

Political, Economic, and Social Determinants of China's Belt and Road Initiative's Reception as A Soft Power Strategy

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ABSTRACT

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a transformative global infrastructure and development project since its launch in 2013. Beyond its economic scope, the initiative is increasingly framed as a strategic vehicle of China's soft power. However, the reception and interpretation of the BRI vary across regions, influenced by political, economic, and social conditions. This paper investigates the contextual factors shaping perceptions of the BRI in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, using a discursive analytical approach. Findings highlight the importance of local political legitimacy, economic sustainability, and social narratives in mediating China's influence and underscore the conditional nature of soft power.

Keywords:

Belt and Road Initiative,
Soft Power,
China-Africa Relations,
Debt Diplomacy,
Development Partnership,
Neo-colonialism

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013 under President Xi Jinping, represents one of the most ambitious global development and connectivity strategies, spanning over 140 countries across Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe (Zhou & Ma, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Initially framed as a vehicle for trade and infrastructure development, the BRI increasingly functions as a strategic tool of soft power, leveraging infrastructure investments, cultural diplomacy, media partnerships, and educational exchanges.

The success of the BRI as a soft power instrument is not uniform and is deeply contingent upon political, economic, and social conditions in host countries. This paper

examines how these contextual factors influence the reception and interpretation of the BRI in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion. China's BRI exemplifies this through infrastructure diplomacy, cultural outreach, Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and media expansion (Hartig, 2023; Jiang & Sun, 2021). The initiative allows China to construct narratives of "win-win" cooperation and provide an alternative to Western-led development models (Wang & Alon, 2024).

Existing research indicates that the BRI's reception is mediated by political regimes, economic capacity, social awareness, and cultural contexts (Salem & Wekesa, 2024; Obi & Adeoye, 2024). Weak governance, debt vulnerabilities, and civil society activism influence whether host countries view China as a benevolent partner or as creating dependency. Understanding these determinants is essential for assessing the initiative's soft power potential.

2. METHOD

This study uses the historical research method to analyse how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been received as a soft power strategy. The approach situates the BRI within China's evolving foreign policy, from revolutionary diplomacy under Mao, through economic pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping, to proactive global engagement under Xi Jinping. By tracing key milestones since the BRI's launch in 2013, the method examines how political relations, economic ties, and socio-cultural interactions across different regions have shaped responses to the initiative, drawing on both primary and secondary historical sources.

For data analysis, the study employs qualitative content analysis to examine policy documents, official statements, media reports, and academic and policy publications from 2013 to 2025. Texts are systematically coded around political, economic, and social determinants to identify recurring themes and narratives. Cross-regional comparisons are then used to assess variations in acceptance, resistance, or reinterpretation of the BRI. Together, the historical method and content analysis provide a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the factors influencing the BRI's effectiveness as a global soft power strategy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AFRICA

The success or failure of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a tool of soft power in Africa is deeply conditioned by political, economic, and social dynamics that shape the way Chinese investments and cultural diplomacy are received and interpreted. Although the BRI provides China with a powerful platform to project influence, its ability to generate durable soft power depends less on the scale of infrastructure projects than on the political environments, economic structures, and social narratives within African states. These conditions determine whether the BRI is embraced as a symbol of solidarity and partnership or contested as a new form of dependency.

Politically, the receptiveness of African governments plays a central role in shaping how BRI projects are framed and perceived. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes

often embrace Chinese investments because they are accompanied by non-interference principles and fewer governance-related conditions than Western loans. In Ethiopia and Uganda, where Western actors have criticised democratic backsliding, Chinese financing is welcomed as a politically convenient alternative. The discursive framing of China as a “reliable partner” in such contexts enhances its soft power because governments reproduce narratives of sovereignty and mutual respect. Yet in countries with vibrant opposition parties and active civil societies, these same projects are sometimes framed as enabling corruption and elite capture, limiting their soft power appeal. In Zambia, for instance, opposition actors discursively portrayed Chinese loans as mortgaging the country’s future, undermining Beijing’s carefully cultivated image of benevolence (Manda, 2022).

Economic conditions also strongly influence how the BRI functions as a soft power tool. African economies are structurally diverse, ranging from resource-dependent states such as Angola and Nigeria to more diversified economies such as South Africa and Kenya. Where BRI investments align with pressing economic needs, such as energy access, port development, or railway connectivity, discourses often highlight China as indispensable for modernisation. The Lagos–Ibadan railway in Nigeria became a discursive marker of progress that visibly reinforced positive perceptions of China’s developmental role. Yet where debt burdens intensify and economic fragility persists, the BRI becomes discursively linked to fears of dependency. This was evident in Kenya’s Standard Gauge Railway project, where loan repayment challenges generated public criticism that reframed China from a partner to a potential creditor overlords. Thus, the economic condition of debt sustainability plays a decisive role in shaping whether the BRI enhances or undermines soft power.

Social conditions, particularly public perceptions, labour relations, and cultural exchanges, are equally significant in determining the BRI’s soft power outcomes in Africa. While governments often frame Chinese projects as mutually beneficial, local communities sometimes resist them due to limited job creation, environmental concerns, or perceptions of exclusion. For example, in Zimbabwe, protests over Chinese mining operations discursively reframed Beijing’s presence from development-oriented to exploitative. These contestations limit the resonance of China’s soft power narrative, showing that grassroots reactions can undermine the diplomatic gains that BRI projects seek to generate. On the other hand, China’s emphasis on cultural diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and media exchanges, has cultivated new constituencies of support, particularly among African youth. Students returning from China often articulate narratives of partnership and opportunity, contributing to discursive shifts that present China as a desirable model of development. These contrasting perceptions illustrate how social conditions at both the grassroots and elite levels shape the legitimacy of China’s soft power projection.

The broader geopolitical context also interacts with political, economic, and social conditions to shape BRI discourses in Africa. Western actors, particularly the United States and European Union, actively challenge Chinese narratives by framing the BRI as a vehicle of “debt-trap diplomacy” and strategic manipulation. However, African leaders often resist this framing by reasserting agency and portraying Chinese engagement as complementary to their developmental visions. Tambo (2023) observes that the African Union’s endorsement of the BRI in the context of Agenda 2063 has created a counter-discourse that situates China within Africa’s long-term aspirations rather than external domination. This

institutional endorsement enhances China's soft power because it embeds Beijing's projects within a continent-wide narrative of partnership.

The success or failure of the BRI as a tool of soft power in Africa is not uniform but contingent upon the interplay of political legitimacy, economic sustainability, and social acceptance. Where political elites align with China's non-interference discourse, economic projects meet developmental priorities, and cultural diplomacy resonates with local communities, the BRI strengthens China's soft power. Where debt concerns, governance challenges, and social grievances dominate, its influence is undermined. The discursive environment is therefore fluid, shaped by contestations between competing narratives of solidarity, dependency, and exploitation. Yet despite these tensions, the BRI has succeeded in embedding China within Africa's developmental imagination, ensuring that Beijing remains a central reference point in political, economic, and social debates across the continent.

ASIA

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has had its most significant visibility and testing ground in Asia, the continent that not only hosts China but also encompasses some of the most diverse political, economic, and social conditions that shape its soft power potential. Asia's centrality to the BRI means that the political environment of host states, their economic vulnerabilities or strengths, and the narratives circulating within society deeply influence the reception and durability of China's soft power.

The discursive environment around the BRI in Asia is thus a contested one, where narratives of cooperation and development coexist with counter-narratives of dependency, exploitation, and geopolitical threat. Politically, the success of the BRI as a soft power instrument in Asia is uneven and depends on the domestic political configurations of participating states. In authoritarian or centralized regimes such as Cambodia, Laos, and Pakistan, political elites have discursively framed the BRI as indispensable for national development, emphasizing the discourse of "win-win" cooperation promoted by Beijing. Das (2022) argues that in Cambodia, where the ruling elite has consistently embraced Chinese investments, the BRI has been articulated as a symbol of sovereignty and a pathway to modernization, which enhances China's soft power appeal. Yet in democracies with active opposition, such as India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, the discursive terrain is more complex. Opposition parties and sections of civil society often portray BRI projects as threats to national sovereignty or enablers of elite corruption, thus undermining China's desired soft power image. Perera (2021) demonstrates how in Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port deal generated public discourse that reframed China as a neo-colonial power rather than a benevolent partner, showing that domestic political contestation significantly shapes the discursive success of the BRI.

Economic conditions across Asia are also central in shaping whether the BRI succeeds as a soft power vehicle. The BRI promises massive investments in infrastructure, energy, and connectivity, but the outcomes are interpreted through the lens of local economic realities. In countries with pressing infrastructure gaps and limited access to Western financing, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, the BRI is discursively associated with modernization and progress. Ali and Raza (2023) highlight that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been framed in Pakistani public discourse as a "game-changer," particularly in political rhetoric, thereby reinforcing China's image as a developmental ally. Yet the same projects are simultaneously framed by critics as unsustainable, raising debt dependency concerns that weaken the BRI's soft power appeal.

In Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad's temporary suspension of BRI projects in 2018 generated critical discourses about "debt traps," which continued to circulate even after renegotiations resumed. Singh (2020) observes that such debates created a dual narrative, where China's economic role was both welcomed as necessary and feared as overwhelming, revealing how debt sustainability and transparency conditions are critical to BRI's soft power outcomes.

Social conditions across Asia further complicate the discursive reception of the BRI. Labour relations, and cultural engagements shape whether China's initiatives resonate positively or negatively. In Southeast Asia, where memories of Chinese influence remain sensitive, the BRI has been subjected to competing discourses. Vu (2021) notes that in Vietnam, cultural and historical tensions generate skepticism toward Chinese infrastructure projects, often framing them as exploitative rather than cooperative. Similarly, community-level disputes over labour and environmental concerns in Myanmar have discursively undermined China's soft power, despite the government's endorsement of BRI projects. Conversely, in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, China has invested in cultural diplomacy, including student exchanges and media cooperation, which has cultivated discourses that present China as a modern and indispensable partner. Kudaibergenova (2022) argues that while suspicion remains about Chinese dominance, younger generations returning from Chinese universities often articulate more favourable perceptions, demonstrating the importance of social and generational conditions in shaping discursive outcomes.

The geopolitical environment in Asia also interacts with political, economic, and social conditions to determine the discursive strength of the BRI. Rivalries, particularly with the United States, Japan, and India, contribute to counter-discourses that frame the BRI as a tool of strategic expansion rather than cooperation. In South Asia, for instance, India's rejection of the BRI on sovereignty grounds has not only influenced domestic discourse but also shaped the perceptions of neighboring states. Sharma (2023) shows that Indian media consistently portrays the BRI as a geopolitical encirclement strategy, contributing to skepticism even in countries that formally participate in the initiative. At the same time, regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provide platforms for legitimizing Chinese narratives, reinforcing discourses of multilateralism and regional development that enhance China's soft power credibility.

The success or failure of the BRI as a tool of soft power in Asia cannot be understood without considering the interplay of political, economic, and social conditions. In countries where ruling elites embrace Chinese financing, economic needs align with infrastructure delivery, and cultural diplomacy resonates with society, the BRI enhances China's soft power. But in contexts where political opposition mobilizes discourses of dependency, economic burdens generate debt anxieties, and social groups resist Chinese labour or environmental practices, the initiative undermines rather than strengthens Beijing's influence. Asia thus embodies the paradox of the BRI: it is the region most invested in and most closely linked to China, but also the region where discursive contestations are most intense. This duality reveals that the BRI's soft power is not predetermined by material investments alone but constantly mediated by the political legitimacy of host regimes, the economic sustainability of projects, and the cultural and social narratives that emerge around them.

LATIN AMERICA

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Latin America reflects how political, economic, and social conditions shape the reception and legitimacy of China's soft power. Unlike Africa and Asia, where China's presence is more geographically embedded, Latin America represents a relatively newer frontier of the BRI. This novelty has allowed China to construct discourses of South–South cooperation, solidarity, and development, but these discourses are mediated by deeply rooted political traditions, economic dependencies, and social imaginaries within the region. As a result, the success or failure of the BRI as a soft power strategy in Latin America depends less on the scale of projects than on how they intersect with local conditions and ongoing narratives of sovereignty, inequality, and development.

Politically, the nature of governance and ideological orientations of Latin American governments play a decisive role in shaping the discursive outcomes of the BRI. In left-leaning governments such as those of Bolivia, Venezuela, and Argentina under certain administrations, China's investments have been discursively framed as alternatives to Western-dominated institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Álvarez (2021) argues that in Venezuela, the BRI has been represented not merely as an economic project but as a political symbol of resistance to U.S. hegemony. By contrast, in countries experiencing ideological shifts or political polarization, such as Brazil and Chile, the BRI becomes the subject of contestation. While one administration may embrace Chinese projects as developmental opportunities, subsequent governments may discursively frame them as threats to national autonomy. González (2023) observes that in Brazil, the Bolsonaro government constructed narratives that painted Chinese influence as neocolonial and threatening to sovereignty, undermining the discursive gains China had made under previous administrations. These fluctuations demonstrate that political transitions and ideological divides strongly condition whether the BRI strengthens or weakens China's soft power in the region.

Economic conditions further shape how the BRI is perceived and narrated in Latin America. The region has long been characterized by resource dependency and structural inequalities, which condition the reception of foreign investments. Where BRI projects align with urgent economic needs, such as port development, telecommunications infrastructure, or energy diversification, they are framed as solutions to structural bottlenecks. Perez and Dominguez (2022) highlight how in Ecuador, Chinese-financed hydropower projects have been presented in political discourse as markers of modernization, reinforcing China's image as a partner in national development. Yet economic vulnerabilities, particularly debt exposure, create discourses of skepticism. In Argentina, the financing of major railways and energy projects has been criticized by opposition politicians who frame China's role as deepening dependency and exposing the country to debt traps (Romero, 2022). These contestations resonate in societies where the memory of foreign economic domination remains strong, making economic sustainability and transparency central to the discursive success of the BRI.

Social conditions, including public opinion, labor relations, and cultural interactions, also significantly influence the BRI's soft power trajectory in Latin America. China has invested heavily in cultural diplomacy across the region, establishing Confucius Institutes, promoting Spanish-language Chinese media, and offering scholarships to Latin American students. Martínez and Ochoa (2020) note that these initiatives have cultivated discourses of mutual learning and cultural respect, particularly among younger

generations exposed to Chinese education and technology. Yet at the community level, Chinese projects have often faced criticism over labor practices, environmental impacts, and lack of local participation. Fernandez (2023) points to mining projects in Peru, where protests by indigenous communities discursively reframed China's engagement as extractive and environmentally harmful, undermining Beijing's image of cooperation. The divergence between elite narratives of partnership and grassroots perceptions of exploitation underscores the importance of social dynamics in shaping soft power outcomes.

The geopolitical dimension further interacts with these political, economic, and social conditions, reinforcing or undermining the BRI's legitimacy. U.S. influence in Latin America remains powerful, and Washington has actively sought to counter Chinese narratives by framing the BRI as a geopolitical instrument of coercion. However, Latin American governments often negotiate between these competing discourses to maximize their strategic autonomy. Castro (2021) highlights how Mexico has sought to balance relations with both the United States and China, discursively presenting the BRI as a complement rather than a threat to existing partnerships. At the same time, regional organizations such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) have embraced cooperation with China in ways that embed the BRI within a multilateral and South–South framework. This institutional discourse strengthens China's soft power by aligning it with regional aspirations for autonomy and multipolarity.

The BRI's success as a soft power tool in Latin America is conditioned by the interplay of shifting political ideologies, fragile economic structures, and contested social narratives. In contexts where political elites frame China as an alternative to Western dominance, where economic projects meet urgent developmental needs, and where cultural diplomacy resonates with younger populations, the BRI enhances China's image as a partner in modernisation. Yet in contexts where political transitions reframe Chinese influence as threatening, where debt concerns dominate, and where local communities resist extractive practices, the BRI undermines rather than strengthens China's discursive legitimacy. The Latin American case therefore reveals the fragility of China's soft power strategy: while its economic weight is undeniable, its discursive power is constantly contested and mediated by local conditions. This dynamic ensures that the BRI in Latin America remains simultaneously a source of attraction and suspicion, highlighting the complex and conditional nature of soft power in the region.

Summary of Critical Discourse analysis of the Impact of Socioeconomic Conditions in Africa, Asia and Latin America (2013–2025):

Period (2013–2025)	Discourse Theme	Regional Context	Key Actors/Voices	Critical Interpretation
	“High development needs create acceptance”	Africa – states with major infrastructure gaps	African leaders, development agencies	Weak institutions accept BRI projects as urgent solutions, often ignoring risks.
	“weaken effectiveness”	Asia – nationalist resistance in India, Sri Lanka protests	Civil society, opposition groups	Resistance narratives highlight sovereignty and debt concerns, weakening China’s image.
	“Polarized responses shaped by governance”	Latin America – stable vs. fragile regimes	Progressive governments, opposition parties	Democratic accountability demands transparency, creating uneven project legitimacy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the political, economic, and social determinants shaping the reception of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a soft power strategy, using critical discourse analysis of developments between 2013 and 2025. The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness and perception of the BRI are not uniform across regions but are deeply mediated by prevailing socioeconomic conditions and governance structures in host countries.

In Africa, the reception of the BRI was largely driven by urgent development needs and structural economic weaknesses. Severe infrastructure deficits, limited access to capital, and fragile institutional frameworks encouraged political elites to embrace Chinese projects with minimal resistance. As a result, discourses surrounding the BRI were predominantly supportive, with concerns about debt sustainability, governance, and long-term dependency often subordinated to immediate development priorities. This pattern reflects a dependency-oriented logic in which socioeconomic necessity outweighed strategic caution, reinforcing the BRI’s appeal as a source of rapid development rather than as a contested geopolitical project.

In contrast, Asia presented a more complex and divided reception. Fragile political systems, combined with active civil societies and nationalist sentiments, exposed the limits of China’s soft power influence. In countries such as India and Sri Lanka, socioeconomic vulnerabilities intensified fears related to sovereignty, debt, and loss of autonomy, generating strong public and political resistance to BRI projects. Although economic and

infrastructure benefits were acknowledged, competing narratives framed the BRI as a potential source of dependency rather than mutual development. This indicates that where political contestation is strong, soft power initiatives are more likely to face scrutiny and resistance.

Latin America exhibited a polarized pattern shaped by variations in governance quality. Countries with stronger democratic institutions subjected BRI engagements to public debate, transparency demands, and institutional oversight, resulting in cautious and conditional acceptance. Conversely, states with weaker governance structures welcomed BRI projects with fewer reservations, increasing both short-term gains and long-term vulnerability to mismanagement and elite capture. These contrasting discourses highlight the central role of political accountability in determining the legitimacy and sustainability of external development initiatives.

Overall, the study concludes that the BRI's reception as a soft power strategy is contingent on local socioeconomic conditions rather than on China's intentions alone. While economic incentives enhance China's attractiveness, they do not guarantee acceptance in contexts marked by strong institutions and political pluralism. The findings underscore that soft power is relational and context-dependent: it is strengthened by developmental need but constrained by governance quality, public accountability, and political contestation. Consequently, the BRI's long-term influence will depend not only on infrastructure delivery but also on how effectively it aligns with local socioeconomic realities and institutional expectations across different regions.

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