopolitical arrogance, whereas the people-based and culturally-driven approach of India achieves goodwill and is limited to financial means. The conclusion of the paper entails that the competition of soft power by the two states plays an important part in global governance and the future of South-South cooperation.

Keywords: Soft power, China, India, global south, multipolar world, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Introduction

The emergence of the Global South as an active geopolitical, economic, and cultural space has transformed the boundaries of internal affairs of international relations in the twenty-first century to an unprecedented extent, attributing an unusual importance to the soft power policy of a new power structure, such as China and India (Verma & Li, 2025) ^[1]. With the tendencies of multiploidization of the global order intensifying, the states of the Asian area, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands have gained more influence in the processes of world governance and developmental policies, which generates a competitive environment where Beijing and New Delhi are eager to establish themselves as the chosen partner of the developing world (Palit & Palit, 2022) ^[2]. In the case of China, soft power has been closely intertwined with the overall Chinese foreign policies and foreign leadership aspirations, which are expressed through massive infrastructure financing through the Belt and Road Initiative, educational and cultural outreach through the Confucius Institutes, massive financial media networks, and discourses of win-win cooperation and Chinese modernisation (Kelkar & Agarwal, 2023) ^[3, 18]. India, in its turn, previews a civilizational identity and populist vision based on mutual historical experiences of colonialism, democracy, and development of solidarity, and enacts its instruments, including Bollywood, yoga diplomacy, engagement of the diaspora, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, and leading multilateral platforms, the International Solar Alliance and the Voice of Global South Summit (Hazarika & Mishra, 2016) ^[4]. Humanitarian assistance, vaccine diplomacy, and digital cooperation are applied by both nations to strengthen the relationship, but the character, volume, and ideological contextualization of their programs vary in many ways, as both countries reflect different political structures, economic capacities, and normative objectives (Mitra, 2021) ^[5]. This soft power competition is not just a prestige competition, but rather a strategic battlefield in an effort to control the world narratives,

attitudes in development models, and nurture long-term collaborations in the areas that have infrastructural demands, technological advancement expectations, and seek a fair global reflection. Although the state-led resource-absorbing outreach of China has a fast payoff in the form of visible results, it also brings forth doubts on issues of debt dependency, political obscurity, and geopolitical expansion. The more cultural, capacity-oriented, and less aggressive approach in India has the potential to provoke greater goodwill and trust, limited by a few financial resources and bureaucratic obstacles. This changing competition is crucial to the analysis of how the Global South manages to cope with the challenges of geopolitics in the modern world, a degree of strategic freedom, and will use the advantages of external alliances to their developmental interests. This study will attempt to assess critically the tools, stories, imaginations, and geopolitical implications of Chinese and Indian soft power interactions, and provide a comparative frame to shed light on their inherent strengths and weaknesses, as well as their futures in a fast-shrinking global system.

This paper evaluates the changing soft power policies of both China and India critically as they struggle to gain influence in the Global South, which has been one of the key arenas in the contemporary multipolar world. It compares the processes of using cultural, political, economic, educational, and humanitarian tools by the two states to create perception, establish partnerships, and realise their global identities. The paper states that the soft power of China, despite being legitimised by big financial investments and massive projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, bears the traces of the state-focused narratives and geopolitical ambitions. The strategy of India is, however, based on civilizational values, on democratic values, and on developmental solidarity, exploiting the cultural capital, diaspora actions and capacity-building programmes. The paper provides an analysis of the motives, approach, and efficiency of these strategies and how nations in the Global South understand them and react to them by using a

comparative analytical perspective. Finally, the paper has shown that China-India soft power politics has a remarkable influence on regional alignment forming, developing cooperation, and the future structure of global governance.

Research Objective

- To analyse the key soft power instruments employed by China in the Global South, including cultural diplomacy, development financing, media outreach, and political narratives.
- To examine India's major soft power mechanisms such as cultural influence, democratic values, diaspora engagement, and capacity-building initiatives and assess their effectiveness across the Global South.
- To compare the strategies, motivations, and ideological foundations of Chinese and Indian soft power, highlighting their points of convergence and divergence.
- To evaluate the perceptions and responses of Global South countries toward China's and India's soft power efforts, and assess how these perceptions influence bilateral and regional partnerships.
- To understand the broader geopolitical implications of China-India soft power competition, including its impact on South-South cooperation, regional alignments, and emerging structures of global governance.

Conceptualising China-India Soft Power

This work is predominantly based on the works of Joseph Nye, who is the theorist of the Soft Power Theory, which assumes that states attain international influence not only by exploiting coercive military and economic power, but by attracting, persuading, and co-opting others. In his definition, Nye sees soft power as an outcome of culture, political values, and foreign policies that seem to be just or morally correct. Both China and India have operationalised these aspects differently, and therefore, the framework presented by Nye would be critical in understanding their competing patterns in the Global South. Assisting this is a Constructivist view which focuses on the significance of identity, common norms, as well as cultural meaning in defining state behaviour (Karmwar & Abhinav, 2024) [6]. Constructivism relates to the way of understanding why India prefigures its civilizational subject and the ethic of democracy, and the way China propagates discourses of modernisation and co-modernisation as each tries to establish ideological attraction in various areas. South-South Cooperation (SSC) paradigms also contribute to the study as they emphasise solidarity, non-interference, and mutually beneficial development between the countries of the Global South. The Belt and Road Initiative of China and the developmental programmes of India, such as the ITEC and the International Solar Alliance, can both be viewed through the glasses of SSC but in varied approaches, aims, and conception. The analysis of the literature reveals that much of the research on the topic of the soft power of China tends to focus on Confucius institutes, media proliferation, and infrastructure diplomacy, and can both point out benefits and issues of dependence. Meanwhile, the literature on India's soft power focuses on cultural diplomacy, diaspora resources, and democratic principles, but recognises weaknesses of resources and institutions. Although the strategies of each country have a rich literature, comparative

analyses are underdeveloped, and in particular, the way the Global South states perceive and cope with the dual engagement. This is the gap that presents the main reasoning behind the current research study (Rek, 2025) [7].

China's Soft Power Strategy in the Global South

The soft power approach in the Global South has since developed into a complex and extremely synergised campaign involving the use of a blend of cultural outreach, partnerships in development, technological interactions, and political propaganda. In contrast to the traditional Western models of soft power that are based primarily on cultural appeal and political principles, the Chinese model becomes a combination of state-initiated campaigns with economic benefits and public diplomacy options to build perceptions and develop legitimacy and influence in geopolitics (Button, 2010) [8]. In Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific, China presents itself as a development, modernisation, and South-South co-operation champion, as a substitute to the institutions and models of governance that are primarily sourced from the West. This part explores the main elements of the Chinese soft power projection: cultural diplomacy, development and humanitarian outreach, technological appeal, political narratives, and the ambivalent views that come with these activities.

Cultural Diplomacy

The pillar of the Chinese soft power is cultural diplomacy, which tries to create an awareness of Chinese civilisation, their language, and culture. The most noticeable part of this outreach is the Confucius Institutes, which have been organised in hundreds of centres all over Africa, Asia, and Latin America. All these institutes provide a chance of studying Chinese language courses, cultural programs, scholarships, and academic exchanges and offer China as a country with a rich history and a worldwide perspective. This is to be supplemented by a massive Chinese language promotion program, which involves training the local teachers, giving them subsidised language materials, and increasing the number of Mandarin classes in foreign universities and schools. The cultural influence of China is also intensified by the media growth, especially via CGTN Africa, Xinhua news bureaus and China Radio International, which continue to relay stories of Chinese development success, and portray China as a responsible global power, as well as fighting the dominance of the Western media (Thussu, 2014) [9]. These platforms publish customised content, which underscores China-Global South relations, commonly centring on the common experiences of struggle against colonialism, development issues, and Western bias. With the help of these tools, China tries to shape the image of the culture that can be seen as rich in content, welcoming, and tolerant of diversity.

Development Diplomacy

At the core of the influence-building strategy of China is development diplomacy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the foundation of this interaction, which links over 140 nations by infrastructure corridors, digitalisation, energy initiatives, and trade routes. The most recognisable forms of China appearing in the Global South are BRI projects: ports, highways, railways, and power plants, which are used as reliable predictors of long-term role and commitment. In addition to BRI, China gives a lot of support in terms of

infrastructure financing, and this allows the developing nations to develop some important forms of public infrastructure that may not be provided by Western institutions, due to credit rating or conditions (Shah *et al.*, 2017) ^[10]. China has further institutionalised development diplomacy in development financing institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund. These institutions can provide concessional loans, project financing, and investment capital, which strengthen China as a world leader in development. Through its approach as an investment partner that is concerned about economic change, China uses development diplomacy to gain goodwill and strategic reliance.

Humanitarian & Health Diplomacy

Humanitarian and health diplomacy are becoming more and more widespread in China in order to improve its world validity and moral position. One of the most prominent ones is COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, where China has provided millions of doses of the vaccine to other countries throughout Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Southeast Asia when most Western countries were focused on domestic populations. China championed them in the state media, where it was presented as a responsible international citizen that is assisting equitable vaccine access (Hunter, 2009) ^[11]. In addition to the pandemic, China sends out frequent medical missions to Africa, which dates back to the 1960s. These teams do offer health care services and training, medical equipment, and construct health facilities like hospitals and clinics. The health diplomacy in China is both beneficial to partner nations and reinforces the moral message of China as a leader in humanitarian efforts based on goodwill and prosperity.

Economic & Technological Appeal

The strong pillars of Chinese soft power are economic control and technological growth. Digital Silk Road is a large-scale program which contributes to collaboration in telecommunications, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and digital infrastructure. Chinese technology is essential to nation-building because companies such as Huawei and ZTE are developing digital connections and smart city systems throughout the Global South. At the same time, the geographical diffusion of Made-in-China technological infiltration, such as smartphones and applications, as well as other renewable energy devices, enhances the incorporation of China in the everyday society of partners (Fijałkowski, 2011) ^[12]. Cheap goods and rapidly expanding digital ecosystems create a sense of familiarity and dependency on Chinese brands, which contributes, in turn, to the Chinese soft power in the concept of economic embeddedness. The technological appeal represents China as a progressive, advanced, and technology-driven nation that can offer digital solutions to the developing countries.

Political & Ideological Messaging

The political messaging that China has developed is a slight yet relevant aspect of its soft power. It often propagates the story of non-interference, a contrast to its diplomacy with the Western standard of conditional and democratic promotion and human rights monitoring. This is an attractive strategy in the case of most countries in the Global South, especially those under the control of an authoritarian

regime or with a weak political structure. Another model of economic growth that is marketed by China is the Chinese modernisation, which is the developmental path that shows their model as an alternative model of development without liberalisation of the economy in the West. Utilising political discourses (Gupta, 2013) ^[13], FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), and strategic communication, China can send a message that its ascension is nonviolent, inclusive and beneficial to developing countries. The message in this ideology reiterates the perception that China honours national sovereignty and favours other forms of governance.

Perceptions and Critiques

In spite of the immense political expansion, the soft power of China is increasingly being perceived and criticised in the world south. The most notable issue is debt diplomacy, where its opponents claim that Chinese loans form a false financial reliance, which they cite in the cases of Sri Lanka, Zambia, and some areas in Africa. Chinese-funded projects are often associated with allegations of limited transparency, absence of local labour involvement, and environmental damage. Moreover, an issue of influence operations (media control, political funding or ground surveillance on the internet) has made some governments reconsider their involvement (Garver, 2023) ^[14]. In places where the presence of China has dramatically grown, the natives feel that China is economically overpowering or politically invading them. In general, the soft power policy by China in the Global South is comprehensive and multi-dimensional, merging the aspects of cultural interaction, leading development, technological persuasion, and political discourses. Its success, however, is defined by a convoluted combination of attraction, dependency and scepticism-rendering it a strong and controversial instrument in the modern global politics.

India's Soft Power Strategy in the Global South

The soft power approach of India in the Global South is established on the premise of a distinctive mix of cultural background, democratic principles, developmental collaboration, and the entrenched diaspora relations, and this enables India to exert influence not through coercion but through enticing others. On the vanguard of this outreach is the cultural and civilizational diplomacy of India that exploits yoga, Ayurveda, spiritualism and its visual culture industries. World Yoga Day, Ayurveda advertisement, and Bollywood movies, books, and music popularisation leave a successful cultural resonance with viewers in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, whereas diaspora networks are involved in carrying the Indian culture to other parts of the world. India balances culture with strong development and capacity building diplomacy in the form of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, which educates thousands of professionals in developing nations in areas such as agriculture to ICT (Khara, 2018) ^[15]. Lines of Credit India funds infrastructure, energy, and connectivity in Africa and Asia and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), and the shipment of digital public goods, including Unified Payments Interface (UPI) tools, and similar initiatives make India appear to be offering low-cost, inclusive, sustainable solutions. Concurrently, Indian educational diplomacy, headed by the Indian Council on Cultural Relations (ICCR), provides

scholarships to students of the Global South to raise future elites who have a strong sense of identification with India; African and South Asian students have particularly been the beneficiaries, which enhances the long-term influence of India. Politically, India is popularising a very specific ideological discourse that has its focus on the concepts of democracy, pluralism, and civilizational values, which portrays the country as a place where the ancient past and the contemporary rule can blend. The Indian vision of Vishwa Guru empowers its desire to provide moral and intellectual leadership to the world (Vishal *et al.*, 2020) [16]. The active health and humanitarian diplomacy that has resulted in Vaccine Maitri delivering COVID-19 vaccines to over 90 countries and its regular utilisation of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations across the Indian Ocean and beyond are reinforcers of the reputation of being a first responder in India. One of the biggest foundations of India's soft power is its large diaspora, commemorated by Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which contributes to India building goodwill in countries with high populations of the Indian origin, particularly, Africa, the Gulf and Western countries. Diaspora is a kind of unofficial connection which facilitates economic relations, cultural acquaintance and political confidence in the countries of destination. Nevertheless, these advantages do not imply that India has no kind of limitations to its soft power: because the country has only the limited resources in terms of finances to support development among other states, as compared to the tremendous financial capacity of China, and because of delays caused by the inefficient bureaucracy, issues hindered the project execution. Nevertheless, the soft power of India is deeply striking because of its cultural access and democratic culture and people-focused approach to development that allows it to become a valid and reliable partner in a large part of the Global South.

Comparative Analysis: India vs. China

The Indo-Chinese soft power in the Global South demonstrates more or less two theories of influence influenced by the political structures, historical identity, and developmental course, which may be the source of competition and convergence. The orientation of strategy is mainly infrastructure-intensive and state-led in China, which is based on mass financing, central planning, and speedy implementation of the project via programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Digital Silk Road. On the other hand, the Indian strategy is culture-oriented, democratic, and people-oriented, with a tradition that focuses on attaining mutual relationships at the cultural level, as well as in civilizational and capability building by granting programmes such as ITEC, ICCR scholarships, development lines of credit, and so on, rather than dependency. China undoubtedly advocates the notion of a Shared future of mankind, turning into a scientific worldwide developmental trendsetter, offering possibilities of modernisation and economic transformation (Wei, 2024) [17]. India, in its turn, anticipates its role as the Voice of the Global South and a proponent of human-centred development, inclusion, and sustainability, with the International Solar Alliance and digital public goods being some of its values. Comparing instruments of influence, China is highly dependent on such tools of influence as economy and technology, such as ports, railways, smart-city

systems, digital infrastructure and mass investments, which are able to release high-visibility and speedy influence. India, in turn, has a more diversified set of instruments of cultural attraction, value-based diplomacy, and capacity-building, which focuses on relationship-building and grassroots training in the long run rather than on financial sources (Kelkar & Agarwal, 2023) [13, 18]. These disparities define how they are received in the Global South: China is often viewed as efficient, competent, and rich in resources, yet occasionally domineering and mysterious, and concern is raised that its debts will go unrepaid, its politics will arrive in power, and technology based their surveillance on the same, could creepily monitor, and so forth. India, in turn, is seen as relatable, trustworthy and familiar with the Indian culture, though less resourceful, where bureaucratic slowness, as well as financial limitation, limits the extent of its involvement. The two powers are in a fierce conflict in a number of strategic arenas. The clearest battleground is Africa, where China leads in infrastructure and technologies, with India being the top in the areas of education, health, pharmaceuticals, and cultural affinity. China has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region with ports and naval access points, and India is also enhancing relationships with the region due to SAGAR and HADR missions and defence alliances, which challenge India's traditional sphere of influence. Another urgent frontier is the digital ecosystems, and tech giants in China are building digital foundations, while India is providing open-source digital public goods, which are cheap and inclusive. On the multilateral institutions level, China exercises a tremendous influence on BRICS+, SCO, and G77, and India relies on such platforms as the G20 Presidency and the Global South Summit to foreground narratives of development. Even though they are competitively oriented, there are significant complementary areas. The two nations focus on cooperation between South and South and developmental cooperation and opposition to Western domination in international governance (Mitra, 2021) [5]. They collaborate in BRICS on such areas as climate finance, renewable energy, and development banks, and they have common interests in terms of global stability, reduction of poverty, and mitigation of climate change. Simply, both India and China represent two radically different models of soft power that overlap in some cases but still form the growing political landscape of the Global South.

Implications for Global Geopolitics

The growing rivalry in soft power between India and China has profound differentiating consequences for global geopolitics since both powers influence new standards of world governance and the reestablishment of the function of the Global South in the international system. The rival accounts of their views of the future of the world, such as the idea of the shared future as China relates it and the idea of the human-focused, democratic process of development as India means, provide alternative patterns in the way in which the global institutional design has long been dominated by the West. This competition shapes the future course of BRICS, G20 and other Global South organisations, where China can impose its financial resources and institutional expansionism, and India hails inclusivity, consensus-making and developmental equity. With BRICS gaining power, size, and influence, India and

China will be the key to whether it will be an integrated block or a haven of disjointed interests in a fragmented arena. Their rivalry also overlaps with the overall U.S.-China rivalry as India is gradually becoming (Hazarika & Mishra, 2016) ^[4] a strategic balancer in the Indo-Pacific, with an intersecting allegiance to Western powers, but no lessening of its multipolarity and non-alignment pledge. This situation provides developing countries with more bargaining power to diversify partnerships and negotiate agreements with better conditions, and not to be excessively dependent on one power outside the country. This leads to greater strategic freedom for the Global South, with China being the source of the financing and India the source of developmental collaboration to pursue their own interests. But that in turn presents complicated geopolitical decisions in that states have to walk the fine line between the aggressive economic overture of China and the resource-constrained but value-driven approach of India. Finally, China-India soft power competition has helped to reorganise the world governance systems, which have seen the Global South take centre stage in influencing international norms, which is multipolar in nature.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that both China and India, in spite of their similarities in the level of civilisation and increasing material skills, use divergent soft power strategies predetermined by their political structures, developmental patterns, and foreign policy investments. The soft power strategy by the state of China, which is resource-intensive, based on academic programs named Confucius Institutes, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cultural diplomacy, expanding global media and managing narratives has earned scale and been experiencing endemic trust deficits, particularly in liberal democracies. The soft power of India, on the other hand, is diffuse, is made up by the society, and is based on democratic pluralism, cultural openness, and diaspora networks and normative leadership in the Global South. Further dynamics likely suggest the emergence of India as a more credible actor in normative spaces, including digital governance, democratic values, development cooperation, and China as a consolidator in the infrastructure diplomacy, technology systems, and authoritarian-conducive spaces. The dynamics of influence are changing in the Global South: the countries are becoming more and more multi-aligned, i.e. they use India and China at the same time in order to gain more economic benefits and strategic independence. Consequently, neither of the two cities, Beijing or New Delhi, can boast of unchallenged control of cultural or ideological primacy. Some policy recommendations to India are the reinforcement of the power of institutions of public diplomacy, the investment in the services of the regional cultural centre, the rampant development of partnerships with the partners of development, and the power of digital diplomacy. China needs to enhance transparency, lessen the use of political messaging in cultural programs and develop people-to-people confidence outside of the elite relationships. The two countries ought to collaborate on issues such as climate, education, interaction and South-South digital capacity establishment to ensure that zero-sum rivalry does not destroy the stability within the region. Future directions: Sub-regional patterns of soft power (South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa), longitudinal changes

in perceptions among audiences, the influence operations of AI and comparative research on the role of diasporas and state-led soft power could be evidenced. Conclusively, China versus India soft power rivalry is nothing but a mature negotiation of credibility, appeal, and a sense of normative power in a multipolar world where concepts, values, and cultural scripts are as great a force as money and arms.

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