

How Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are Reshaping China's Soft Power?

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Abstract

A rising and globalizing China has evoked mixed reactions. There is a growing body of literature that highlights China's military hegemonic tendencies. This has

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overshadowed the Chinese efforts at promoting co-operative interdependence, of which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a symbol and emerging reality. This paper contextualizes the BRI, along with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to examine and explore the symbols, tools and contours of the Chinese soft power. This study contends that, despite apprehensions by critics about China's motives underlying the BRI, for the participant countries it offers infrastructural development through economic investment and educational exchanges that showcase Chinese culture and its soft power. Do the participating countries find these offers appealing? This raises two critical questions: Does China's economic development oriented soft power through BRI obviate its military designs? Does China have the tools that Joseph Nye conceptualizes for the soft power that a global power requires? This study makes a critical appraisal of Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power and analyses how the Chinese scholars and policy makers are transforming its usage and conceptual applicability as China stands for globalization, multilateralism, common and shared goals for the planet and humanity. Given COVID 19, China's soft power appeal could have political and security implications for the global world order.

Introduction

This paper contextualizes the BRI, along with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to examine and explore the symbols, tools and contours of the Chinese soft power. This study contends that, despite apprehensions by critics about China's motives underlying the BRI, for the participant countries it offers infrastructural development through economic investment in educational and cultural exchanges that showcase Chinese culture and its soft power. Do the participating countries find these offers appealing? This raises two critical questions: Does China's economic development oriented soft power through BRI obviate its military designs? Does China have the tools that Joseph Nye conceptualizes for the soft power that a global power requires? This paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides a critical appraisal of Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" and how the Chinese scholars and policy makers are employing it. The second section analyses how the BRI has spurred academic educational exchange processes, deepening people-to-people contact, engagement and interconnectivity, thereby, providing a strong socio-cultural foundation to the Chinese soft power. The third section explains the grand vision underlying China's BRI, which constitutes its soft power, and its linkage with peace, security and hard power, as China stands for globalization, multilateralism, common and shared goals for the planet and humanity.

Soft power is a quintessential component of a global power. American

soft power has grown along with its economic and military power, and is best reflected through its tolerance for dissent, respect for human rights, religious freedom, quality of higher education, Hollywood, and promotion and protection of free market and democratic values. With the rise of China, a critical question is being asked; does China have the soft power of a global power? China's rise is somewhat different, given that it has benefited from the complex process of global interdependence and chosen to pursue economic development through peace, continuity of policies and stability. China is conveying to the world that hard and soft power have a symbiotic interrelationship. Given COVID 19, China's soft power appeal could have political and security implications for the global world order, and the paper alludes to some of the challenges arising out of it.

Smokescreen of Soft Power and 'Hidden Military Motives'?

In the twenty-first century, China and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have emerged as the strongest proponent of globalization, and not communist revolution.¹ China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (*previously One Belt One Road*) is a key driver of this Chinese-led globalization.

This study argues that the BRI has three vital components; first, it links development with security; essential economic drivers, such as trade and infrastructure investment are inextricably linked to political stability and peace. Second, the BRI promotes cultural and educational exchanges as manifestations of China's soft power. Third, it envisions regional connectivity and economic interdependence as catalysts of the soft power and security nexus.²

The BRI is an ambitious initiative that covers around 65 countries, 4.4 billion people and 40 percent of the global GDP.³ From the Chinese perspective it is fully cognizant of the cultural sensitivities, economic needs and security concerns of participant states. In addition to factors such as the production and exchange of knowledge, innovation and technological

¹Kerry Brown, *The World According to Xi* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), 89.

²For a detailed analysis on development and security nexus, see, Saeed Shafqat, "China's Rise: How Is It Impacting the Gulf, Iran, Pakistan and Beyond?" *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* March 2017) pp 1-22, p 4-5

³The Chinese government released a complete document on March 28, 2015 on "On Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," The document provides a comprehensive overview of how China has conceived and designed BRI and aims to pursue its accomplishment, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", *National Development and Reform Commission*, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html (accessed 1 July 2018).

growth, trade and transportation costs, China recognizes that security acts as a pivotal determinant of the geography of development. China has clutched this opportunity to exhibit its military ambitions. Thus, China's revival of the ancient Silk Road into the modern BRI redefines the parameters of traditional geo-economics and international relations.

In a recent study, Jonathan Hillman, while providing an insightful critique and practical constraints of the BRI, acknowledges it as an “undeniably bold” effort; “The BRI is more than a policy -it is a brand. With such large amounts of investments available, central and local governments, private firms and non-profit organizations are incentivized to repackage their work around BRI.”⁴ In fact, with time, the BRI has gained global recognition and legitimacy. For instance, in April 2017, the United Nation's Social and Economic Council held a workshop with Chinese experts titled “*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress and Future Cooperation - Dialogue between the United Nations and Chinese experts*”. Chinese and UN experts concluded that it was in line with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, as the initiative focuses on five categories of the SDGs namely, people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.⁵

President Xi Jinping has been emphasizing the need for global interconnectivity, interdependence and in that perspective, highlighting the role of the BRI as a vehicle of economic partnerships and socio-cultural connectivity. At his UN address in 2017, he stated that the BRI “aims to achieve win-win and shared development.”⁶ Reviving the old Silk Roads, connecting Asia, Europe and beyond, it comprises of two mega-initiatives:

⁴Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century* (Washington, D.C: CSIS, 2020) pp 11-12

⁵Chinadaily.com.cn, April 2017. A month later (On May 14th 2017,) speaking at the B&R Summit in Beijing, the upcoming Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, urged the international community to support and join the initiative as it is, “rooted in a shared vision for broad development.” He went on to say that China is the ‘central pillar of multilateralism’ and supporter of global institutions and leading contributor to UN peace missions. Many world leaders (29 presidents/prime ministers and representatives of over 130) echoed similar sentiments demonstrating solidarity, support and praise for the initiative. India was conspicuous by its absence. Speaking as host of the Summit, President Xi Jinping promised to contribute another 100 billion dollars towards the B&R to create, what he called a, ‘big family of harmonious coexistence’. For more details see: Xinhua Net, “UN chief urges global efforts to tap Belt and Road potential for common development”, *Xinhua Net*, 14 May 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282138.htm (accessed 1 July 2018).

⁶XinhuaNet, “President Xi Jinping's Speech at the UN -Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” XinhuaNet, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c_135994707.htm.

the *Belt* (Silk Road Economic Belt), and the *Road* (21st century Maritime Silk Road Initiative), and six corridors along the route.⁷ It is China's means to "foster a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation," according to President Xi Jinping.⁸

Along with the BRI, it appears that the study of political science and international relations (IR), both in theory and practice, has undergone transformation in China. Social sciences and political studies had been evolving and developing in the Chinese universities for the past three decades, but the rise of President Xi Jinping has given it a new salience. For the first time, one of the seven members of the highest decision making body -the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China- is a professor of law and politics, someone who has been an influential thinker and advisor to President's Jiang Zemin (1993-2003), Hu Jintao (2003-13) and now President Xi Jinping, since 2013 to date.⁹ This is Wang Huning, a professor and specialist in political theory, philosophy and law from Fudan University. He is credited with bringing the concept of "soft power" in the Chinese academic discourse back in the 1990's.¹⁰

Wang was instrumental in shaping the debate among Chinese scholars on culture and soft power.¹¹ He underscored the centrality of culture in defining Chinese soft power. He articulated that "if a country has admirable culture and ideological system," other states would be attracted towards it, and there would be no need to use hard power which is "expensive and less efficient."¹² Furthermore, Wang demonstrated this himself by participating in international debates and advising teams of the Fudan University students, and winning the Asia-Pacific region debates. He is the first academic and policy intellectual to be elevated to the top most leadership tier in China. Wang is perceived to be close to President Xi Jinping, and is considered

⁷Saeed Shafqat and Saba Shahid, *China, Pakistan Economic Corridor: Demands, Dividends and Directions* (Lahore: Centre for Public Policy and Governance, 2018)pp 11-15

⁸XinhuaNet, "President Xi Says to Build Belt and Road into Road for Peace, Prosperity," XinhuaNet, May 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136281412.htm.

⁹Brown, *The World According to Xi*, 74-75.

¹⁰Bonnie Glaser and Melissa Murphy, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics," in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), 12.

¹¹For an insightful discussion and debate among Chinese scholars, see, Jukka Aukia, "The Cultural Soft Power and China: A Tool for Dualistic National Security" *JCIR*, Vol 2, No1, 2014. Pp 71-94, p 80-84

¹²Wang Huning, "Culture as National Soft Power: Soft Power," *Journal of Fudan University* (March 1993).

to be the principal architect of Xi Jinping's "China Dream."¹³ Wang's rise and advisory role in the top echelons of policy making circles clearly shows that the intellectuals may not be visible, but are embedded in the Chinese policy planning process. Patapan and Wang have provocatively labelled Wang Huning as the "hidden ruler," shaping the direction of contemporary Chinese politics.¹⁴

Contemporary China's advocacy for multilateralism, free trade and globalization has evoked mixed reactions from academia, think tanks and policy makers. The Western world in general and America in particular is attributing "hidden military motives" to the BRI, and depicting China as a hegemonic global power.¹⁵ For example, Nadege Rolland brings attention to how, with the BRI expanding geographically, China is highlighting the rise of new security threats, requiring greater military protection. Nadege Rolland presents "security threats" as a ploy by China to justify expansion of its security footprint and military capabilities, especially the scope of action of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁶

Similarly, many Western analysts and notable figures have been issuing concerns over China's BRI. For instance, Francis Fukuyama, cautions that China is exporting its developmental, political and ideological model.¹⁷ This echoes an alarmist and ideological mind set of the American scholars. Several others contend the BRI to be a part of China's peripheral diplomacy, which is not simply about win-win cooperation, but in fact to "reconstitute the regional order – and eventually global order - with new governance ideas,

¹³Haig Patapan and Yi Wang, "The Hidden Ruler: Wang Huning and the Making of Contemporary China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109 (January 2, 2018): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2017.1363018>. According to the authors in 1995 Wang Huning was picked up by President Jiang Zemin and has continued to gain greater respect, access and authority in the CPC becoming member of the Politburo (size 25 core members).

¹⁴Patapan and Wang, "The Hidden Ruler."

¹⁵For a scathing critique of the CPC and China's militaristic designs, see Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of the State's speech at the Nixon Library; <https://sv.usembassy.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-at-the-richard-nixon-presidential-library-and-museum-communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/> accessed on November 8,2020.

¹⁶Nadege Rolland, "Securing the Belt and Road: Prospects for Chinese Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads," *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)*, September 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/securing-the-belt-and-road-prospects-for-chinese-military-engagement-along-the-silk-roads/>.

¹⁷Francis Fukuyama, "Exporting the Chinese Model," Project Syndicate, January 12, 2016, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/china-one-belt-one-road-strategy-by-francis-fukuyama-2016-01>.

norms, and rules.”¹⁸ Some believe it to be China’s strategy to transition from a Peaceful Power to a Great Power status and ultimately, establish a Sino-centric world order.

President Trump’s administration (January 2017 to January 2021) and its spokespersons also remained hostile towards China and captive to the Cold War mentality, and its blinkered historical analogy constrained America’s China strategy.¹⁹ In 2017, the US Department of Defense declared China’s CPC as an “existential threat,” demonizing and delegitimizing the CPC, implying regime change, short of calling for it. In animosity to the CPC, President Xi Jinping is also being portrayed as reincarnation of Josef Stalin.²⁰ In fact, in the past two years, a growing consensus has emerged among the Democrats and the Republicans to treat China as a “strategic rival.” As the new President-elect Joseph Biden has assumed Presidency in January 2021, the anti-China rhetoric could become nuanced and less harsh. But would the new administration abandon “de-coupling” and rejuvenate “coupling” with China through economic engagement and strategic cooperation? In February 2021 while addressing the virtual Munich Security Conference, President Joseph Biden was unequivocal in declaring China as a “strategic” and “ideological” competitor, so there is nuanced continuity of Trump’s policy in Biden’s approach towards China, yet he has kept the window of opportunity open on co-operation on climate change, fighting the pandemic and searching for common ground on global public health issues and trade.²¹

The US strategic competition with China, nonetheless, continues to unfold, with the BRI in particular portrayed as a vehicle of China’s hegemonic tendencies, obliterating the larger Chinese vision of promoting dialogue and engagement, co-operation and interdependence, and international relations based on win-win co-operation. The US perspective is eloquently expressed by Elizabeth Economy: “China is an illiberal state seeking leadership in a liberal world order.”²² She argues that China has made its

¹⁸William A Callahan, “China’s ‘Asia Dream’: The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 226–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891116647806>.

¹⁹Michael McFaul, “Xi Jinping Is Not Stalin,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-10/xi-jinping-not-stalin>.

²⁰McFaul

²¹Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, February, 19, 2021; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>, accessed on 26th February 2021.

²²Elizabeth C. Economy, “China’s New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping.” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 97, No3, May/June 2018 pp 60-74, p 61 & 74

“revolutionary intentions clear,” and that the US should also respond in “equally unambiguous terms.” Understandably, the US considers itself as the architect and defender of the “liberal world order.” How can it allow an “illiberal state” to step in its shoes or even dare to try replacing it? Hence, it has been deflating China -a China that in fact stands for globalization, multilateralism, common and shared goals for the planet and humanity.

It is visible that the recent outbreak of Covid-19 has flustered Xi Jinping’s vision of building a resilient co-operation network and economic interconnectivity through the BRI. China has been striving to maintain a stable economy and it is commendable that during the pandemic so far, China has been able to maintain a constant three per cent annual growth rate. If this persists, British Sinologist, Kerry Brown, insightfully observes, “China will have won the battle to show that diplomacy and international relations can be run largely value free (or at least Western value free), and focused purely on economic and material outcomes.” Many countries would continue to engage with China, on economic, monetary and material terms, while not having to conform to its value system or ideologies.²³ This is a significant feature of China’s economic-leaning soft power. With this soft power, China is trying to convince the international community of its peaceful rise.

SECTION 1: Joseph Nye’s Soft Power Concept and How China is Employing it

Professor Joseph Nye, who coined the term, defines “soft power” as attractive power –the ability of a country to get others to want what it wants through attraction as opposed to coercion.²⁴ It is about promoting co-operation by creating “an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.”²⁵ The three soft power resources, countries have at their disposal, are its culture, political values and foreign policy.²⁶ Nye’s initial work revolves primarily around assessing the American soft power, and he credits it to strong liberal democratic values, free-market economic model, vibrant civil society, globally popular Hollywood and its artistic and cultural offshoots and industries. He vigorously argues that China’s soft power may never match

²³Kerry Brown, “Hearing: U.S.-China Relations in 2020,” in “*Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*,” Panel One: China’s Assessment of Its Strategic Environment (U.S.-China Economic And Security Review Commission), accessed October 2, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/Brown_Testimony.pdf.

²⁴Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2004), 11.

²⁵Nye, 7.

²⁶Nye, 11.

that of the US. An authoritarian party with strong socio-political control, lack of democratic culture and a weak civil society impede China's soft power efforts.²⁷

Like Nye, many Western analysts have a strong liberal bias and understandably support and promote those liberal social, economic and political values as manifested through liberalism. Comparing these with the Chinese "authoritarian system," they find China lacking the foundations of what Nye, calls soft power. For example, a leading American Sinologist, David Shambaugh, contends that under the Communist Party rule China has a "repressive political system."²⁸ Thus, he dismisses any notions of Chinese soft power. Unlike Nye, Shambaugh and Fukuyama, Kerry Brown, however, has a more nuanced understanding of the CPC and state relationship. He argues that the state and Party no longer exercise complete control over the society and economy. The emerging non-state sector and the middle class have been a key contributor to innovation and development of China and exercise greater autonomy today. Elaborating his argument, Brown makes a provokingly insightful observation; "it is the Party which has become a parasite, relying on it (non-state sector) to survive."²⁹ This signifies that assertions about the monolithic character of the CPC, and absence of any countervailing forces within it, are exaggerated.

With reference to the BRI, the Western scholars remain sceptical about the sources and capability of China's soft power. This is largely because most of the Western scholars have been measuring soft power on the basis of the template provided by Nye for American soft power.³⁰ The resilience of Nye's conceptualization merits attention as the Chinese scholars too have been latching on to it to explain and analyse Chinese soft power.³¹ This is problematic as Nye's soft power template has limited utility to explain Chinese soft power. Nye's soft power concept was laid out and rose to prominence in the 1990's and so must be analysed within that historical context. It was relevant in the post -World War II period, when European powers were militarily and economically devastated and the US emerged

²⁷Joseph Nye, "No, the Coronavirus Will Not Change the Global Order," *Foreign Policy*, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-pandemic-china-united-states-power-competition/>.

²⁸David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015. Pp 99-107

²⁹Brown, *The World According to Xi*, 62-63.

³⁰Trefor Moss, "Soft Power? China has Plenty", *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2013.

³¹Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, "China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2008.48.3.453>.

as the champion of free market economy and liberal democratic values.³² The advocacy of civil liberties, democratic values, civic virtues and reliance on free market economy added to the attractiveness of the American soft power template. However, as this American-styled soft power gave way to frequent and excessive use of hard power, of which the Afghan and Iraq wars are prime recent examples, Nye's American soft power template was jolted and its legitimacy and credibility came under serious scrutiny. In fact, Nye acknowledged that the Iraq war turned out to be "costly for our (American) soft power."³³

The US soft power has tarnished even further in the past few years. During his tenure, President Trump alienated the European and other allies, undermined US led multilateralism, disrupted immigration and attraction to the US universities and technology power houses, thereby, undercutting the US soft power.³⁴ Nye, who remains one of the most articulate exponents of American soft power, has been highlighting the declining American soft power, based on his experience and expertise. He has the experience of working in several American administrations, including as Deputy to the Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology, and as a member of the Foreign Affairs Policy Board, providing advice on matters of U.S. foreign policy. He has also chaired the National Security Council Group on Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In one of his recent articles, he expressed his dismay, stating that President Trump's "looseness with the truth has debased the currency of trust that is needed in a crisis, and his continual disdain for our allies means that we have fewer friends."³⁵ According to Nye, this is how the US is increasingly falling prey to the Thucydides Trap, or in other words, a self-created fear of China's rise threatening to replace America's hegemony as the world power.³⁶ As more and more states join China's BRI, the US policy makers are becoming more hawkish, and claim China to be threatening the US global economic and

³²Eric Li, "The Rise and Fall of Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, August 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-soft-power/>.

³³Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, xii.

³⁴Fareed Zakaria, "Trump Prepares to Pass the World Leadership Baton to China," *Washington Post*, March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-prepares-to-pass-the-world-leadership-baton-to-china/2017/03/16/c64ccee2-0a84-11e7-a15f-a58d4a988474_story.html.

³⁵Joseph Nye, "No, President Trump: You've Weakened America's Soft Power," *The New York Times*, February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/opinion/trump-soft-power.html>.

³⁶Joseph Nye, "Power and Interdependence with China," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 14–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1734303>.

military hegemony, necessitating decoupling from China.

Under Trump Presidency, the US behaviour and conduct in international relations remained increasingly aggressive and confrontational, unlike that of a superpower. The US acted like, what Tufts Professor Michael Beckley calls a “rogue superpower”—“an economic and military colossus lacking moral commitments, neither isolationist nor internationalist, but aggressive, heavily armed, and entirely for itself.”³⁷ To cap it all, America’s denouncement of alliances, protectionism, issuance of greater visa restrictions and stricter immigration policies indicated the tightening political and policy making landscape. In all the three sources of soft power, namely, culture, political values and foreign policy, Nye stated that “Mr Trump has reversed attractive American policies and made America weaker rather than greater.” When he inferred *America First* narrowly, he made everyone else feel second rate.³⁸ While Trump’s presidential term has ended, his policy prescriptions have damaged American reputation irreparably, and it would take some time to restore American credibility, soft power and reputation.

In contrast, China has been engaging all through co-operative interdependence, connectivity and mutual gain opportunities, with Wang Huning’s ascendancy to the top-most political echelon being depicted by the Chinese scholars as an “antidote to strongman politics.”³⁹ Wang, the principal architect of China’s soft power, has remained low-key, and is popularly described as a soft-spoken and well-mannered scholar-turned-political figure.⁴⁰ While he has written on a wide array of topics, in his most important book, *Comparative Political Analysis*, he writes about an increasingly globalizing world with everyday matters of life, such as environment and transport, becoming so interlinked that they are becoming political issues of global significance.⁴¹ Many of Wang’s writings, scholars note, “hew so closely to Xi’s policies.”⁴² Wang may be considered an equivalent to National Security Advisor to the American President, although he is designated as the Vice-Chairman of the Central Leading Group on the

³⁷Michael Beckley, “Rogue Superpower: Why this could be Illiberal American Century”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-10-06/illiberal-american-century-rogue-superpower?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=pre_release&utm_campaign, accessed on 19 October 20 20.

³⁸Nye, “Opinion | No, President Trump.”

³⁹Yi Wang, “Wang Huning: China’s Antidote to Strongman Politics,” *The Diplomat*, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/wang-huning-chinas-antidote-to-strongman-politics/>.

⁴⁰Patapan and Wang, “The Hidden Ruler,” 12.

⁴¹Patapan and Wang, 9.

⁴²Yi Wang, “Meet The Mastermind Behind Xi Jinping’s Power,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2018): 15–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/npqu.12116>.

Construction of the One Belt One Road (CLGOBOR). More importantly, he is a policy advisor who has risen to ranks in the CPC hierarchy by virtue of his intellectual prowess and on the strength of his ideas.⁴³

Wang's ascendancy reflects that China is shaping its soft power through its intellectual's dexterity. In 2017, the Chinese leadership publicly revealed its plan to significantly expand the country's soft power base by 2035. It claimed that China's modernisation "offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind."⁴⁴ President Xi Jinping, in particular, has been at the forefront in projecting China's vision of wanting to build a world of shared interests through multilateral arrangements, increased co-operation and people-to-people connectivity. Simultaneously, he has energized the diversity, growth and competition among the Chinese think tanks for feeding into, and influencing, the policy process. Thus, the CPC and its leadership have given legitimacy to the role of intellectuals and think tank scholars and analysts.⁴⁵ Contrarily, the Western scholars continue to characterize Xi Jinping as authoritarian and dictatorial, and the CPC as intolerant and repressive.⁴⁶

As a matter of fact, in the Chinese political system, the leadership and the CPC, in concert with societal forces, including think tanks, have been playing a critical role in shaping the country's soft power narrative. Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, like his predecessors, the Party has shown considerable degree of organizational stability and a broad consensus among the top leaders on continuity of policies. Leadership and cultural values are intertwined and embedded through the CPC. According to both Yan Xuetong and Wang Huning,⁴⁷ a strong, centralized and unified

⁴³Patapan and Wang, "The Hidden Ruler," 14.

⁴⁴Yan Xuetong, "Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy001>.

⁴⁵Francois Godement, "A Hundred Think Tanks Bloom in China" European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR.EU, August, 2016) pp.1-12.

⁴⁶Aaron L. Friedberg, "Bucking Beijing: An Alternative U.S. China Policy" *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012. PP 48-58. Pp 49-50. He calls Chinese elites, 'arrogant' and 'insecure' who want to 'hold on political power' through CPC.p49. Also see Shambaugh(2015) pp 99-100

⁴⁷Yan Xuetong, "Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy001>; Jane Perlez, "Behind the Scenes, Communist Strategist Presses China's Rise," *The New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-wang-huning.html>.

political leadership is a source of Chinese soft power.⁴⁸ Concentration of power in the leader is based on meritocracy, which is considered a virtue in the Chinese culture and political system.⁴⁹ It is the backbone on which the Chinese soft power is erected, with a sound and morally grounded leadership considered an unbridled asset for soft power projection. While in Nye's view, a country's soft power is more effective if the power is dispersed and there are competing groups/ power centres as is typically the case in major democratic countries.⁵⁰ Nye makes a case for the Western democracies stating that "in democracies where public opinion and parliaments matter, political leaders have less leeway to adopt tactics and strike deals than in autocracies."⁵¹ This shows that the Chinese formulation of soft power differs from the American template, each based on its own national conditions, history, culture and moral and ethical orientations of the leadership.

Furthermore, unlike Nye's conceptualization of soft power that asserts a kind of defensive particularism by pushing for democratic liberal values, the Chinese soft power constitutes non-interference, multilateralism, strong unified political leadership, with bringing harmony among societies and states as the desired goal and key guiding principle. The BRI beams the soft power of China differently; it is not about having a specific attractive culture, political values or foreign policy; the three soft power resources of a country, proposed by Nye. Rather, the BRI offers a "loose framework" that can be "modified" by the participatory countries according to their needs, choices and resources.⁵² Co-operation under the BRI umbrella shows sensitivity to the local conditions, and inclusiveness through connectivity, and China upholding the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Several scholars and analysts however hold a different perspective. For

⁴⁸Guozuo Zhang, *Research Outline for China's Cultural Soft Power*, trans. Xiaoyan Li, Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China's Development Path (Social Sciences Academic Press China & Springer Singapore, 2017), 97.while also offering detailed explanations of the scope of and essential questions concerning Chinese cultural soft power. The book is divided into six parts, which, taken together, concisely yet thoroughly examine the theoretical roots of soft power and the current status of China's soft power as illustrated in concrete cases.

⁴⁹Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015). Bell makes an insightful and refreshing analysis of Chinese political system and the role of meritocracy in the making of leadership compared to Western democracies. Pp 4-6.

⁵⁰Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, 16.

⁵¹Nye, 16.

⁵²Nadine Godehardt, "No End of History: A Chinese Alternative Concept of International Order," *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, 2016, 23, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2016RP02_gdh.pdf.

instance, Hillman's study, which is a combination of travelogue, history, politics, economics and also his personal observations of on ground realities across the BRI countries and societies, presents a different view. He highlights the hurdles and practical difficulties likely to constrain the success of the BRI, and dilute its soft power.⁵³ While Hillman's scepticism merits attention, it is noteworthy that many countries are, nonetheless, increasingly embracing the BRI. It offers them an opportunity to identify areas of shared interest through engagement and cooperation, thereby increasing the possibility of achieving win-win outcomes. The participant countries in fact, have the freedom to devise their own development path, and more importantly, retain their cultural practices. This makes the BRI "flexible, inclusive and open."⁵⁴ While remaining within the definitional context laid out by Nye, whereby soft power is "an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values,"⁵⁵ this is how China is presenting the world with an adaptation, variant and alternative form of Nye's soft power conceptualization. This is how the BRI is emerging as a symbol of Chinese soft power.

SECTION 2: BRI: Pivoting on Academic and Cultural Exchanges

The cornerstone of America's soft power, besides promoting democracy and protecting free market, in the post-World War II period, was its higher education and academic exchanges. According to Nye, "academic and scientific exchanges played a significant role in enhancing American soft power," as international students became carriers of American values in their homelands.⁵⁶ The Fulbright Program is a shining example of that. In the previous decades, the world has witnessed more than three hundred leaders –prime ministers and presidents and influential figures of different countries- having academic qualifications from the US colleges and universities. This has contributed in many ways to the benefit of the US and adoption of American values. However, the international student body has been declining in the past few years. The US saw a decline of 9.6% in its international student body in 2018, and another 2% in the subsequent

⁵³Hillman, see chapters 3 and 5, where the author raises concerns about access, transparency and accountability with reference to BRI projects across the countries.

⁵⁴Godehardt, 20.

⁵⁵Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, 7.

⁵⁶Nye, 45.

year.⁵⁷ Despite this downward trend, the US is still the top destination of choice of international students.⁵⁸ Interestingly, the number of Chinese students coming to the US is the highest among the international students. However, these Chinese students have been paying full tuition fees and also returning to China upon completion of their studies. This high return rate clearly shows that Beijing has been successful in curbing the brain drain.

Bringing and Building Soft Power at Home and Abroad:

Back in 1979, the US-China exchanges constituted the largest student-to-student exchange between any two civilizations in world history.⁵⁹ Since Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door" reforms in 1978, China has been sending its own students overseas to pursue higher studies. Nearly 5.86 million Chinese students have studied abroad from 1978 to 2018.⁶⁰ China has been able to expose its younger generation to the Western education, way of life, and also fight brain drain by absorbing eighty-three percent of these students back to China.⁶¹ These Chinese youngsters –future leaders- are "politically open and individualistic because of their modern educational background and international experience... and (are) learned about different cultures," according to Yan Xuetong.⁶² This is remarkable and demonstrates how China has built and expanded upon Nye's conceptualization of soft power.

President Xi Jinping has galvanized these academic exchanges, sharpening the focus and vigorously emphasizing on the dire need for China to "...strengthen people-to-people and cultural exchanges with other countries...to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and

⁵⁷Michael T. Nietzel, "International Student Enrollment Down Again At U.S. Universities," *Forbes*, November 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2019/11/18/international-student-enrollment-down-again-at-us-universities/>.

⁵⁸Institute of International Education, "Project Atlas Infographics -2019 Press Release," *Global Mobility Trends* (Institute of International Education, 2019), <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data/Infographics/2019-Project-Atlas-Infographics>.

⁵⁹Hongshan Li, *U.S-China Educational Exchange: State, Society and Intercultural Relations, 1905-1950* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1.

⁶⁰Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "More Chinese Study Abroad in 2018," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, March 2019, http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/media_highlights/201904/t20190401_376249.html.

⁶¹Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "Brief Report on Chinese Overseas Students and International Students in China 2017," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, April 2018, http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201901/t20190115_367019.html.

⁶²Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, 51.

panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power."⁶³ In 2018, about 662,100 Chinese students left the country to study abroad, making China the top contributor of international students globally.⁶⁴ At the same time, as many as 492,185 international students were inbound to China, making China the third top destination of choice among foreign students globally.⁶⁵ Through student exchanges, China socializes students to its culture, exposing them to Chinese soft power. This manifests itself in different forms, from the traditional Chinese culture, to popular culture constituting art, entertainment, music and cinema, to high culture, which includes its thriving educational system, study of social sciences and literature. On international student and academic exchanges China has adopted the American model skillfully and according to its needs.

This demonstrates that China does have a strong foundation and sources to formulate its own narrative of soft power. Demographically, younger adults across the globe hold a favorable view of China, at present.⁶⁶ These young adults are China's target audience. By inviting and hosting them, China further familiarizes them with Chinese politics and way of life. It has undertaken a strategic and targeted approach in offering these opportunities. For instance, it has been providing thirty-percent more scholarships to students belonging to less politically free countries in the East Asia and Pacific region, as opposed to their counterparts in more free countries. Consequently, these less politically free countries accounted for the largest numbers of students inbound to China.⁶⁷

However, this must not overshadow Chinese efforts of opening space for dialogue and understanding. Kerry Brown makes a passionate appeal to the Western world to "stop moralizing against China," pointing out that the

⁶³China Daily, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

⁶⁴Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "More Chinese Study Abroad in 2018."

⁶⁵Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019, http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html.

⁶⁶Laura Silver, Kat Delvin, and Christine Huang, "People around the Globe Are Divided in Their Opinions of China" (PEW Research Centre - Global Attitudes and Trends, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/>.

⁶⁷Samantha Custer et al., "Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image." (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, December 2019), 37, http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Influencing_the_Narrative_Report.pdf.

West knows too little about China, its history and culture. He pleads that “there needs to be much more support for basic education about China and for knowledge-based engagement with it...on China, there is scant evidence of even a decent level of understanding amongst most politicians, opinion formers, and commentators.”⁶⁸ In the light of this insightful observation, it is pertinent to note that through its academic exchange programs, China provides an opportunity for engagement, dialogue and people-to-people contact. If this is not an evidence of the growing Chinese soft power, what more do the Western observers want?

The BRI, in particular, has played a pivotal role in accelerating these people-to-people exchanges and expanding the Chinese soft power. The BRI aims at expanding co-operation in five key areas, “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds,”⁶⁹ of which people-to-people bonds is the least discussed, despite being of greatest importance. This fifth goal of strengthening the people-to-people bond embraces cultural and academic exchanges, to co-operating in a variety of areas of common interest, such as tourism and public health. The academic exchanges in particular have gained momentum along the Belt and Road countries, where China has also deployed its Confucius Institutes network -Chinese equivalents of UK’s British Council and France’s Alliance Française to facilitate the educational exchange process.

China has been sending many of its students to study in the BRI countries. While the US and Europe were historically the leading study destinations of Chinese students, the BRI countries are gaining popularity. This way China has made the educational exchange process, a two-way process. For instance, in 2017, 66,100 Chinese students were studying in the BRI participant countries.⁷⁰ Similarly, there were 317,200 students from the BRI countries studying in China, accounting for 64 percent of

⁶⁸Kerry Brown, “Why the West Needs to Stop Its Moralising against China,” E-International Relations, August 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/10/why-the-west-needs-to-stop-its-moralising-against-china/>.

⁶⁹National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of, and Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” March 2015.

⁷⁰Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, “Brief Report on Chinese Overseas Students and International Students in China 2017.”

China's international student body.⁷¹ There are several reasons that have helped China attract students from along the Belt and Road route. In many of the recipient countries, mostly developing and middle to low-income countries, China's economic power adds to its attractiveness. The BRI projects showcase China's economic power, clout and expertise, and the locals see themselves to be benefiting from China's growing economy in the form of economic aid, foreign investment and academic scholarships tied to the BRI projects –the tools and engine of Chinese soft power. To a considerable degree, it is transforming into a favorable view of China. A PEW Research Study concludes that people who believe to be benefiting from China's booming economy have a 64⁰% chance of holding a favorable view of China.⁷²

China's soft power ventures are backed by its economic power, which Nye categorizes as hard power. Feeling "threatened" and motivated by considerations of "strategic competition," the US, India, Australia and Japan tend to curb the scale of Chinese soft power by characterizing it as a "charm offensive." To debunk this rising soft power, they point its lack of transparency, entrenched cronyism, poor governance practices, environment repercussions, debt trap diplomacy and China's circular lending strategies underlying the BRI.⁷³ Thus, the credibility and salience of Chinese soft power is caricatured and belittled. Yet, it is important to note that soft power is a type of "power," relational and contextual in nature, and so must be understood within the context in which the power relationships exist. China's relations with the BRI participant countries are burgeoning with time, and the participant countries largely hold a positive perception of China's engagement with them. Local people and political elites in these countries have been blaming their own government, not China, for controversies surrounding the BRI projects, including those related to corruption, mismanagement and the so called "debt trap." This is best illustrated by the case of Pakistan, which houses one of the corridors, also the "flagship" project of the BRI: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

⁷¹Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "Growing Number of Foreign Students Choosing to Study in China for a Degree across Multiple Disciplines," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, April 2018, http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201804/t20180403_332258.html.

⁷²Laura Silver, Kat Delvin, and Christine Huang, "Appendix: Factors That Influence Views of China," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/appendix-factors-that-influence-views-of-china/>.

⁷³For a paradoxical view; a scathing critique and the awesome character of BRI, see Hillman, pp 10-14

CPEC: the ‘Black Hole’ or Jewel of BRI?

There is no denying that Pakistan continues to suffer from a reputation crisis, and rejuvenating reputation loss is never easy. For example, in a recent study, Jonathan Hillman labels CPEC as the “Black Hole” of the BRI. Eloquently, he argues; “In South Asia, the flagship of China’s BRI may become its greatest test. Xi has put his personal stamp on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), traveling to Islamabad in April 2015 to cement the two countries “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership” and signing a host of agreements. But after ballooning to a mythical \$100 billion, CPEC has drifted back to earth and delivered only a fraction of its initial promise. Dangerously, China is betting it can succeed where the United States and the international community have failed for decades.”⁷⁴ Ironically, on several occasions the Pakistani leadership, while offering clarifications and trying to be transparent, instead have ended up further complicating such perceptions. However, this does not change the fact that there is great support for the CPEC in Pakistan. Any issues arising out of it are, in fact, blamed on Pakistan’s own poor management of the project, and this does not hurt China’s soft power. For instance, when Razak Dawood, the Advisor to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, expressed his despair over CPEC, he stated; “The previous [Pakistani] government did a bad job negotiating with China on CPEC; they didn’t do their homework correctly and didn’t negotiate correctly so they gave away a lot.”⁷⁵ He apportioned blame on his own country, not China.

Given this context, five Chinese initiatives; namely, educational exchanges and fellowships, China Study Centers, Confucius Institutes, Gwadar-China Scholarship and the China- Pakistan “Dosti” Radio channel, are enhancing the Chinese soft power and changing the dynamics of China-Pakistan relations. Since the formal launch of the CPEC in 2015, there has been twofold increase in the number of Pakistani students going to China. There were 15,654 students in China in 2015,⁷⁶ and the number shot up to 28,023

⁷⁴Jonathan Hillman, p 19 .In chapter 7 that focuses on Pakistan, Hillman, makes a scathing critique of Pakistan, demonizing it and warning China, if the US and West could not succeed in this country China would also fail, here is his punchline, “They (China) may regret choosing Pakistan as the BRI’s proving grounds...If neighboring Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, Pakistan’s the black hole of foreign assistance”. Pp 132 &134

⁷⁵Henny Sender, Farhan Bokhari, and Jamil Anderlini, “Pakistan Rethinks Its Role in Xi’s Belt and Road Plan,” *Financial Times*, September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/d4a3e7f8-b282-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132>.

⁷⁶China Power (Center for Strategic and International Studies), “Is China Both a Source and Hub for International Students?,” ChinaPower Project, September 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-international-students/>.

by 2018.⁷⁷ China is the second top destination of Pakistanis, after the UK. Pakistan has been the third top source of international students to China,⁷⁸ and the prime beneficiary of Chinese scholarships globally.

China has crafted an effective and well-designed educational diplomacy with Pakistan under the CPEC, and there are several instances that demonstrate this. For instance, the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), in collaboration with China's Southeast University, has offered fully funded scholarships for hundred Pakistanis over a period of five years under its program "Inherit of Pak-China Friendship: Hundred Talents Study Financing Program."⁷⁹ The scholarship specifically sponsors Pakistani personnel engaged in projects under the CPEC. It underwrites a two-year long Master's in Transportation Engineering; designed exclusively to help students excel in the CPEC integrated transportation.⁸⁰ Ten people benefitted from this opportunity in 2017 and twenty-four in the subsequent year.⁸¹ The program has been custom designed for both countries to mutually benefit out of it, and in fact, it is in line with the Government of Pakistan's vision to achieve development through the CPEC.

These CRBC sponsored scholarships are geared towards equipping students solely with the skills necessary to deliver the CPEC, and fill job vacancies relevant to it. These jobs are created by different CPEC infrastructural projects like road building and transportation lines. Hence, these jobs are here today and could be gone tomorrow. They only exist until the time the project is operational. In other words, such programs are imparting skills, which are of value only within a limited context and for a limited time period. This indicates poor strategizing on part of Pakistan. The burden of translating China's soft power into a win-win case lies with Pakistan. It is risky for Pakistan to keep building a workforce with skills

⁷⁷Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018," Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019, http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html.

⁷⁸Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China.

⁷⁹HEC Pakistan, "Opening Ceremony Of First Batch Of Pakistani Students Selected Under CRBC Scholarship Program," Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, December 19, 2017, <http://hec.gov.pk/english/news/news/Pages/Ceremony-CRBC-scholarship.aspx>.

⁸⁰HEC Pakistan, "HEC-CRBC Scholarship Program Offered By China Road And Bridge Corporation For The Year 2018," Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, April 24, 2018, <http://hec.gov.pk/english/scholarshipsgrants/lao/CRBC/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁸¹Associated Press of Pakistan, "CRBC Scholarships for Pakistani Students to Strengthen Pak-China Relations: Chairman HEC," *Associated Press Of Pakistan*, September 2018, <https://www.app.com.pk/national/crbc-scholarships-for-pakistani-students-to-strengthen-pak-china-relations-chairman-hec/>.

that have a limited applicability and have limited utility for future job opportunities. Studies reveal that in the near future, the CPEC is likely to create as many as 700,000 jobs in different sectors such as airport operations management and logistics sector.⁸² Those are the jobs needed to strategize towards building a pool of skills-oriented and professionally competent workforce. The onus is on the Pakistani leadership and policy makers, to maximize the educational, technical and professional advantages that the educational exchanges with China offer and convert these into a long-term and sustainable opportunity for Pakistan. In efforts to further expand the educational ties, in August 2017, top business schools in China (eight in total) and Pakistan (nine in total) launched the CPEC Consortium, supported by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. These manifests shared vision and win-win cooperation through educational exchanges and aims to increase academic collaboration to support the economy and management systems of China and Pakistan. The consortium seeks to bring business school leaders on one single platform for collaborative research, and educational and management development programs to support CPEC. The Chinese universities and institutes that are part of the consortium include Fudan University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Nanjing University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Tsinghua University, University of Science and Technology of China, and Zhejiang University. Pakistani universities include Baluchistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS), COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Institute of Information Technology, Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Institute of Business Management Sciences (IMS), Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), and University of the Punjab.⁸³

All this demonstrates China's strategic clarity. In fact, it is best demonstrated by how China has customized its programs in response to local realities. Its scholarship opportunities are inclusive in nature, sensitive to the local environment and cater to the local Pakistani needs. An example of this is the "Gwadar-China Scholarship Program," offered by China in collaboration with the HEC in 2017. It is an international program designed for the Baluchi youth, and in particular, for the indigenous students of

⁸²Hassan Khawar, "CPEC and Skills Development," *The Express Tribune*, May 2018, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1715631/6-cpec-skills-development>.

⁸³<https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/news/news/Pages/Conference-CPEC.aspx> accessed on December, 14, 2020.

Gwadar. It offers numerous opportunities, of which, the key one is to learn the Chinese language at the leading native Chinese language institutes in China.⁸⁴ Fourteen students of Gwadar benefitted from this program in March 2018, and another thirty-six in November the same year.⁸⁵

This “Gwadar China Scholarship” is exemplar of an exchange opportunity mutually beneficial for both the countries. It allows China to project soft power by housing Pakistani students and introducing them to the Chinese lifestyle. For Pakistan, it is beneficial both in the short-run and long run. In the short run, this program is likely to produce competitive Chinese language proficient individuals who will benefit from the job opportunities emerging through the CPEC. Most important of all, such programs are likely to create a sense of inclusiveness and ownership of the CPEC in the Baluchi students. It is imperative to realize it in its true spirit; for in engaging Baluchistan lays the prospects of the CPEC as a “game changer.” And in that spirit, the future of Pakistani federation lies in Baluchistan, and Pakistan should not miss this opportunity. In the long run, such exchange programs are likely to have familiarized Pakistani students with the Chinese culture, ethics and society, and polished their social skills to work with the Chinese in any firm or enterprise across the globe. Even within Pakistan, the Chinese community is expanding, meaning that in the near future, both Pakistani and Chinese will have to work together for meeting each other’s everyday needs, be it at grocery shopping, restaurants or cultural events. Hence, Pakistan gets to translate this Chinese soft power engagement from zero-sum to positive-sum through such opportunities, making it a win-win for both the countries.

To facilitate these exchanges, China’s Confucius Institute (CI) network has been a pivotal force. Pakistan currently houses four Confucius Institutes, each at four different educational institutes. Globally, there are more than five hundred CIs established in 154 countries and regions.⁸⁶ Chinese leadership made a strategic move by side tracking Mao Zedong Thought, and resuscitating Confucius Thought and expanding its soft power through the CIs. Hard data suggests that countries with a greater number of

⁸⁴Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, “Gwadar-China Scholarship Program,” Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2018, <https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/scholarshipsgrants/GCSP/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁸⁵Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, “HEC Sends off 36 Gwadar Students for Chinese Language Course in Beijing,” Higher Education Commission Pakistan, October 2018, <https://hec.gov.pk/english/news/news/Pages/Gwadar-Students-in-Beijing.aspx>.

⁸⁶XinhuaNet, “Confucius Institutes a Boost to Cultural Exchanges,” XinhuaNet, December 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/05/c_137653186.htm.

Confucius Institutes have generally held a more favourable view of China.⁸⁷ CIs have been instrumental in improving foreigners' perception of China. More importantly, they have helped China attract students and facilitated the educational exchange process. There is a strong positive correlation of the location of Confucius Institutes with the number of students going to China.⁸⁸ Countries with more Confucius Institutes have reportedly sent more students to China. South Korea, Thailand and Pakistan house one of the highest numbers of Confucius Institutes regionally, and consequently, have been the top three sources of international students to China.⁸⁹

The CIs help facilitate the exchange process in at least three ways. One, they serve as promotional tools for Chinese exchange and study abroad opportunities, publicizing and marketing them to the Pakistani communities. Two, they serve as official test centres for Chinese language proficiency test (HSK) –the Chinese equivalent of the English language tests: IELTS and TOEFL. Three, the CIs serve as a platform for celebrating cultural festivals, promoting people-to-people contact and training the locals in Chinese language and culture.

The CIs have been designed to serve as China's soft power tools prior to, and independent of the CPEC. However, their conjunction with the CPEC has expanded the scope of China's educational diplomacy with Pakistan. The CIs have been organizing job fairs, international conferences and exhibitions, boosting the CPEC. For instance, in May 2018, the Confucius Institute at the Punjab University in Lahore hosted a "CPEC Chinese Job Fair" It helped in aligning Pakistani-based Chinese companies engaged in the CPEC projects to potential employees, in order to maximize future job opportunities for them, and as many as thirty firms participated in the event. In this way, the Confucius Institutes are serving as a platform for bringing together the Chinese enterprises and the Pakistani entrepreneurs, thus, strengthening the CPEC.

China is also building its presence in Pakistan's media landscape. In 2016, China Radio International (CRI) collaborated with the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) to launch "Radio FM 98," jointly titled

⁸⁷Samantha Custer et al., "Silk Road Diplomacy: Deconstructing Beijing's Toolkit to Influence South and Central Asia" (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, December 2019), 60–67, http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Silk_Road_Diplomacy_Report.pdf.

⁸⁸Samantha Custer et al., "Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image." (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, December 2019), 35, http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Influencing_the_Narrative_Report.pdf.

⁸⁹Custer et al., 35.

“Dosti Channel.”⁹⁰ The idea was first initiated during President Xi’s visit to Pakistan in 2015, and formally launched in 2016.⁹¹ By partnering with a local channel, China effectively entered into the Pakistani media landscape. It created space for a two-way communication. Had it not partnered, and simply gotten a broadcasting license to run its own channel, it would have been dispensing one way-communication⁹² by simply transmitting its content without any understanding of the local context. The fact that the CRI is joint-ventured, assures that the content is not simply dictated by the Chinese media source, but in fact is broadcasted in collaboration with the locally produced programs⁹³. This demonstrates China’s sensitivity to the Pakistani cultural context, which is a key characteristic of its soft power template.

Currently, the Dosti Channel operates in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad,⁹⁴ and functions 24/7. It is furthering people-to-people connectivity. According to Chan Xing, the Chinese Director of Dosti Channel, the channel has captured a receptive Chinese and Pakistani audience, with a large number of people tuning in to the channel to listen, call and converse.⁹⁵ Thus, the channel has been facilitating interaction between the Pakistani citizens and the Chinese in Pakistan, fostering people-to-people relations. Ironically and interestingly, the primary languages of transmission are Urdu and English, both of which are understood by a vast majority of Pakistanis. In addition, a “Learn Chinese” program is also broadcasted on a daily basis.⁹⁶ This is how Chinese and Pakistanis are crisscrossing the language barrier. The catch,

⁹⁰The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “CRI’s Radio Channel in Pakistan Now Broadcasting Locally Produced Programming,” China Radio International, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1536547/1536547.htm>.

⁹¹The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “CRI’s Radio Channel in Pakistan Now Broadcasting Locally Produced Programming,” China Radio International, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1536547/1536547.htm>.

⁹²Custer et al., “Ties That Bind: Quantifying China’s Public Diplomacy and Its ‘Good Neighbor’ Effect,” 2.

⁹³The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “CRI’s Radio Channel in Pakistan Now Broadcasting Locally Produced Programming,” China Radio International, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1536547/1536547.htm>.

⁹⁴Pakistan Today, “Pakistan, China Launch Transmission of ‘Dosti’ Channel,” Pakistan Today, November 10, 2016, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/11/10/pakistan-china-launch-transmission-of-dosti-channel/>.

⁹⁵Zulfiqar Baig, “Dosti Channel: Can Radio Bring Two Countries Closer?,” *The Express Tribune*, September 18, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1805820/1-dosti-channel-can-radio-bring-two-countries-closer/>.

⁹⁶BBC Monitoring, “Analysis: China’s Growing Presence in Pakistani Media,” BBC Monitoring, December 18, 2017, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1do6djm>.

however, is that it only an hour-long program; limited air time for a program in foreign language allows the channel to blend in well with the local Urdu and English language content. Hence, such foreign, yet locally produced programs are less likely to be perceived as a new “Other.” Interestingly, radio is one of the most powerful means to reach out to the Pakistani masses. Pakistani consumers on average spend about 14 hours every week tuned in to the radio.⁹⁷ This makes radio the second-most consumed form of media after TV in Pakistan.⁹⁸ In this sense, the Dosti Channel signifies China’s efficient use of its media source as an official soft power tool to advance people-to-people ties.

To summarize, educational exchanges, Confucius Institutes, Radio channels and the CPEC have propelled Chinese soft power. The cumulative effect of these programs has been deepening of people-to-people connectivity, besides infrastructural development and enhancement of academic exchanges. This enabling environment has boosted learning of Chinese language, thereby, promoting a better understanding of Chinese history and culture and a healthier appreciation of its soft power. There has been a mushroom growth of China study centers, Chinese language programs within school and college curriculum in Pakistan, amplifying research collaborations. It is worth noting that Pakistan, at present, has the highest co-authored publications with China than with any other country.⁹⁹ This makes Pakistan (CPEC) the jewel of BRI.

BRI’s Soft Power: Insights from South and Central Asia:

Insights from South and Central Asia reveal the growing Chinese soft power presence. This is primarily through China’s academic exchange opportunities, several of which are tied to its BRI projects, providing strong academia-industry linkages and better employment opportunities. In the South Asian region, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port is an oft quoted case critics cite to demonstrate China’s debt trap diplomacy underlying the BRI, thereby, undermining and overshadowing the Chinese soft power efforts. Yet, Sri Lankans speaking for themselves, for instance, Dushni Weerakon and Sisira Jaayasuriya, leading Sri Lankan economists, explain that Hambantota’s 99-year lease to China needs to be understood as part of the greater problem of Sri Lanka’s on-going economic and debt crisis,

⁹⁷Radio Score, “Radio Score,” Radio Score, 2017, <http://radio-score.com/#home>.

⁹⁸Radio Score.

⁹⁹Ehsan Masood, “Scientists in Pakistan and Sri Lanka Bet Their Futures on China,” in *Nature*, China’s Science Silk Road: Part 2 (Nature, 2019), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01125-6>.

and not exclusively a problem created by the Chinese debt.¹⁰⁰ Hence, the BRI participant countries have not blamed China for the issues arising out of the BRI.

China has successfully been able to project its economic clout and capability as an economic giant and benefactor in these countries and that spikes its soft power. While perceptions are not monolithic, and different views exist across different regions and countries, and along different political, economic and income strata, yet, students from the South Asian countries are generally developing favorability of China with time. For instance, Nepalese students, interviewed upon their return home from China, expressed their approval of the Chinese political system for its efficiency, good governance in terms of safety and security, promotion of economic development, quick implementation of infrastructural projects and delivering results. It made them realize that China offers lessons to learn. They also noted that the infrastructural development projects in their own home country remained politicized and a mere rhetoric of words.¹⁰¹

These examples show that the students from the participant countries are energetically availing themselves of the educational exchange opportunities tied to China's BRI projects. For these countries, China provides exclusive partnerships, preferential policies, institutional frameworks and especially funding opportunities to expand the educational exchange co-operation. A significant 66 percent of the Chinese government scholarship beneficiaries happened to be from the BRI countries in 2017.¹⁰² Many of these scholarship beneficiaries are students from countries with a GDP per capita and income per capita lower than that of China.¹⁰³ For students in these countries, China's study-abroad opportunities promise better economic prospects for working in the BRI projects at home and Chinese firms across the globe.

¹⁰⁰Weerakon Dushni and Sisira Jayasurriya, "Commentary: Sri Lanka's Debt Problem Wasn't Made in China," Channel News Asia, March 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/sri-lanka-debt-port-borrowing-problem-not-made-in-china-11309738>.

¹⁰¹Romi Jain, "China's Soft Power Aims in South Asia: Experiences of Nepalese Students in China's Internationalization of Higher Education" (Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Education, Cleveland State University, 2018), <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/1061/>.

¹⁰²Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, "The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects" (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press, 2019), 19 <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydy/gw/201904/201904220254037.pdf>.

¹⁰³Custer et al., "Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image.," 37.

China has strategically placed itself as a "better value-for-money" study abroad destination, offering valuable market-industry linkages, especially through the BRI projects. This is a key facet of its soft power. Its targeted scholarship programs include the "Silk Road Scholarship" and "Belt and Road Initiative Scholarship," which allow locals to gain a specialized skill-set in order to avail the BRI related job opportunities and easily transition into the well-established Chinese job market. Other examples include China's "Scholarship for Youth of Excellence Scheme of China (YES China)." This gives students from along the Belt and Road, a chance to pursue degrees such as a Master of One-Belt-Road Sustainable Infrastructure Engineering (MOSI) or AIIB Master of International Finance (AMIF).¹⁰⁴ China has doubled its efforts in promoting student exchanges in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular.¹⁰⁵ These countries are two of the largest recipients of Chinese government scholarships in Central Asia, where China has been particularly keen to dispel the negative images of China, which is a legacy of the Cold War. These improvisations by China, on Nye's conceptualization of soft power, are paying dividends as perceptions about China are propitiously changing.

Empirical evidence suggests that young Kazakhs today are more welcoming towards China, and also relatively neutral, despite any "hidden motives" China may have in engaging with Kazakhstan. They are eager to study and work in China.¹⁰⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the view of their ancestors, who possess a typical "Cold War mentality" and a strong affinity with Russia.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, youngsters in Uzbekistan have also grown fond of China and expressed their favorability towards it. This is largely because of China's investment in local human capital and provision of modern educational opportunities for them and that attract students, and promote talent and innovation through the educational architecture supplementing the BRI's infrastructural projects.¹⁰⁸ Recognizing the salience of educational exchanges and the experiences of foreign students in China, David Shambaugh has perceptively observed that these "will certainly sensitize them to Chinese viewpoints and interests... they will possess knowledge

¹⁰⁴CSC Scholarship, "Youth of Excellence Scheme of China," Chinese Government Scholarship, 2017, <https://www.chinesescholarshipcouncil.com/youth-of-excellence-scheme-of-china.html>.

¹⁰⁵Samantha Custer et al., "Silk Road Diplomacy: Deconstructing Beijing's Toolkit to Influence South and Central Asia" (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, December 2019), 8, http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Silk_Road_Diplomacy_Report.pdf.

¹⁰⁶Custer et al., 6.

¹⁰⁷Custer et al., 45.

¹⁰⁸Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream.'"

of the Chinese language, as well as Chinese society, culture, history, and politics...They will also share personal connections with former classmates and will move up through professional hierarchies simultaneously.”¹⁰⁹

This leads to the conclusion that the academic exchanges provide a strong socio-cultural foundation to the BRI, setting the pace for China to promote and pursue its vision of shared humanity, interdependent world order, and showcasing Chinese soft power. ¹¹⁰ China is reformulating and improvising the soft power ingredients conceptualized by Nye and slowly and gradually reaping its dividends.

SECTION 3: BRI: Transforming Chinese Soft Power

Pivoted around the educational exchange process, the BRI is spurring cooperation in a range of areas, from economic, cultural, and political to geo-strategic. Since all participant countries have an opportunity to identify areas of shared interest, it increases the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes. Although Nye has reservations over the Chinese approach, yet, he acknowledges that the BRI has allowed China to strengthen ties with its trading partners. He admits that “China’s economic success story enhances its soft power.” This is evidenced by the fact that 128 out of 190 countries trade more with China than the US today.¹¹¹

The Chinese leadership has been playing a significant role in advancing the country’s vision and goals. It is an undeniable fact that the leadership has been backing, sponsoring and funding the BRI, and has been vigorous and articulate in enhancing the country’s soft power. The critics however often point out that there is little resonance and ownership of it by the ordinary people, both within and outside of China. Kerry Brown reminds us that Xi Jinping and the CPC actually “go to great lengths to stress that they are people-centred.” Unlike in the time of Mao Zedong, people in China today, particularly the emerging middle class have a greater say in the running of their country. In essence, the “power dynamics have changed.” It is “the desires of the people which guide the Party and affect the way it formulates policy.”¹¹² Consequently, many of the Party policies are people-centred, in words, deeds, and actions.

Increasingly, it is evident that the BRI revolves around the ordinary people and in fact, goes a step further by aiming to bring the people

¹⁰⁹David Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order,” *International Security* 29, no. 3 (2004): 64–99.

¹¹⁰Custer et al., 49. For a contrary view, see ,Shambaugh (2015) pp 102-107

¹¹¹Nye, “Power and Interdependence with China,” 13–16.

¹¹²Brown, *The World According to Xi*, 116–18.

together—connectivity is its underlying theme. The BRI is not simply an infrastructural project; in fact, it is underscored by China’s grand vision of creating a shared world—a “harmonious society” at home and a “harmonious world” abroad. The BRI has been incorporated in the Constitution of China, and is inalienable from the broader CPC narrative, its Core Socialist Values and the Xi Jinping Thought –all of which spell out China’s vision of creating a community of common destiny and shared future. For instance, a PEW Research Centre study conducted recently, documented Nigerians living near a site of a major Belt and Road project developing a sense of ownership for the project and favorable views of China once the project had neared completion.¹¹³ The critics however, view this as propaganda that is ideologically driven, and claim that it covers up “hidden motives” of China. They are unwilling to see the BRI as economic, educationally and culturally driven. They remain dismissive of any constructive and positive intent and outcome of BRI, unwilling to accept the growing evidence of the soft power gains it is beginning to offer to China.¹¹⁴

The BRI helps China enhance its soft power in at least four ways. First, the BRI is based on multilateral co-operation processes. Several multilateral mechanisms are now formally a part of it, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), along with financial mechanisms, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The BRI is intertwined with a range of national, regional and global bodies, and entities such as China’s Confucius Institute network. These forums open space for dialogue, sharing views and bridging differences. Multilateralism is especially helpful when leaders meet, according to Kishore Mahbubani, the former ambassador from Singapore to the UN. It creates a sense of community among people coming from different parts of the world, which in turn has a ripple effect across the globe.¹¹⁵ Nye, in one of his early writings, states how multilateral arrangements are more likely to enhance a country’s soft power than unilateralism because “the currency of soft power is attraction based on shared values and the justness and duty of others to contribute to policies

¹¹³Dennis Quinn, “Nigerians Living near a Major Belt and Road Project Grew More Positive toward China after It Was Completed” (PEW Research Centre -Global Attitudes and Trends, April 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/23/nigerians-living-near-a-major-belt-and-road-project-grew-more-positive-toward-china-after-it-was-completed/>.

¹¹⁴Jonathan Hillman, p15

¹¹⁵Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (Public Affairs, 2017), 45, <https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/kishore-mahbubani/the-great-convergence/9781610390347/>.

consistent with those shared values.”¹¹⁶ The BRI’s multilateralism helps China move a step closer to its goal of a shared global community.

The second way by which China envisions building a shared world is through reviving the “Silk Road Spirit” -a metaphor for peace, cooperation, inclusiveness and mutual learning through shared experiences. With the world increasingly converging on four key areas –environmental, economic, technological, and aspirational,¹¹⁷ revival of the “Silk Road Spirit” further accelerates this convergence, allowing for an advancement of shared interests in all these domains, under the BRI framework. For convergence on advancing environmental awareness, the BRI has a total of twenty-two formal multilateral mechanisms focusing exclusively on environmental repercussions. Of these, the most prominent one is the BRI International Green Development Coalition, which has more than 120 participant organizations from 60 states and environment ministries from 25 BRI states.¹¹⁸ In the economic realm, the BRI is promoting interdependence, transparency and openness. China is spearheading this with its total investment under the BRI ranging from about \$1 trillion to \$8 trillion.¹¹⁹ Thirdly, convergence in the technological landscape is manifested in China’s “Digital Silk Road,” for which 16 countries have officially signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU).¹²⁰ Critics however, see it as “digital authoritarianism,” even though it is evidently geared towards minimizing the digital gap and allowing all to share the benefits from open access to technology and information. Fourthly, the BRI is delivering people’s common set of material aspirations. For instance, it is catering to people’s shared educational aspirations, as explained in the previous section. In all these four domains, the BRI is accelerating people’s convergence on a set of shared interests for a shared future.

The BRI also provides a framework for collectively resolving common problems, whereby the benefits of joining the BRI are far greater than staying out of it. In some ways, the management of Covid-19 has put to test the character and management skills of Chinese leadership for building a

¹¹⁶Nye, *Soft Power: Means to Success in World Politics*, 7.

¹¹⁷Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World*, 55–88.

¹¹⁸Sarah Lidslaw and Lachlan Carey, “Chinese Multilateralism and the Promise of a Green Belt and Road,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-multilateralism-and-promise-green-belt-and-road>.

¹¹⁹Jonathan Hillman, “How Big Is China’s Belt and Road?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road>.

¹²⁰Huang Yong, “Construction of Digital Silk Road Lights up BRI Cooperation,” *People’s Daily Online*, 2019, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0424/c90000-9571418.html>.

sustainable co-operation network. For China, support from the participant countries during this public health crisis is a valuable metric to gauge their receptivity to its soft power. While some, such as Pakistan, have showed support, many have raised concerns that it is this increased interdependence and people-to-people connectivity spurred by the BRI that is leading to a greater public health crisis. Several world leaders, such as the American and French Presidents, and the Australian and Canadian Prime Minister have also chosen to point towards China for virus spread.

This has resulted in hostility towards China. Additionally, the Western media, academia and policy makers have also been increasingly aggressive in highlighting other issues. The Chinese academia and policy analysts on the other hand, are conscious of this and trying to address it. For example, Yan Xuetong observes that, if China were to truly expand its soft power, it must establish moral superiority. He incisively observes that China remains contradicted in this regard at present.¹²¹ Yan Xuetong advocates that China must allow free speech, religious freedom, and promote unity in diversity. This is an unachievable goal, according to David Shambaugh, for as long as the Chinese leadership remains clung onto what he terms “hard authoritarianism.”¹²²

At present, China has struck a balance in managing its relations with other states, adopting what Evan Osnos of the *New Yorker* calls a “struggle but not smash” approach.¹²³ China has converted the US hostility into an opportunity; it has neither been breaking ties from the global institutions, like the US did under the Trump presidency, nor is it eager to gain hegemony, like the US did in the last century. In fact, it is striking a reasonable balance in its relationships by participating, competing, managing and in essence, struggling- a “struggle but not smash” approach. In contrast, the US is presenting and confronting China as a geo-strategic threat, stirring realist theory, and thus thwarting the Chinese soft power. The Europeans are also confronted with a predicament; on the one hand, the Trump administration has been abandoning alliances, while, many European states have signed bilateral agreements with China on G5 technology, rail road and cyber connectivity for instance. In this acrimonious and unpredictable

¹²¹Xuetong, “Chinese Values vs. Liberalism,” 22.

¹²²David Shambaugh, *China's Future*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016). For more recent and nail biting criticism of President Xi and the CPC see Richard McGregor, “Party Man: Xi Jinping’s Quest to Dominate China” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019. Pp 17-25.

¹²³Evan Osnos, “The Future of America’s Contest with China,” *The New Yorker*, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

global environment, China has been engaging all through co-operative interdependence, with its soft power, despite suspicions by hostile powers, gaining momentum.

Conclusion

From the above review of literature, analysis and evidence it may be concluded that by pivoting educational and cultural exchanges, promoting cooperative interdependence, the BRI is becoming transformational, gaining legitimacy and credibility, as the number of participating countries has risen to about sixty five.¹²⁴ China's ambition continues to maximize the number of participants. The soft power dividend, radiating through BRI, inclusive of the CPEC, is becoming visible in three distinct ways. First, it is based on multilateral co-operation processes, whereby ownership by member states is the key and that is evidently on the rise, giving legitimacy to the BRI; second, its "Silk Road Spirit" facilitates convergence on a set of common values for the advancement of shared interests in four important domains –technological, economic, environmental and aspirational, which includes educational; and three, it provides a framework to act collectively in addressing common problems. States are joining the BRI voluntarily, and in pursuit of their national interests and pragmatic needs, and not because of fear or coercion. This reflects the BRI's soft power, as participating countries find it rewarding economically, educationally, culturally and for improvements in innovation and connectivity. The BRI is a symbol of China's soft power, and despite hiccups, its progress is irrefutable. China has successfully been "getting others to want what it wants through attraction" and not through projection of military power, energizing and refashioning Nye's soft power conceptualization. Nye does have reservations over the Chinese refashioning of his soft power, yet he encourages the US to welcome it as well.¹²⁵ More recently, writing for Asia Society Policy Institute, Daniel Russel and Admiral (retired) Samuel Locklear, have argued that China is "weaponizing" BRI, yet the US should not abandon diplomacy with China as it is pursuing "the largest scale infrastructure project the world has ever

¹²⁴Rolland, "Securing the Belt and Road."

¹²⁵Joseph Nye, "Xi Jinping's Marco Polo Strategy," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute –The Strategist*, June 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/xi-jinpings-marco-polo-strategy/>.

known.”¹²⁶ Thereby reinforcing that the BRI is an emerging reality of Chinese “Smart Power.”¹²⁷

Idealizing and building a shared world is both problematic and challenging. By unpacking the BRI, the Chinese leadership has provided an alternate platform than the existing one- it is not challenging the existing order but showing the world, in the words of the American poet, Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken.” President Xi Jinping has taken the road “less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.” China is offering a different choice to those who are willing to join; it is not saying “you are either with us or against us.” That said, there remain several impediments in China’s way of realizing its grand vision of creating a “harmonious world” with shared vision for global peace. It is a tall order in a realist world where conflict, rivalry, strategic competition and war has been and continues to be a reality. Given the rise of China and the perceived US threat to its military hegemony and democratic ideals, the legitimacy and sustainability of the BRI’s promised peaceful and harmonious global order is intrinsically tied to the US response towards China, which remains confrontational and “Containment” driven. To mitigate and avoid such a “calamity,” Kevin Rudd, proposes a perceptive and balanced way forward, he says the two need to build trust and develop a framework of “Managed strategic competition” in which both super powers can test the strengths and weaknesses of each other and the world can see and decide on its own and then wryly he leaves it to the imagination of all by saying, “may the best system win.”¹²⁸

Yet, these challenges are a litmus test of China’s resilience and its leadership’s ability to truly knit the participating countries together, enhance partnerships and make the BRI sustainable. The success of the BRI is ultimately rooted in its ability to build constructive, meaningful and sustainable people-to-people ties. For it is only when there is a resonance

¹²⁶https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/china-is-weaponizing-the-belt-and-road-what-can-the-us-do-about-it/?mccid=dfd3771eaf&mc_eid=4baa25aadf accessed on November 2, 2020. For a similar but more nuanced perspective, see, Henry Farrel and Abraham Newman, “*The Folly of De-coupling from China: It Isn’t Just Perilous—It is Impossible*” https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-03/foolly-decoupling-china?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=on_the_ballot&utm_campaign=on_the_ballot_2020_active accessed on December 4, 2020.

¹²⁷Joseph S. Nye, “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2009, p.160-163. According to Nye a combination of hard and soft power is needed for effective foreign policy and this is what China appears to be doing through BRI.

¹²⁸Kevin Rudd is the President of Asia Society and formerly the Prime Minister of Australia, “Short of War: How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Confrontation From Ending in Calamity” | *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2021, pp 2-20. P 20.

and ownership of it at the grass-roots level among the people that China will be able to win acceptance of and realize its vision in its true spirit. The Coronavirus (Covid-19) threat could slow down this process, but as soon as it is brought under control, the BRI's footprint is likely to expand in the countries that seek to foster connectivity, cooperation, and aim to pursue common goals that have a shared vision of global peace and sustainable development. This study reveals that, the academic exchange process, backed by Chinese economic investments under the BRI, are acting as a catalyst in advancing China's soft power. This "distributive globalism" of the BRI holds the promise of an interdependent, cooperative, peaceful and harmonious global order.