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The Role of Soft Power in EU-China Relations: Limits, Challenges, and Strategic Responses

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Riassunto

Alla fine del Novecento, il concetto di soft power entrò a far parte del dibattito internazionale come una nuova forma di influenza, esercitata non solo dagli attori statali, ma anche da nuovi attori non statali emergenti sulla scena globale. Questa visione alternativa delle relazioni internazionali trovò terreno fertile in un contesto segnato da un relativo declino dell'hard power tradizionale e dal conseguente indebolimento della visione realista che fino a quel momento aveva dominato le relazioni internazionali, concependo la guerra come il motore principale alla base del comportamento degli Stati.

In questo scenario in evoluzione, l'importanza della forza militare venne ridimensionata a favore di un potere fondato su strumenti non coercitivi, in cui l'influenza culturale e ideologica assunse un ruolo chiave. Parallelamente a queste tendenze, una serie di dinamiche sociali ed economiche e, un contesto mondiale sempre più interconnesso, favorirono l'affermazione di una concezione alternativa delle dinamiche globali.

Il concetto di soft power fu elaborato da Joseph Nye negli anni "90 sulla base di un'analisi del contesto statunitense e fu, da lui, in seguito arricchito di nuove caratterizzazioni ed esteso ad altri attori del sistema globale. Strumenti come la persuasione, l'influenza culturale e la leadership ideologica assunsero un ruolo centrale nel definire le scelte di politica estera. Inoltre, con l'evoluzione del sistema internazionale, emersero nuovi concetti contrapposti e complementari rispetto a quelli di soft e hard power, a testimonianza della crescente complessità delle dinamiche globali. Il primo è quello di smart power, inteso sia come una combinazione strategica e consapevole degli strumenti di hard e soft power, sia come una forma di influenza modellata su un contesto globale sempre più interconnesso e digitale, in cui l'interdipendenza diventa un elemento chiave delle relazioni internazionali. Il secondo concetto è quello di sharp power, con riferimento specifico all'uso delle risorse di potere da parte dei regimi autoritari fondato su strumenti non consensuali e spesso manipolatori. Questi nuovi approcci affiancarono alle visioni tradizionali delle dinamiche globali, emergendo come risposte alle sfide poste dalla globalizzazione,

dalle nuove tecnologie di informazione e dall'emergere di nuovi statali e non statali con un orientamento politico diverso da quello di stampo democratico occidentale. Nella prima parte questa tesi vuole analizzare l'evoluzione di questi concetti, le loro caratteristiche e il loro impatto sulle relazioni internazionali e sulle strategie impiegate dai vari attori globali per affermare la propria influenza nello scenario internazionale.

Dopo aver analizzato in linea generale il concetto di soft power, il focus si sposta su come la teoria ha trovato applicazione in uno Stato lontano geograficamente e ideologicamente dagli Stati Uniti e allora in rapida ascesa economica e politica: la Cina. Di fronte alle crescenti preoccupazioni degli altri attori internazionali per la sua veloce modernizzazione e crescente assertività nel contesto internazionale, le autorità cinesi introdussero nel proprio discorso politico il concetto di soft power, con il fine di dimostrare le intenzioni pacifiche alla base dello sviluppo cinese.

Questa visione, seppur di stampo occidentale, fu così in seguito adattata e plasmata sulla realtà culturale, politica e ideologica della Cina, dando origine a quello che successivamente verrà definito come "soft power cinese". In questo progetto di tesi si intende analizzare quelli che sono i suoi strumenti, gli elementi distintivi rispetto alla visione originaria e la sua attuazione nei rapporti con l'Europa, attraverso un'analisi di alcuni eventi e iniziative emblematiche degli ultimi dieci anni.

L'analisi della strategia di Pechino ha come obiettivo quello di mettere in luce come la Cina abbia costruito una propria narrazione di soft power che riflette le sue peculiarità e le sfide che affronta, sia sul piano interno che su quello internazionale, e di determinare come questa narrazione trovi attuazione, seppur con efficacia limitata, nei rapporti con l'Europa.

Il soft power cinese affonda le sue radici nell'identità culturale, storica e ideologica del Paese, ponendo un forte accento sull'importanza dell'armonia nella politica estera e il ruolo della Cina come attore internazionale responsabile e positivo.

Analizzando questa forma di influenza, emerge che essa si manifesta soprattutto attraverso la cultura, tanto da essere spesso definita come soft power culturale. Di fatto, uno degli obiettivi principali di Pechino è la diffusione della propria lingua e del proprio patrimonio culturale all'estero, tramite una serie di iniziative culturali,

scambi educativi e istituzioni come gli Istituti Confucio. Questi ultimi svolgono un ruolo strategico nella proiezione internazionale cinese, promuovendo attivamente la lingua e cultura nazionali.

Accanto alla dimensione culturale, un ruolo centrale è svolto dalle iniziative economiche. Gli strumenti finanziari e commerciali costituiscono infatti una componente fondamentale del soft power cinese, attraverso cui Pechino rafforza la propria influenza e stabilisce rapporti di cooperazione con altri attori del sistema internazionale.

Un altro strumento chiave del soft power cinese è rappresentato dai media, sulla cui internazionalizzazione Pechino ha investito in modo crescente negli ultimi anni, promuovendo accordi e cooperazioni con piattaforme europee. L'obiettivo è quello di diffondere la propria narrativa e dare spazio alla "voce cinese", elementi che oggi occupano un posto centrale nell'agenda politica del Paese. Attraverso le piattaforme mediatiche, la Cina mira a plasmare l'opinione pubblica globale e a contrastare le narrative occidentali, spesso accusate di offrire un'immagine negativa del Pease.

Trattando il soft power cinese è inoltre essenziale analizzare il ruolo crescente che occupano i social media. Le piattaforme social vengono infatti spesso utilizzate in modo strategico e strumentale dalle autorità cinesi per proiettare un'immagine positiva della nazione all'estero.

Un esempio significativo è rappresentato dal periodo della pandemia di COVID-19 , durante il quale l'attività cinese sui social è cresciuta in modo esponenziale, arrivando talvolta ad essere percepita come aggressiva. Si tratta del caso di quella definita che in occidente è stata definita come "wolf warrior diplomacy", termine che si riferisce al tono combattivo di alcuni contenuti diffusi sui social media.

La pandemia costituisce un caso emblematico per analizzare non solo il ruolo dei social media nella strategia di soft power della Cina, ma anche l'attuazione più in generale di questa strategia in Europa. La cosiddetta "diplomazia delle mascherine" è stata uno dei principali tentativi di Pechino di rafforzare la propria cooperazione con i paesi europei e di limitare i danni reputazionali causati dal COVID-19, attraverso una strategia mirata di aiuti e assistenza medica ai Paesi maggiormente colpiti.

L’analisi della politica estera della Cina in questo periodo si inserisce in un quadro più ampio, che mette in luce il ruolo chiave delle iniziative culturali, economiche e mediatiche di Pechino nella regione europea.

Tuttavia, dall’analisi emerge il carattere duale della strategia di soft power cinese e della sua percezione in Europa. Da un lato, l’Europa riconosce i potenziali vantaggi delle iniziative cinesi, soprattutto in ambito economico, ma dall’altro continua a considerare Pechino più come un rivale strategico che come un partner, e una potenziale cooperazione più profonda incontra un diffuso scetticismo. Questo atteggiamento ambivalente riflette le tensioni nei rapporti con la Cina, che oscillano tra il riconoscimento delle opportunità di sviluppo e i crescenti timori per la sicurezza e i valori democratici.

Questa visione dei rapporti con Pechino, unita ad altri fattori come la percepita aggressività cinese, la posizione ambigua della Cina in merito a questioni globali chiave, come il conflitto in Ucraina, e le controversie legate a situazioni in regioni come lo Xinjiang ed Hong Kong, limitano significativamente l’efficacia delle iniziative di soft power nella regione, contribuendo spesso alla loro categorizzazione come sharp power. Inoltre, il forte ruolo del Partito Comunista Cinese nella definizione dell’agenda internazionale e nella gestione della presenza mediatica, sia interna che esterna, contribuisce a far percepire l’attività cinese come propaganda, alimentano ulteriormente la diffidenza occidentale.

Per evidenziare la dualità e i limiti del soft power cinese in Europa, viene presa in analisi la Belt and Road Initiative, uno dei progetti più rilevanti di Pechino nell’ultimo decennio. Pur trattandosi di un’iniziativa di carattere prevalentemente economico e infrastrutturale, essa ha anche un’importante dimensione di soft power, e in questo contesto il caso dell’Italia risulta particolarmente emblematico. L’adesione da parte del governo italiano dimostra che l’iniziativa era stata inizialmente accolta con entusiasmo, lasciando intravedere la possibilità di una concreta attuazione delle ambizioni di Pechino nella regione. Tuttavia, successive rivalutazioni strategiche e cambiamenti politici hanno progressivamente ridimensionato il progetto, fino al ritiro ufficiale dell’Italia. Questo episodio evidenzia le difficoltà incontrate dalla Cina

nel costruire relazioni di fiducia in Europa, dove le preoccupazioni legate alla sicurezza e alla dipendenza economica tendono a prevalere sulla realizzazione di una cooperazione più stretta e l'instaurarsi di un rapporto di fiducia.

La limitata efficacia delle iniziative di soft power cinesi e il diffuso scetticismo nei confronti di una collaborazione più profonda si inseriscono in un quadro di crescenti tensioni tra Bruxelles e Pechino. A livello diplomatico, rimane una forte enfasi sull'importanza del rapporto con la Cina, soprattutto nelle occasioni ufficiali. Tuttavia, a livello concreto, il rapporto con Pechino è sempre più segnato da preoccupazioni, in particolare per l'ampio divario commerciale tra i due Paesi, che Bruxelles interpreta come un segnale di squilibrio economico e un ostacolo alla cooperazione. Nonostante questo, mentre i rapporti sino-europei sembrano affrontare un periodo di crisi, i crescenti investimenti cinesi nel settore della sostenibilità e delle tecnologie verdi, unite all'impegno di Pechino per il raggiungimento degli obiettivi internazionali in materia ambientale, sembrano aprire nuove possibilità per una maggiore presenza cinese in Europa e una ripresa del dialogo. Tuttavia, queste speranze sono in parte frenate dalla percezione, diffusa in Europa, dei crescenti investimenti cinesi come una potenziale minaccia alle industrie e ai settori strategici locali. Questa dinamica crea una tensione tra interesse economico e tutela degli interessi strategici, che spesso si traduce in una risposta ambivalente da parte degli Stati membri nei confronti delle iniziative promosse da Pechino.

La cooperazione sino-europea sembra inoltre favorita dagli ultimi sviluppi del contesto internazionale, in particolare dalla recente posizione degli Stati Uniti, caratterizzata da un progressivo disimpegno non solo nel settore ambientale, con il ritiro dagli accordi di Parigi, ma più in generale dalle istituzioni multilaterali. Questo atteggiamento ha alimentato l'ipotesi di una possibile "ritirata" statunitense dalla leadership globale, aprendo così nuove possibilità per la Cina di affermarsi come protagonista sulla scena internazionale e di realizzare le sue crescenti ambizioni.

Un altro evento significativo che, di recente, ha contribuito a ridefinire lo scenario geopolitico globale è stato l'imposizione di dazi da parte degli Stati Uniti, che ha colpito anche partner storici come l'Europa, generando crescenti tensioni nel settore commerciale e nell'alleanza transatlantica. In risposta, molti paesi hanno iniziato a

guardare con maggiore interesse alla possibilità di intensificare la collaborazione con la Cina, rafforzando l'influenza globale di Pechino. In questo contesto, si assiste a una possibile ridefinizione degli equilibri geopolitici, in cui l'Europa potrebbe avvicinarsi alla Cina, pur mantenendo un atteggiamento cauto e volto alla salvaguardia dei propri interessi strategici. Alla luce di questi sviluppi globali, Cina ed Europa sembrano orientare la propria politica estera e la loro ricerca di influenza verso nuove aree di interesse strategico nel Sud Globale, considerato sempre più come un'opportunità per costruire nuove forme di collaborazione. In questo scenario internazionale sempre più complesso, caratterizzato da un apparente ritorno agli strumenti militari e da uno spostamento delle ambizioni strategiche verso nuove aree, prevedere l'evoluzione futura del rapporto sino-europeo resta una sfida. Tuttavia, il soft power continuerà ad avere un ruolo significativo nelle dinamiche tra i due Paesi, pur rimanendo condizionato da alcune caratteristiche strutturali.

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Introduction

In 1990, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power defining it as a country's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. Since then, the international system has undergone many changes. With the emergence of new global players like China, soft power has become increasingly important alongside traditional instruments of influence. In this evolving context, culture, media, economic appeal and narrative shaping have become essential tools in the countries' foreign policy strategies.

This thesis focuses on analyzing China's soft power strategy, particularly in relations with Europe.

China's own interpretation of soft power is inspired by Nye's theory; however, it reflects the country's own strategic objectives and ambitions. In the context of China's rapid rise on the global stage, Chinese leaders increasingly shaped the official narrative around the concept soft power, integrating it with the nation's broader global strategy, mainly aimed at projecting China as a reliable and pacific international actor. This narrative is hindered by Beijing's increased assertive stance and authoritarian governance, which often lead to the Western perception of China's initiatives as sharp power, rather than soft power.

The main objective of the research is to define the effectiveness of China's soft power in shaping relations with Europe and is pursued through an analysis of the main developments of China's strategy in the region in the past ten years.

The initiatives considered in this study include China's mask diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Belt and Road Initiative and growing cooperation in climate and sustainability, the choice of these three cases stems from their implications in terms of soft power. Through an analysis of these dimensions of Chinese engagement in Europe, the thesis investigates how China aims at increasing its influence in Europe and seeks to projects itself as a strategic partner, rather than a systemic rival. The final objective is to assess the outcomes of these initiatives to determine the effectiveness in achieving soft power objectives.

Special attention is given to Italy's cooperation with China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Following an analysis of the soft dimensions of this China's strategic initiative, the focus shifts on the implications of Italy's initial decision to join and later to withdraw for China's broader soft power strategy in Europe.

Finally, the research analyzes how China's soft power ambitious fit in the rapidly changing international context, also considering the opportunities that the U.S' withdrawal from multilateral organizations and the imposition of tariffs on historical allies might create for Beijing.

In examining the current global order, the analysis also considers Europe's strategic response to China's growing soft power ambitions, characterized by a renewed engagement in the Global South in an attempt to counterbalance China's influence in the area.

The study draws on English-language academic sources, speeches and media reports, with a focus on material published over the past ten years. This limitation to more contemporary sources was done in an attempt to fill a gap in the academic landscape, where recent developments of China's soft power strategy and their impact on EU-China relations are often overlooked. By examining the recent dynamics involving the two parties, the research aims at offering a better understanding of the current role of soft power in EU-China relations, while making assumptions about the possible future evolution of this cooperation.

CHAPTER 1

The Concept of Soft Power

1.1 The Concept of Soft Power and Its Development

The pursuit of power and influence has long been at the heart of international politics. Traditionally, states and other international actors have relied on hard power instruments, like military force, economic sanctions, or coercive measures to assert their supremacy in the global scenario. However, at the end of last century, an innovative approach to the exercise of power emerged: soft power.

It is natural when talking about soft power to refer to the literature of Joseph Nye, which is essential to give an introductory overview of the concept and to determine its value for international relations.

Nye was the first to define soft power in 1990, and since then he has revised and expanded the concept several times. In his analysis of the global context of the 1990s, he observed a shift away from the traditional means of power in favor of an alternative form of influence "*less transferable, less coercive and less tangible"*, reflecting the growing importance of information and communication. [1]

The decline of traditional resources of power is mainly connected to five trends: the increased economic interdependence, the emergence of transnational actors, rising nationalistic tendencies in weak states, the spread of new technologies and changing political issues. [2]

The spread of modern and innovative technologies played a crucial role in the relative decline of hard power instruments. These advances allowed the diffusion of military capabilities not only among great powers, but also to private actors and small states, thus reducing the monopoly of great powers over deterrence and weakening the effectiveness of traditional military superiority. [3] Furthermore, the development of innovative technologies and new means of communication contributed

[1] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept," *Journal of Political Power* 14, no. 1 (2021), p. 167
[2] Ivi., p.160
[3] Ivi., pp. 160-162

to the growing importance of information in defining international dynamics. The instant access to knowledge through these technologies became central in the states' strategies and the increased value placed on intangible sources of knowledge contributed to a decline in the reliance on military strength alone. [4] For instance, while in the past governments primarily invested in human espionage, at the end of last century, major powers relied on satellites to acquire economic, political and military information.[5] This shift demonstrates the growing significance of technologies in shaping global influence.

Another factor that has contributed to the growing importance of soft power is the growing economic interdependence among global actors, which not only diminished the value of coercion through military and economic strength, but also increased its costs. As Nye points out, while growing economic interdependence can be beneficial for the nations involved, it also increases the risks connected to the use of threats. As a result, the rising costs of using force made less threatening forms of power increasingly attractive. [6]

Global interdependence accelerated the process of globalization, reshaping traditional power dynamics. In this evolving international scenario, the relative importance of hard power diminished, favoring contexts where strategic for gaining wealth and influence increasingly relied on cooperation rather than coercion.[7]

The evolving nature of international politics increased the importance of more intangible forms of power. Intangible resources, such as national cohesion, universalistic culture and the growing influence of international institutions gained greater prominence on the global stage. [8] These shifts created fertile ground for the rise of soft power, understood as the ability of a country to legitimize its influence through the attractiveness of its culture, ideology and institutions. [9]

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[4] Ivi., p.165.
[5] Ivi., pp.164-165
[6] J. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990), pp.167-168.
[7] G. M. Gallarotti, "Soft Power: What It Is, Why It's Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use," *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011), pp. 25–47, p.37
[8] J.S Nye, "Soft Power", *op. cit*., p. 164
[9] Ivi, p. 167.

These dynamics, which began to emerge as early as the 1990s, were further reinforced in the following decade and led to a shifting role for military power on the global stage. Nye emphasizes how scientific and technological developments in the twentieth century, particularly the emergence of nuclear weapons, influenced dramatically the nature of power resources. The nuclear revolution created a new age of security community, in which conflicts between major powers became increasingly unthinkable due to the immense costs of war. [10] This evolution in military capability had contradictory consequences for global superpowers: while it granted them unmatched military strength, it also significantly increased the social and political costs of using hard power. [11]

The rising costs of war not only depended on advancements in military technology, but also on the social changes within major democratic societies, where the increased public awareness of the human cost of conflicts reduced the acceptability of military intervention in the population's eyes. [12] In this context, the global spread of democracy further contributed to reducing the utility of coercion and force. As individuals became more politically empowered, they could help prevent the use of violence to resolve conflicts. Moreover, the diffusion of a democratic culture had a positive influence on national leaders, orienting them towards a more liberal approach to power. [13]

Another factor that contributed to the rise of soft power was the growth of international organizations, which encouraged nations to adopt a more constructive global approach and increased their trust in the value of creating cooperative networks. As these networks evolved, so did the norms and laws they promoted. In this perspective, international institutions not only raised the minimum standard of civil behavior in global politics but also strengthened the role of soft power by making nations

[10] G. M. Gallarotti, "Soft Power", *op, cit.* p, 38
[11] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", (2004), p. 33
[12] Ibid.
[13] G. M, Gallarotti, "Soft Power", op. 38

more inclined to use legitimate forms of influence and abandon illegitimate ones, such as force and coercion. [14]

The development of new military technologies, the changes in the public perception of war, the growing democratization and the growing role of international organization, together all contributed to shape the relative reduction of hard power and the increasing role of soft power on the global stage.

In a rapidly changing international landscape, the original concept of soft power was revised several times.

In his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,* Nye expands on the initial concept of soft power by emphasizing its vital component: attractiveness and defining its main sources, which are a country's culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. [15]

The first of these sources, culture, is defined as a set of values and practices that provide meaning within a society. A country can produce soft power through its culture when it includes universal values, and its policies align with global shared interests. For Nye, universalistic cultures, such as the United States 'one, increase a nation's probability of obtaining the wanted results because it contributes to the establishment of a relationships of attraction and duty. On the contrary, cultures that promote limited values are less likely to produce soft power. [16]

In his discussion of the role of culture in soft power, Nye uses the term "universal values", without proving a detailed definition or explanation of how these should be interpreted. However, given the American context of his research, it can be implied that he aligns more closely with a Western conception of universal values. The idea, rooted in broader Western political discourses and tradition, frames uni-

[14] Ivi., pp. 38-39
[15] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p. 8
[16] Ivi., p. 25

versal values as those accepted globally, regardless of a person's ethnicity or nationality. They are generally associated with the notions of liberty, democracy and human rights. [17]

When discussing the appeal of the United States, Nye highlights how values such as democracy, human rights and individual opportunities can be especially attractive to others. [18] In his view, foreign policies produce soft power when they promote these broadly shared values. [19]

While not giving an exact definition of his interpretation of universal values, Nye is more focused on clarifying the distinction between the cultural resources that help produce soft power and the behavior of attraction. He warns against reducing soft power only to the exportation of popular culture, pointing out that this approach to soft power often produced the desired outcomes. While popular culture can contribute to a nation's soft power strategy its effectiveness and impact depend largely on the context. As Nye illustrates, the global popularity of American popular products, such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's do not necessarily lead to a greater love for the United States, particularly in the Islamic world. [20] This example underscores Nye's argument that the effectiveness of soft power exercised through the sharing of cultural resources is deeply connected to the values these sources convey and how they resonate in distinct cultural and political environments.

According to Nye, both domestic and foreign policies play a crucial role in shaping a country's soft power, with their impact depending largely on the context. These policies can either enhance or damage a nation's attractiveness, producing both long-term and short-term effects. When a country pursues policies that are perceived by others as legitimate and aligned with shared values, its soft power will be strengthened, in contrast the exercise of policies that are perceived as hypocritical, arrogant and indifferent to the opinion of others will undermine deeply a country's

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[17] Jiayi Wan, "The Dilemmas of Universal Values and the Possible Solutions," *SHS Web of Conferences* 168 (2023): 01001, pp.1-2

[18] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.12

[19] Ivi., p.68

[20] Ivi., pp. 25-26

power of attractiveness. [21] As Nye notes, governments can either attract or repel others by their example; a country that is a role model in behavior within national borders, with international institutions that promote cooperation and a foreign policy that actively promotes peace and human rights has the power to strongly affect the others' preferences too. [22] This highlights how policy decisions affect global perception and contribute to a country's power to influence the international environment through attraction rather than coercion.

Another key aspect that witnessed an evolution since its initial theorization of soft power is the type of actors who exercise it. In *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,* Nye's primarily focuses on the exercise of soft power by national government, emphasizing their ability to influence and attract others through a country's culture, values, and policies. However, while governments remain central in his analysis, Nye hints at the broader shift in power dynamics. He notes the growing importance of the exercise of power by private actors, fostered by the processes of modernization, urbanization, and communication in developing countries. [23]

The increasingly significant role of non-state actors on the global stage becomes even more important in the information age, which allows power to transcend national boundaries to spread more widely. In this new context, soft power is only partially exercised by private actors, such as NGOs, which have a key role in shaping global power dynamics. They can both influence public perceptions indirectly and pressure governments and business leaders directly, all without relying on hard power. [24]

Non-state actors include intergovernmental organizations, which, according to Nye, can also develop soft power. The United Nations is an important example of an international organization with significant soft power, deriving from its universality, legal framework and global attractiveness. These aspects grant its votes and

[21] Ivi, pp. 12-13
[22] Ivi.., p.14
[23] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990), p.162
[24] J.S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.91

declarations a significant degree of global legitimacy. However, the UN's soft power is dynamic, as it changes over time and is heavily influenced by political events and the decisions of member states. For instance, the U.S decision to enter the conflict Iraq without a second Security Council resolution damaged the UN's credibility, with many countries questioning its role in dealing with international conflicts. Despite these limitations, the UN remains an influential actor on the global scenario and its role cannot be neglected by governmental actors. [25]

So far, the non-state actors discussed include intergovernmental organizations and private entities, but there are two additional types of non-state actors worth mentioning for their use of soft power.

The first are organized religious movements, which for centuries have exercised soft power attracting followers around the world through shared values and beliefs. However, when these movements adopt aggressive or coercive strategies, they risk repelling rather than attracting, consequently undermining their soft power. [26]

The second category includes malevolent organizations and networks. According to Nye, soft power is defined on the perception of the target audience, not on the intentions of the beholder, so as far as the target audience finds it appealing there is a soft power strategy. This means that even transnational terrorist organizations, though largely viewed as repulsive, can exert a form of soft power over receptive audiences, particularly among extremist groups. [27]

The exercise of soft power by private actors has become an increasingly significant trend in global politics. Whether through the attraction of followers, the shaping governments policies and public opinion on key issues, the radicalization extremists' group, contributes to shape the evolving international arena.

Another recurring theme in Joseph Nye's work is the relationship between hard power and soft power. Although they represent different forms of influence, both

[25] Ivi., p.95

[26] Ivi., pp. 94-95

[27] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.95

are interconnected as ways of shaping others' behavior to achieve desired outcomes. [28] This connection becomes particularly relevant when soft power strategies adopt coercive elements, thereby blurring the line between the two. [29]
This is the case of power strategies such as agenda setting. While they may involve elements of deception, they do not necessarily fit within hard power, as what ultimately determines whether an action constitutes soft or hard power is the perception of target audience. If the behavior is perceived as welcome and legitimate, it aligns more in the category of soft power, even when coercive elements are present.[30]

From this perspective, two additional elements are essential to define the nature of power: voluntarism and persuasion. All forms of power depend on the context, and the circumstances where people can relate to each other. However, compared to hard power, which relies on coercion, soft power depends heavily upon the existence of a willing target audience. Its effectiveness increases when a country's culture and ideology are perceived as attractive. In such cases, others are more likely to follow voluntarily, without the need for force. [31]
Soft power also operates through the ability to shape others' preferences by means of persuasion. However, Nye emphasizes that persuasion in this context cannot be merely reduced to the ability to convince others by argument. Instead, the kind of persuasion exercised through soft power is rooted in attraction, an appeal that operates through shared values and leads others to acquiescence. To put it more simply, from a behavioral perspective, soft power is best understood as attractive power. [32]

Soft and hard power also differ in several critical aspects. The primary distinction lies in the nature of the behavior and the tangibility of the resources employed. [33]

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[28] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit p.95
[29] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept," Journal of Political Power 14, no. 1 (2021), p.7.
[30] Ibid.
[31] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit p.25
[32] Ivi., p.21
[33] J. S. Nye, "Soft power: the evolution of a concept", op.cit p.7

Nye distinguishes between command power, which relies on coercion or inducement, and co-optive power, which rests on the attractiveness of a culture, values, and the ability to manipulate preferences by setting the agenda. The spectrum between these two forms of power includes a wide range of strategies, from direct coercion and economic inducement to agenda-setting and pure attraction. [34]

Despite these distinctions, hard and soft power are often interconnected and can influence each other. For instance, a country's military and economic decline can lead to a corresponding loss of soft power, particularly in its ability to shape the international agenda and maintain global attractiveness. In addition, some countries may be attracted to others because of their hard power, drawn by the myth of invincibility. In this way, military power can be used to create empires or institutions that dictate the agenda to smaller states. [35]

Despite their mutual influence, soft power does not depend on hard power. From this perspective, a country can wield soft power regardless of its military might and vice versa. [36] For instance, the Vatican wields considerable soft power despite its limited hard power, while the Soviet Union once possessed significant soft power, but it later declined even though its economic and military capabilities continued to grow. [37]

While soft power gained recognition as an essential component of international influence, alongside its theorization, numerous criticisms have emerged.

A first criticism of Nye's soft power theory concerns its limited scope in terms of geography and historical context. Most of its soft power writings focus on United States, often overlooking other emerging international actors. As a result, the analysis tends to be context-specific and focused on the implications of major global events for the U.S global influence, such as the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq conflict. [38]

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[34] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", op.cit, p.22
[35] Ivi., p.23
[36] Ivi., p,24
[37] Ibid.
[38] M. Gomichon, "Joseph Nye on Soft Power", E-International Relations, March 8, 2013, https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/08/joseph-nye-on-soft-power/

Soft power strategy requires a high level of expertise, effective interagency coordination and cross-disciplinary approaches, which contributes to its perception as a complex strategy. While all foreign policies have the ultimate goal of changing human behavior, the objectives of soft power are often pursued through attractive narratives and shared values. This can make them appear more transparent, but at the same time their strategic purposes may be subtly embedded, allowing governments to present them as benevolent or neutral initiatives.[39]

Moreover, critics often argue power exercised through the means of attraction and imitation has limited outcomes when it comes to shaping policy decisions. [40] This perceived ineffectiveness of soft power is also attributed to the increasingly competitive and conflictual nature of the international arena, where many states are prioritizing traditional measures of power. Since the end of the Cold War, some scholars have argued that the influence of soft power has been overstated. This critique does not dismiss the utility of soft power itself but rather questions its overall presence or absence in the current international scenario. Scholars aligned with the realist school of international relations view the potential effectiveness of soft power with skepticism, especially for its heavy reliance on non-state actors, which are considered as irrelevant in realism. [41]

Nye addresses the skepticism by admitting that, even though the effectiveness of soft power is not as immediate and strong as that of hard power, it is wrong to say that it's not effective at all, as he stresses out *"it is more common that exerting influence on others allows us to get what is desired*". [42]

The ones who view power as limited to actions of command and control have a limited perspective that ignores another important aspect of power: the ability to

[39] M. Seymour, "The Problem with Soft Power," Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 14, 2020, FPRI, accessed September 8 2025 https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/the-problem-with-soft-power/.
[40] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.15.
[41] M. Seymour, "The Problem with Soft Power", op.cit
[42] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.15.

get the wanted outcomes without resorting to coercion through threats and economic retaliation. [43] To analyze whether soft power is effective or not, it is important to specify that certain conditions are more suitable for the exercise of attraction than others and in general soft power is more likely to have an impact on a country's general outcomes rather than specific objectives. [44]

The major limitation associated with soft power lies in its concrete effectiveness; while it is true that the power of attraction is generally less immediate or forceful than hard power, it would be a mistake to exclude it entirely from analyses of power. Instead, its effectiveness should be considered in relation to specific conditions and the objectives it seeks to achieve.

Other critics argue that the limitations of soft power do not stem from its theoretical dimension, but rather from the evolving global landscape.[45] Nye first introduced the concept of soft power during the last days of the bipolar world system, where the exercise of power relied mainly on military force. Today, however, the international scenario has become multipolar, with the emergence of three major global powers competing for influence. In this context, soft power is often seen as secondary and less relevant in defining global dynamics. Instead, nations are expected to rely more on strategic alliances based on shared interests, where a country's national power will stem mainly from its value as a desirable ally. [46] In this new international scenario, the exercise of power will no longer solely rely on coercion or attraction, but on a mutual desire to cooperate in order to solve critical challenges. A clear example of this new trend is the unprecedented alliance between Isreal, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. This collaboration is not based on shared values, political systems or historical ties, but rather on a common strategic interest in countering Iran's expansion in the region. [47]

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Ivi., 15-16
[45] I. Manor and G. J. Golan, "The Irrelevance of Soft Power," E-International Relations, October 19, 2020, accessed September 5, 2025, https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/19/the-irrelevance-of-soft-power/
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

The evolution of the original idea of soft power is one of the main points of Nye's latest publications, particularly in response to the rise of new actors on the global scene and the emergence of the new concept of sharp power. While Nye had previously focused mainly on the US approach to soft power, in this volume the first time he broadens his analysis to include other countries, notably China. He acknowledges that, although the concept of soft power originally emerged in the context of American power, soft power is not limited to the United States or its international behavior. [48] To support this argument, Nye examines how the concept of soft power was received, interpreted, and adapted in China, a theme that will be explored in the chapter "*Chinese Soft Power*".

1.2 The Role of Soft Power in International Relations

To understand the role of soft power in international relations, it is essential to first determine its place within the broader theoretical framework, particularly in contrast to hard power and the dominant realist approach. Realism has long been the dominant paradigm in international relations, emphasizing the centrality of military power, security competition, and the use of force as the ultimate guarantor of a state's survival. [49] In the traditional realist perspective of international relations, war was considered «the ultimate game in which the cards of international politics were played. When all the cards were on the table, estimates of relative power were proven and disproven». [50] However, over time, advances in technologies have transformed the sources of strength in warfare. Moreover, in today's world, for an increasing number of global issues, war is no longer the ultimate arbiter. [51] In the last decades the realist approach has been challenged by the emergence of a softer idea of power, one that emphasizes attraction rather than coercion and questions realists'

[48] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit p. 9
[49] G. M. Gallarotti "Esteem and Influence: Soft Power in International Relations," *Journal of Political Powe*r, p. 383
[50] J.S Nye (2021) "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept." *Journal of Political Power*, p.3
[51] Ibid.

notions of widespread international conflict and the use of violence to grant national security. [52]

As early as 1990, Joseph Nye argued that the evolving nature of international politics had made intangible forms of power, such as culture and diplomacy, more important. [53] In *Esteem and Influence: Soft Power in International Politics,* Giulio Gallarotti specifically identifies four main reasons behind the rise of soft power: the growing social and economic costs of armed conflict in the face of growing economic interdependence among nations, the acceleration of globalization, the softening of traditional security dilemmas, and the emergence of international governance structures. [54] These dynamics contributed together to the creation of a new global arena where influence is exerted through attraction rather than coercion.

Soft power presents a compelling alternative to the use of force in global politics, potentially reducing reliance on armed conflict in favor of strategies based on the power of attraction and persuasion, while promoting shared values and enhancing cooperation between states. As Nye states soft power is a staple for daily democratic politics, if a leader represents values that other want to follow the expenses of leading will diminish as soft power uses a currency other than force or economic means to promote cooperation, that is, the attraction to shared values and the rightness and duty to contribute to the achievement of those values.[55]

Gallarotti's perspective reinforces the value of soft power as an alternative to hard power and a potential strategy for conflict reduction. He emphasizes that a soft power strategy cultivates pacific cooperation and compliance from other countries in a harmonious international context, where alternative "softer" means and sources allow nations to pursue their goals with less animosity and resistance. [56]

Soft power not only can contribute to the reduction of conflicts, but it can also foster greater cooperation in both the economic and political field.

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[52] G. M. Gallarotti "Esteem and Influence", op.cit, pp. 384-387
[53] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990), p. 164.
[54] G. M. Gallarotti, "Esteem and Influence", op.cit, pp.385–386.
[55] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.21
[56] G. M. Gallarotti, "Esteem and Influence", op.cit p.384

By generating esteem, soft power enhances a nation's attractiveness as a model for lifestyle, policies and values. This admiration can lead other nations to emulate successful political and economic systems or to engage in deeper cooperation with soft power states. The emergence of shared interests creates opportunities for mutual gains, making collaboration more reachable than in the realist zero-sum approach. Moreover, soft power strengthens diplomacy by promoting constructive and progressive approaches to foreign affairs. [57] As a strategic power tool, soft power offers a presenting as a peaceful and positive alternative to hard power, enabling nations to address challenges and encourage collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

Soft power has the potential to influence international relations through tools such as persuasion, diplomacy and cooperation. Yet today, in the face of a return to a more traditional view of international affairs, where the use of weapons and force to resolve conflicts is preferred, the difficulty related to the effective application of soft power has increased. More than twenty years have passed since Nye identified soft power as a fundamental element of democratic policy, emphasizing the importance of attraction in international relations [58]. In an international scenario marked by conflicts and growing tensions, Nye himself has had to confront the question: *Whatever happened to soft power?.*[59] In a global context where many major powers, such as the U.S or China are experiencing a decline in soft power, Nye argues that it still holds a great political resonance[60] . Soft power still plays a significant role in international relations, shaping the decisions of leaders in what has become a competition for influence. [61]

Although soft power is not the only or most important source of power given its slow and indirect effects, Nye emphasizes that a skillful leader understands the

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[57] Ibid.

[58] J. S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.21.

[59] J.S Nye., "Whatever Happened to Soft Power?," *Project Syndicate*, January 11, 2022, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/whatever-happened-to-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2022-01

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

power of values. [62] While future developments for any nation remain uncertain, he is sure that influence through attraction will remain a vital component of global politics. [63] Although current trends point to resurgence of hard power, soft power continues and will continue to play a key role in international politics. Rather than disappearing soft power is evolving diversifying into new forms such as sharp power and smart power, which reflect the changing global trends.

1.1 From Soft to Smart and Sharp Power

The traditional conception of international relations, characterized by a bipolarity between hard and soft power, proves to be inadequate for understanding today's increasingly complex international scenario.

With the evolution of the global context, the very nature of power has changed as well. The concepts of soft and hard power are now often discussed alongside other notions such as those of smart power and sharp power, thus defining a more nuanced and complex view of global power dynamics. This chapter explores the evolution of the traditional ideas of power into these new forms, examining how they can help explain the decisions made by contemporary global actors and their foreign policy choices.

One of the new concepts that has emerged in relation to power is that of smart power. This idea is closely tied to the processes of modernization and evolving dynamics in international relations.

Smart power was first introduced by Joseph Nye not as an independent theory, but as a strategic combination of soft and hard power. [64]

Later, Wilson expanded on this definition offering a more complex vision of smart power and emphasizing how it involves three main components. Firstly, a smart

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] J.S. Nye "Soft Power: The Means to Success", op.cit, p.43

power strategy requires the integration of hard and soft power in mutually reinforcing ways, as to allow the actors to pursue their goals more effectively and efficiently. [65] Secondly, to exercise smart power, a leader must have a deep understanding of the target audience, their own objectives and capabilities, the regional and global context and of the appropriate tools to employ. [66] Finally, smart power requires an extensive and deep knowledge of what are defined as the instruments of statecraft. However, it is not enough to identify what tools are available; a "smart" leader must also identify which are the best tools to use depending on the circumstances and have a deep understanding of their strengths and limitations. [67] In addition, in the definition of his strategy, he must be able to choose the right form of power (hard or soft power) to achieve national objectives. It is important that his evaluation draws on historical examples of an effective combination because these can guide present and future decisions. [68]

Most importantly, a smart approach to power is also related to the awareness that hard and soft power instruments are not neutral tools deployed by an enlightened, all-knowing and independent leader. They represent distinct institutional structures cultures that exert their own normative influence over people who wield them. [69]

To conclude, it can be affirmed that Wilson' categorization of smart power reveals it as a complex strategic approach to power, which requires an extensive knowledge and a deep understanding of the available tools, the external circumstances and the characteristics of both the tools and the target audience.

Wilson's theorization of smart power has shaped its main features and clarified the essential elements of an effective smart power strategy.

Moving forward, it is important to examine the global trends that contributed to the emergence of this new form of power. In fact, the growing relevance of smart power is closely linked to global transformations.

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[65] E. J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power" (2008), p.1
[66] Ivi., p.115
[67] Ivi, p.116
[68] Ibid.
[69] E. J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power*",* op.cit, *p.116*

The rise of information age has introduced smarter ways to exert influence; in this context the manipulation and creation of knowledge has become strictly connected with the notion of power itself and any actor aiming at strengthening his global position must build strategies around the new elements of "smartness". [70]

While technological development and the growing importance of information have contributed to the emergence of smart power, they are not the only factors to be considered.

According to Wilson, smart strategies must also account for the shifting balance of influence among traditional states, as well as the rise of new actors on the international stage. [71] Finally, the last reason for adopting a smart power strategy today lies in the evolution of the population itself. As education levels have risen, people have become more informed and less susceptible to strategies that rely solely on hard or soft power. [72]

Smart power is closely connected with the idea of evolution, whether through technological developments, the emergence of new global actors or higher level of education. These shifts contributed to the theorization of a new vision of power, one that is less limited and increasingly shaped by change.

While Wilson's analysis of smart power was initially based on the American context and background, the concept is equally applicable to China's recent approach to foreign policy.

Over the last decades, China's leadership seems to have adopted a more calculated strategy, deploying its power resources strategically. This approach indicates a careful analysis of the world and a balanced use of power tools to achieve both political goals and their national objectives.[73]

A clear example of this smarter strategy can be found in the country's engagement with Africa, which has often been described as a "charm campaign". In its approach

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[70] E. J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power", op.cit, pp.112-113

[71] Ivi., p.113

[72] Ivi., p.113

[73] E. J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power", op.cit, p.111

to Africa, China deploys the full range of national power instruments to build influence and promote cooperation. [74] This combination of hard power and soft power in a way that effectively serves China's strategic objectives perfectly reflects the theory underlying the concept of smart power.

From this analysis, smart power emerges as a leading trend in contemporary international politics, yet this innovative approach to power continues to face several challenges at both institutional and policy levels.

The institutional landscape for hard power and soft power is at the same time quite simple and complex. It is simple in the sense that hard power institutions are way larger, better funded and wield greater influence than soft power ones. [75] This disparity becomes particularly evident when comparing the different budgets of U.S. institutions; as of 2008 the Department of Defense a budget of $260 million, while the State Department, the primary institution responsible for soft power, had a budget of only $10 million. [76]

The exercise of power is deeply influenced by a country's institutions and their funding. A truly smart power strategy therefore required not only a conscious use of power tools and a deep knowledge of the context, but also smarter institutions capable of combining in a balanced way both soft and hard power. Without addressing institutional issues, the advancement of smart approach risks being deeply hindered.

The limitations of smart power lie not only in institutional challenges, but also in political ones, particularly in foreign policies.

Smart power, as applied in foreign policy, is shaped not only by institutional arrangements, but also by the broader political landscape. The imbalance between hard and soft power is therefore not only institutional, but also political. As Wilson points out, hard power enjoys a broader and more influential political base, with

[74] Ivi., 111-112
[75] Ivi., p.116
[76] Ibid.

allies who are far more numerous, visible and powerful than their soft power counterparts. [77] In contrast, soft power is characterized by few political connections and the lack of political support, being mainly represented by scattered communities of public intellectuals, think tanks, academic institutions, and occasional consulting groups. [78] The political challenges of smart power can be found in the political arena, such as political elections and speeches, where soft power principles and programs emerge with great difficulty when faced with the politicians need to appear hard and strong in public settings. In this context, any appeal to soft power often appears as weak and less impactful; by contrast, smart power could represent a more sophisticated approach. That is why smart power advocates must learn to highlight its advantages through a politically appealing language. [79]

Smart power is a trend with growing importance in the face of a more conscious approach to power embedded in an increasingly technological and informed global context. However, the implementation of smart power encounters both institutional and political obstacles, which highlight a great disparity in the approach to hard power and soft power, making it difficult to combine them efficiently and effectively.

So far, three approaches to the exercise of power in international relations have been analyzed: soft power, hard power and smart power. These strategies are typically associated with liberal democracies, such as the United States, or with private actors.

In recent years, however, a fourth concept has entered the discourse on international power dynamics: sharp power. This term offers a framework to understand how authoritarian regimes want to influence foreign public opinion and shape global narratives: sharp power.

According to a report by the National Endowment for Democracy, the term "soft power", is no longer sufficient to describe the strategies employed by authoritarian

[77] E.J Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power", op.cit, p.119
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ivi., p.119-120

regimes. Instead, their efforts for influence should be addressed as sharp, in the sense that they penetrate and manipulate the information environments of the target countries. Through sharp power, the generally unappealing values of authoritarian system, such as the monopolization of power, top-down control, censorship, and coerced loyalty, are projected outward. [80]

One of the distinctive features of sharp power is its insidious nature, characterized by its ability to pierce the political and information environments of target countries through tools such as propaganda. [81] Propaganda plays a fundamental role in sharp power strategies, being one of the main tools employed by authoritarian regimes to promote a specific narrative. This narrative often frames democratic values as inherently Western and promotes their nationalist and traditional cultural values as the legitimate alternative. [82]

From this perspective, sharp power is presented as the antithesis of soft power: whereas soft power rests on attraction and credibility, sharp power relies on manipulation and distortion. Yet, the two are not strict opposites. Both operate in the realm of non-military influence and aim to shape perceptions, but they diverge in method, legitimacy and long-term effectiveness. [83]

A key difference between the two is that, unlike soft power, which relies on credibility and attraction, sharp power involves disinformation campaigns conducted by illiberal nations or suspect actors with the aim of projecting a favorable image in target countries. [84]

To better understand this distinction, it is useful to mention the different implications propaganda can have. In fact, while it can be used in both soft and sharp power strategies, the key difference lies in how it is perceived. When propaganda generates attraction and is perceived as credible by the target audience, it fits within the

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[80] C. Walker and J. Ludwig, *"*From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power': Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World*,"* in *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, International Forum for Democratic Studies (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), p.21

[81] J. S. Nye "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept", op,cit, p.7

[82] C. Walker and J. Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power*",* op.cit, p..21

[83] G. M. Gallarotti, "Esteem and Influence", op.cit, p.388

[84] Ibid.

category of soft power. However, when it is perceived as manipulative, it functions as sharp power, lacking credibility and thus failing to attract. [85]

The perception of a power effort is closely tied to another fundamental aspect of power: influence. Due to their shared emphasis on influencing minds soft and sharp power can be confused, however there remains a major difference in the manner through which that influence is exerted. [86] When influence is perceived as manipulative, even if nonviolent, it falls under the category of sharp power. In contrast, soft power is present only when the target audience willingly embraces the values or messages that are being promoted. [87]

Joseph Nye illustrates this distinction using the example of the Chinese News Agency Xinhua, which openly broadcasts in other countries. This can be considered a soft power strategy, as it is an open and unrestricted way to influence the audience abroad. As a contrasting case to show sharp power strategy characterized by the limited voluntariness of the target, he mentions the China Radio International, which covertly funds thirty-three radio stations in fourteen countries. [88] This example demonstrates how sharp power is a more insidious and unethical strategy than the transparent exercise of soft power.

The line between soft and sharp power often blurs. One of the key challenges to the distinction of soft from sharp power is the weaponization of soft power tools. This happens when they are used as a weapon against third parties or to pit one group within society against another.[89] In such instances, what appears to be soft power may reflect characteristics more aligned with sharp power.

For example, during the 2016 American election, some of the information Russian agents spread via Facebook postings was not fabricated but true and it attracted

[85] J.S. Nye, "Soft power: the evolution of a concept", op.cit, p.8
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ivi., p.7
[88] J. S. Nye, "China's Soft and Sharp Power," *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-soft-and-sharp-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2018-0
[89] J.S Nye "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept" (2018), p.8

some Americans in opposition to others. [90] In this case, even if the intent behind the power strategy was hostile, the influence itself worked through a willing attraction and rather than deception, therefore the weaponized soft power remained distinct from sharp power, as it relied on a voluntary appeal in the target audience.
In fact, while the intent of the actor can help identify the power strategy exercised, the defining characteristic of soft power lies not in intent, but in the degree of voluntary attraction it generates. [91]

The distinction between soft and sharp power becomes even clearer when examining the role of information warfare in shaping sharp power.
In recent years, the strategic use of disinformation campaigns in conflict zones, elections and other geopolitical hotspots has become increasingly evident. These covert warfare tactics are aimed at influencing foreign populations by creating a climate of doubts and uncertainty around official narratives. [92]
Russia has emerged as one of the world's major players that increasingly rely on disinformation campaigns to interfere in major political events. For instance, during the Romanian presidential elections, Russia was accused of orchestrating a massive TikTok campaign in support of Călin Georgescu, a pro-Russian conspiracy theorist whose ideology is rooted in Romania's interwar far-right movement. [93]
This example contributes to demonstrating that, while soft power remains the most effective way for building global influence, the rise of sharp power on the global stage has shown how easily seemingly benign tools, concepts or strategies can be exploited for malicious and unilateral purposes. [94]

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Soft Power 30, "Fighting Back: Fake News, Disinformation and the Question of Sharp Power," *CPD Blog*, October 17, 2019. https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/fighting-back-fake-news-disinformation-and-question-sharp-power
[93] Oana Popescu-Zamfir, "Romania's Election Crisis: A Stark Warning for NATO Nations on Russian Meddling," *Policy Alert*, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 10, 2024. https://ecfr.eu/article/romanias-election-crisis-a-stark-warning-for-nato-nations-on-russian-meddling/
[94] Soft Power 30, "Fighting Back: Fake News, Disinformation and the Question of Sharp Power,"

So far, the focus has been on the main features of new forms of power and their key distinctions from more traditional concepts. To better understand the role these alternative visions of power play in international relations, it is fundamental to consider how they are perceived. If on the one hand, the value of smart power is widely recognized for its potential to optimize national influence and security, on the other its effectiveness remains dependent on the decision makers' abilities to exploit the benefits of diversification among hard and soft power and to integrate soft power tools in their foreign policies. [95]

Despite its limitations, there is a broad acknowledgment of the benefits that might derive from a well calibrated smart power strategy.

In contrast to the generally positive perception of smart power, the rise of sharp power on the global stage has been met with growing concern. There is a widespread perception of sharp power as a threat not only for the well-established democracies, but also for younger or institutionally fragile ones. In this perspective, its rise on the global stage is seen not only as a challenge, but an urgent matter that requires an adequate response from the international community. [96]

[95] G. M. Gallarotti, "Smart Power: Definitions, Importance, and Effectiveness," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015), 245–81, p.273.

[96] C. Walker and J. Ludwig, "From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power', op.cit, p.22

Chapter 2

Characteristics of Chinese Soft Power

2.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of Chinese Soft Power

In order to define Chinese soft power, it is necessary to first analyze the historical and political context in which it developed.

The concept of soft power drew interest from various countries, including China. Its conceptual flexibility made it adaptable to diverse global contexts, and China gradually incorporated it to its foreign policy strategies, particularly through cultural diplomacy and international media initiatives.[97] When Nye's theory was introduced in the country, it took on a different connotation, reflecting the country's unique political and cultural context. This different approach and reception by China are not surprising given the blurred boundaries of the concept itself and the distinctions between the Chinese and American political contexts. [98]

In the 90s China had adopted a policy of increased aggressiveness in pursuit of its strategic goal leading to a tense international climate. Soft power spread in China partly to counter the "China Threat Theory" that emerged in the West as a response to China's growing assertiveness in the East China and South Seas.[99] In a context of growing tension, where China's military modernization worried the neighboring countries and made relations with them tense, soft power offered a tool to ease these anxieties. [100] It is in this period that Chinese media and academic circles began to focus on the potential utility of soft power. [101]

The concept was already circulating in academia in the early 90's; however, soft power became an important part of the official Chinese political discourse only a

[97] M. Repnikova, "Chinese Soft Power" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p.2.
[98] M. Repnikova, *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, at 7:00,
[99] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power: Seeking a Balance between Nationalism, Legitimacy, and International Influence*"*, *RUSI Occasional Paper* (London: Royal United Services Institute, March 2016), p.5.
[100] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power in the New Century: Reconstruction of the Traditional Chinese World Order*",* (London: Routledge, 2019), p.25
[101] Ibid.

decade later, when, during Hu Jintao's presidency, top-level Chinese officials incorporated the notion into their speeches and publications. [102]

The term soft power was explicitly mentioned in an official state document for the first time since the People's Republic of China establishment with the Political Report of the 17th National Congress of the CCP. [103] On the occasion of the National Congress the then Chinese leader Hu Jintao affirmed "We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests".[104]

The explicit reference to soft power in an official occasion marked a turning point, as it showed that the Chinese leadership wanted to complement the country's rapid economic development with a new strategic approach centered on soft power.[105] As a result, a concept until then used in the Western context officially became part of China's national strategy, with its own distinct theoretical framework and interpretation.[106]

The pacifying value of soft power allowed this Western-derived concept to take root in China, where the country's growing assertiveness required a more reassuring strategic approach.

Since its first introduction about two decades ago, soft power has remained a recurring element in the official Chinese political discourse.

In 2012 Hu Jintao recognized soft power as a key element of the country's foreign policy and further defined its core elements. [107] However, it is especially under his successor, Xi Jinping, that China's soft power strategy acquired new vigor and value.

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[102] M. Repnikova, "The Balance of Soft Power," *Almendron*, June 22, 2022 https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/the-balance-of-soft-power/

[103] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power*",* op.cit p.9

[104] Hu Jintao, *"Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects,"* Political Report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 15, 2007, in *Qiushi*, March 2008 special edition (Beijing: Qiushi Press), p.17 https://www.cscc.it/upload/doc/full_text_of_hu_jintaos_report_at_17th_party_congress___qiushi_journal.pdf.

[105] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", p.6

[106] Ivi., p.2

[107] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", op. cit, p.5.

In his speech at the 19th National Congress in 2017 he emphasized the need for China to:

> Improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's cultural soft power.[108]

The presidency of Xi Jinping is characterized by the quest for international communication through a stronger Chinese discursive power and narrative capacity. [109] Internationally, the Chinese president underscored the importance of constructing international discourse power, particularly to counterbalance the dominant Western narrative. [110]

This strategic objective remains central in China's national goals, as emerges from the 14th five-year plan, an official document issued by the National People's Congress in 2021 which outlines the national strategic objectives for 2021-2025 and the long-range strategic objectives for 2035. [111]

Soft Power appears in the document both in the long-term vision with the objective of enhancing the country's cultural soft power and in the document tenth section where the country's objective to enhance the national cultural soft power is further examined. [112]

Having established that soft power constitutes a central element in the official discourse of the Chinese leadership, it is necessary to clarify how the concept is understood and articulated within the Chinese context highlighting the key differences from the Western interpretation.

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[108] Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 18, 2017* (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2017), p.39 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf

[109] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.5

[110] M. Repnikova, "Chinese Soft Power", p. 2.

[111] People's Republic of China, *Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035*, adopted at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, October 29, 2020, accessed July 24, 2025, https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0284_14th_Five_Year_Plan_EN.pdf

[112] Ivi., 82

Chinese scholars are often critical of Nye's idea of soft power and tend to favor a reinterpretation. For some, the distinction between hard and soft power is flexible, and even military resources can contribute to soft power if used for peacekeeping purposes. Others view power as a continuum, with hard and soft power existing at opposite ends of a spectrum. [113]

To better define China's soft power, it is helpful to first identify its purpose. One of the key distinctions between Chinese and U.S soft power is their different strategic objectives.

In the Western context, soft power mainly focuses on attracting others through shared values and beliefs, often with the purpose of encouraging the adoption of democratic and liberal models. [114]

As mentioned before, China's initial soft power strategy was primarily aimed at reassuring other countries of its peaceful intentions in a climate of tensions. This strategy was often supported by historical references to the harmonious Chinese world order and narratives of China's wish for a positive engagement with its neighboring countries, presented as an alternative for the Western imperialistic ambition for hegemony. [115]

The diversity of the initial context in which soft power emerges marks an initial difference in its objective and China's strategy of creating a new peaceful alternative model to the West will become even more important with the nation's further development.

In the 21st century, with China's reemergence as a major global power, its soft power strategy must increasingly focus on gaining international respect and recognition for its achievements and its rise. [116]

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[113] M. Repnikova, "Chinese Soft Power", pp. 3-4

[114] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, 14'

[115] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", p.25

[116] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, 15'

China's ambition to create a new world order becomes even more important in defining soft power strategy and the Chinese leadership emphasizes the importance of harmony as a core principle for its foreign projection. At the heart of Chinese soft power there is the vision for a harmonious world, where countries with different political systems and cultures can coexist peacefully. [117] This ambition emerges in the context of China's rapid development, the country's engagement in a peaceful development and the construction of a harmonious world become essential to decrease concern on the part of the Western world. [118] As Suisheng Zhao notes "This type of reconstruction of the Chinese world order is obviously a narrative that serves China's foreign policy and strategic objectives". [119]

The centrality of the notions of harmony and Chinese world order match China's efforts to promote the perception of its peaceful rise on the global stage through an effective soft power strategy.

This initial phase of China's soft power strategy corresponds to a period focused on the nation's development; once China consolidates itself as a global power a new dimension is added, one that emphasizes narrative ability to shape the global perception.

As already mentioned, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's soft power efforts become even more significant, and it is in this period that a new strategic approach to international projection emerges.

In 2013, during the first year of his presidency, Xi Jinping introduced the objective of "Telling China's story well", which encapsulates the joint efforts of both Party-state media and private actors to reinforce and modernize China's external propaganda. [120] This slogan refers to producing narratives that align with the Chinese

[117] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.7

[118] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", p.27

[119] Ivi., p.31

[120] China Media Project, *"Telling China's story well," The CMP Dictionary*, April 18, 2021, , https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/

Communist Party's external propaganda and its strategic objectives with the purpose of strengthening China's international discursive power and reshaping the perception of the international audience. [121]

Narrative strategy has emerged as a key component of soft power, serving as a vehicle for promoting China's story. One of the main objectives of the country's soft power strategy became the projection of its own narrative and the shaping of a positive image on the international stage.

In this context, media have emerged as one of the primary soft power tools, as they help China to shape international opinion and promote the desired image of China abroad. [122]

The vital role attributed to the media emerges considering that in recent years the Chinese leadership has pursued a reorganization of the media system with the aim of making it more international. The media internationalization strategy was implemented through the signing of cooperation agreements between Chinese and foreign media outlets to facilitate the spreading of the Chinese voice abroad. [123]

China's efforts to shape global narratives is driven by a media internationalization project that spans from television to radio and newspapers. China Central Television (CCTV) set up new international broadcasting facilities, while China Radio International operates in thirty-eight languages with twenty-seven overseas bureaus. As of 2014, China had reportedly invested around $10 billion in external propaganda to support the global media presence. [124] By 2023, Xinhua News Agency had signed cooperation agreements with over 3,600 global institutions including media organizations, government bodies, and universities highlighting the strategic ambition of China's media diplomacy efforts. [125]

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[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, 15-16'

[124] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power*",* p.12

[125] Xinhua Signs Pacts with Foreign Media Outlets to Deepen Cooperation," *Xinhua*, December 2, 2023, https://english.news.cn/20231202/f2b5b6179da94b07814ffab014228083/c.html.

China’s desire to promote a positive and compelling narrative abroad reflects its challenge to an international system shaped by the dominant Western narrative, which is often criticized for portraying China in a negative way. In this context, soft power becomes an essential tool to reshape global perceptions.

The strategic purpose of Chinese soft power emerged as one of its distinctive features and strengths, however, it is not aspect in which it differs from the Western conception of soft power. The sources of Chinese soft power also partially differ from those outlined in Nye’s theorization.

Nye’s main sources of soft power attraction include culture, foreign policy and values. The question is whether Chinese soft power draws on these same resources. What emerges from the analysis of Chinese soft power is that its resources are numerous and varied, ranging from the Chinese model of economic growth, technological advances, traditional culture, hard work ethic and political ideology. The difficulty in defining precisely what China's soft power resources are stems precisely from their variety, so it is correct to say that “China's soft power arsenal includes everything that contributes to making it appear in a positive light internationally”.[126] Given the vastness of these resources, analyzing them in their entirety would be difficult. Instead, this analysis will focus on those resources perceived not only as fundamental to China's soft power strategy but also considered to be the most effective and influential.

Despite the variety of China’s soft power resources, culture occupies a central role in the country’s soft power arsenal. Before examining the significance of Chinese culture in terms of soft power, it is necessary to first define the Chinese conception of the concept itself. For China, culture is a dynamic element, shaped by factors such as the historical period, the socio-political environment and the geographic area. Despite these variations, culture is always perceived as a tool that reflects the

[126] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, ‘9

vision of the ruling leadership, and thus it has a strong political valence. [127] Alessandra Cappelletti's definition of the notion of "Chinese culture" is particularly representative, as she affirms that:

> The expression "Chinese culture" can be considered as an umbrella covering and collecting under itself the multiple expressions and manifestations of the Chinese civilization: practices, expressions, articulations and assertions of the Chinese cultural sphere, they "reveal" or "represent" or "make the individuals and public catch" its multiplicity of aspects. At the same time, the "representations" conveyed by Chinese actors (state and non-state) – outcome of a selection (mediation, purification and classification) process – provide us with the interpretation of Chinese cultural practices and expressions and with the accepted concept of "Chinese culture". [128]

Given its relevance and its political connotation, it is not surprising that culture plays a central role in China's soft power strategy. As a result, Chinese soft power is often referred to as "cultural soft power", with a strong emphasis on the appeal of traditional culture and Confucian values abroad. [129]

The centrality of culture in advancing Chinese soft power is also evident in official policy documents. In 2017, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council General Office, issued a document called "Suggestions on the implementation of a process of dissemination and development of the outstanding traditional Chinese culture". Its aim was not only to define Chinese culture, but also to outline the proper channels for its promotion abroad, thus setting the agenda for the international projection of Chinese culture. [130]

In addition to official documents, speeches by the Chinese leadership also demonstrate the significance of cultural soft power.

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[127] A. Cappelletti, "The "Construction" of Chinese Culture in a Globalized World and Its Importance for Beijing's Smart Power: Notes and Concepts on a Narrative Shift", Working Papers on East Asian Studies No. 115/2017, p.12

[128] Ivi., p. 13

[129] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.6

[130] A. Cappelletti, "The "Construction" of Chinese Culture", p.13

For instance, during the 17th collective study session of the CCP Politburo in October 2024, Xi Jinping emphasized the strategic goal of transforming China into a cultural superpower by 2035. He highlighted the importance of enhancing the country's cultural appeal to international audiences as a means of projecting China's soft power. Xi also stressed the need to increase investments in artistic and literary production, cultural preservation, cultural exchanges and international cooperation. [131]

Culture has emerged as a key component in enhancing China's appeal abroad, making its promotion a strategic objective pursued through a variety of channels.
The most relevant example of Chinese cultural soft power and one of the main channels for spreading Chinese culture abroad are Confucius Institutes: a global network of organizations linked to the Chinese Ministry of Education, whose main purpose is the promotion of Chinese language and culture through education and other activities. [132]
Confucius institutes are present all over the world, their global presence reflects the importance China gives to the dissemination of Chinese culture internationally. According to the official Confucius Institute website:

> By the end of 2023, a total of 496 Confucius Institutes and 757 Confucius Classrooms are established by Chinese and foreign partner institutions with the principle of "planning together, building together, and benefiting together", which has been consistently catering to the needs of people worldwide to learn Chinese and understand Chinese culture. They have served 160 countries and regions globally, hence a leading brand in international Chinese education. [133]

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[131] Xi Jinping, "At the 17th collective study session of the CCP Politburo, Xi Jinping stressed anchoring the strategic goal of becoming a cultural superpower and constantly developing socialist culture with Chinese characteristics for a new era," *Interpret: China (CSIS)*, 2024
[132] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.8
[133] Confucius Institute. "At 20th, the Confucius Institute Is in Its Prime. Official Release of the 20th-Anniversary Logo." *Confucius Institute (ci.cn)*, May 20, 2024. Accessed September 2025.https://ci.cn/en/xwzx/gg/10929b45-6376-4776-8d00-45f77b73c487

Chinese soft power strategy relies heavily on the spread of Chinese language and culture worldwide, and Confucius institutes serve as important means for the promotion of both contemporary China and its historical Confucian legacy. [134] The dual focus on modernity and tradition summarizes China's broader soft power strategy, which while drawing from historical values aims at shaping the global perception through culture rather than coercion.

Confucius institutes play an important role in the global dissemination of Chinese culture and language. However, an equally significant aspect of China's cultural soft power is its investments in educational exchanges.

In recent years, China has emerged as one of the most popular destinations for international students, thanks in part to financial aid initiatives such as the China Scholarship Council program for foreign students. [135] According to available data, China ranked third among the world's most popular study destinations in 2017 and in 2016, with more than 440,000 international students from 205 countries who decided to study there. [136] The increasing number of international students choosing China as their study destination and the diversification of countries of origin proves the nation's growing ability to attract an international audience.

The abstract dimension of cultural values is one of the strengths of Chinese soft power, yet the more material and economic aspect is important as well.

Economic instruments are generally associated more with hard power; however, the Chinese leadership views economic power as essential to exercising of soft power, envisioning a model in which the cultural component is integrated with the economic one. [137]

The importance of economic resources for China's soft power becomes evident when examining the country's strategy of foreign aid programs, which include

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[134] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power"*, p.* 9

[135] E. Albert, *"*China's Big Bet on Soft Power*," Council on Foreign Relations* (backgrounder, February 19, 2018), https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power.

[136]Ibid.

[137] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, '11

grants, interest-free and concessional loans and other kinds of official government funding, primarily directed to the developing world through South-South cooperations. [138]

The collaboration between China and developing countries is essential to the economic aspect of China's soft power strategy. Chinese leader Xi Jinping, at the ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Summit last year, announced financial support for Africa of more than 50 billion dollars and expressed China's willingness to deepen the cooperation in different sectors to advance the shared path towards modernization. [139]

This commitment not only represents China's financial engagement but also aligns with the country's broader soft power strategy of projecting the positive image of a helpful and loyal partner.

So far, two of China's soft power resources and major strengths have been analyzed: its culture and economic tools. Another important dimension of Chinese soft power is public diplomacy, whose main target is the international audience.

The Chinese conception of public diplomacy and its purpose are closely aligned with those defined by Joseph Nye, who emphasized the importance of public diplomacy not only in reaching governments or States, but foreign populations as well. [140] Nye described public diplomacy as serving several key purposes: establishing a country's national position as legitimate and reasonable, promoting a significant agenda and building relationships with influential private actors. [141]

China created a clear role for Nye's conception of public diplomacy with an external soft power mainly aimed at projecting a positive image abroad, communicating Chinese opinions and positions, fostering a favorable international environment and promoting a harmonious and co-operative world-order. [142]

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[138] E. Albert, *"*China's Big Bet on Soft Power*",* op.cit

[139] A. Bao, *"*China's Xi Pledges Over $50 Billion in Financial Aid to Africa to Deepen Ties," CNBC, September 5, 2024, updated September 5, 2024,, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/09/05/chinas-xi-pledges-over-50-billion-in-financial-aid-to-africa-to-deepen-ties-.html.

[140] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", op.cit, p. 10

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

The resources that support Chinese soft power, from culture, education, economic assistance to public diplomacy, are viewed by the Chinese leadership as fundamental strengths. The increasing investment in these areas reflects strong confidence in their effectiveness in achieving a greater international influence.

A second fundamental difference of Chinese soft power from Nye's conception lies in the target audience. [143]

As Osamu Sayama states "Chinese soft power is concerned with influencing the hearts and the minds of foreign peoples and also with its image among their leaders, who are the main focus for soft power". [144] This definition highlights how China's approach to soft power differs from the Western one; while in the Western conception the target audience of soft power is the general international public, for China soft power must not only address foreign people, but also their leaders.

For instance, according to the Western approach to soft power, if a country aims to promote specific policies abroad, it must persuade the international audience of the policy legitimacy in order to gain support from other countries. In this sense, "Western soft power" targets mainly foreign populations. [145] In contrast, Chinese soft power strategy is also oriented to the foreign political elite. This ability to influence foreign political leaderships and shape their opinion represents a key strength of China's soft power strategy.

It has emerged that China's exercise of soft power on the international stage is directed not only at foreign publics but also political leaders.

Another aspect of Chinese soft power is its dual nature, operating both externally and internally by targeting two distinct audiences: the international community and the national population. While the analysis will mainly focus on the outward-facing aspect of Chinese soft power, it is important to briefly mention the domestic dimension as well.

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[143] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Il soft power cinese: concetti, strategie e istituzioni*, July 9, 2024, podcast, https://www.iai.it/it/news/il-soft-power-cinese-concetti-strategie-e-istituzioni, '11

[144] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.7

[145] Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Il soft power cinese, p.11

For China the domestic and international dimensions are closely connected, as the Party's internal legitimacy remains a main concern even while operating abroad. In this context, domestic support and respect for the leadership's mission is essential, and international recognition reinforces the Party's support in light of its achievements. [146] Internally, Chinese soft power promotes national cohesion, traditional culture, and strengthens the Party's leadership. Thus, it serves a dual purpose: on the one hand it enhances China's global influence, on the other it reinforces national power by promoting social and political unity. [147]

The unique characteristics of Chinese soft power, such as its emphasis on cultural dissemination, its focus on international political elites and its attention to the domestic audience, emerge as core differences from Western soft power. These features not only shape China's strategic approach, but they also represent key strengths of Chinese soft power. If effectively pursued they enable China to assert itself not only as an economic superpower, but also a globally influential actor with cultural and political appeal.

Chinese soft power has great potential, however in practice it is often perceived as a strategy with limited impact and many shortcomings that hinder its success.

These limitations are as varied as the sources employed and are generally defined with reference to the limited effectiveness of soft power in the Western context. This analysis will focus on three key challenges facing Chinese soft power: the reliance on economic resources, the lack of appeal of the Chinese model, and the central role of nationalism and the Chinese Communist Party.

Economic tools emerged as one of the main resources used by China to win partners globally. This heavy reliance on economic strength is often viewed by the Chinese leadership as a successful strategy, but it could instead prove to be one of the limitations to the effectiveness of Chinese soft power.

[146] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", p.8
[147] Ibid.

In particular, the over-reliance on economic instruments to establish diplomatic relations reveals Chinese normative power still has limited credibility in foreign countries. Moreover, despite China's growing economic strength, the attempts to use economic ties to influence the behavior of other States have had limited success so far. [148]

In recent years, China's high investments in infrastructural projects and economic assistance for developing countries have emerged as one of the pillars of the country's soft power strategy through economic appeal. However, there are still doubts about the effectiveness of economic cooperation in improving the country's image internationally. Establishing economic ties with other nations is important, but it is not enough to build a strategic and political bond of trust. [149] Given this limitation on the use of economic resources, China's infrastructure construction and financing projects often do not directly translate into its ability to exert influence over target nations. [150]

An example of the use of economic resources to strengthen cooperation with another nation can be seen in the investments in Africa. China's large infrastructural projects in the African continent show its efforts to win partners globally, however this approach does not always lead to the desired results.

A representative case is that of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, which, rather than fostering trust between the population, fueled local protests. The acquisition of the infrastructure was perceived as the symbol of the nations' growing dependence from China and of the exploitation of the area for strategic purposes. The backlash of this ambitious Chinese investment highlights the importance of integrating economic tools within a broader soft power strategy. [151] Regional actors or underdeveloped countries are often drawn to the economic benefits that cooperation with

[148] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", op.cit, p.39

[149] Ivi, pp.39-40

[150] E. Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power"

[151] J. E. Hillman, "Game of Loans: How China Bought Hambantota", CSIS Briefs (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2018), https://www.csis.org/analysis/game-loans.

China could bring in the short term, however the local communities often maintain a cautious approach about the alignment with Beijing strategic projects. [152]

The limitations of economic tools in creating a long-term influence at the international level are illustrated by Suisheng Zhao's statement «loyalty cannot be bought through money, and influence does not simply derive from a country's economic resources». [153]

While it is true that economic means such as investments and aid have attractive power, they are insufficient to build trust and admiration in the long term, especially among local populations. A soft power strategy to be truly effective must be integrated with values such as mutual respect or cultural affinity. The intangible influence is as important as the more concrete one to cultivate a successful cooperation on the global stage.

Soft power is based on the appeal of values that being perceived as universal by target audiences, generate a desire to emulate. In the case of Chinese soft power, the absence of a set of values perceived as attractive by other countries emerges as another one of its main shortcomings, as it often leads to a lack of interest in adopting the Chinese model.

The lack of appeal for the Chinese values is to be partially blamed on its strategic approach to soft power. While Western soft power strategies emphasize the projection of values that can resonate with target countries, China's approach places a greater emphasis on other resources such as culture and economics. As a result, China's messages are often interpreted in the Western World through pre-existing frames that are generally negative. [154]

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[152] E. Albert, *"China's Big Bet on Soft Power"*

[153] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", p.40

[154] T. Zappone, "Reinventing Soft Power: The Strong Impact of China's Soft Power "Shortcomings" on the Global South*"*, IAI Papers 23|19 (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2023), https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/reinventing-soft-power-strong-impact-chinas-soft-power-shortcomings-global-south

The perceived lack of universalism in Chinese values is often viewed as a limitation to its soft power. However, Tanina Zappone offers a different perspective, suggesting that what many scholars consider a weakness of Chinese soft power could in fact represent a potential strength.

One of China's strategies for gaining partners is the emphasis on the rejection of the universality of the "Western model". This rejection is accompanied by the assertion of an alternative model of influence that refuses the imposition of national values on other countries, in favor of supporting peoples in pursuit of their own original development. [155] Considering this strategy, the lack of universally appealing values in Chinese soft power should not be considered a negative factor. [156] This limitation could actually represent a winning factor in gaining the favor of all those countries that perceive the Western model as outdated and see China as a potential alternative. Thus, the lack of universality in Chinese values represents a limitation of its soft power depending on the context in which it is exercised. From a Western perspective, it is fair to say that Chinese political values often lack attractiveness; however, for underdeveloped or developing countries, China, with its distinct values, can represent an alternative model of development to follow.

So far, the excessive use of economic resources and the lack of appeal of Chinese values have emerged as potential limitations for Chinese soft power.
Another dimension strategy which falls within the shortcoming is the centrality of nationalism and core interests in Chinese foreign policy. Core interests refer to those strategic interests perceived as essential for the country's survival and thus nonnegotiable by the Chinese leadership, they often coincide with territorial claims and national sovereignty and lead to a stronger assertiveness in strategic areas.[157] Together with core interests, the nationalistic aspiration of a newfound prosperity

[155] Ivi, p.10
[156] Ibid.
[157] S. Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power", *op.cit*, pp. 37-38.

and central role in the global stage, condensed into the "Chinese dream", become essential components of Chinese soft power, threatening its effectiveness. [158]
Nationalistic aspirations and core interests are connected to another fundamental aspect of Chinese approach to soft power: the Party. In fact, what has been defined as the strategic objective of telling China's story coincides with the desire to tell the story of the Chinese Communist Party, by portraying its achievements and reinforcing its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. [159]
If on the one hand, the importance of core interests and nationalistic values for Chinese soft power leads to a muscular approach on the global stage, on the other the Party centrality leads to the perception of China's narrative communication as political propaganda and consequently, to a blurring of soft power in the sphere of sharp power.

So far, we have explored Chinese soft power, examining its key resources, strengths and limitations. However, certain aspects of the Chinese behavior on the international scene, raise doubts about whether it is correct to define its approach to power as soft power.

2.2 The Evolution of Chinese Soft Power: Soft Power, Smart Power or Sharp Power?

China's strategy has always been defined as soft power, but now this assertion will be questioned to determine whether it is more appropriate to define China's strategy as smart power or sharp power.
The concept of smart power, that is to say the ability to combine elements of hard power and soft power in mutually reinforcing ways to achieve strategic objectives, will be further examined in this section through its potential application to the case of China. While this definition was originally formulated mainly from an analysis

[158] China Media Project, "Telling China's Story Well," *The CMP Dictionary*, April 16, 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/.
[159] Ibid.

of U.S. foreign policy, China's strategic approach to global influence is also worth exploring, because it may fall into this category. Since the 2000s, the concept of Chinese smart power has moved beyond theory and has been increasingly applied to contemporary Chinese foreign policy.[160] The growing relevance of smart power can be assessed by examining the evolution of China's approach to relations with international actors.

China's approach to international relations has been characterized from the outset by a cautious assessment of the external environment, leading to the formulation of a strategy that balanced soft power with hard power.

The Chinese leadership, under Hu Jintao, deployed power sources in a strategic and balanced manner to pursue political and national goals. [161] This measured approach is emphasized in contrast to the one pursued by President George W. Bush's, more focused on the American need for military superiority. During this period, China's strategy was characterized by the commitment for a "peaceful rise", and the country's military strength was integrated with a "Charm Campaign", focused on foreign assistance and high-level engagement with underdeveloped countries. [162]

China's strategic engagement with African countries under Hu Jintao reflected a smart power approach to international politics, as it emphasized the Chinese aspiration of an international pacific projection through a balanced combination of military strength and attraction.

With Xi Jinping's rise to power, it is necessary to reassess China 's foreign policy to determine whether it still falls into the category of smart power or a change occurred. In the early days of his presidency, Xi appeared committed to maintaining a smart power approach, one that combines military strength with soft power tools, to enhance China's global influence. This marked a shift from a purely hard power

[160] A. Cappelletti, "The "Construction" of Chinese Culture in a Globalized World and Its Importance for Beijing's Smart Power: Notes and Concepts on a Narrative Shift", Working Papers on East Asian Studies No. 115/2017, p.9

[161] E. J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616, no. 1 (2008), p.111

[162] Ivi., 111-112

approach to a new strategy focused on an open, cooperative and win-win development model for foreign affairs. [163]

This new strategic direction for Chinese foreign policy appears evident in China's handling of the Myanmar's crisis, where instead of resorting to coercion, China opted for a more diplomatic approach to reduce tensions. This renewed Chinese commitment to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict instead of intervening militarily is demonstrated by the participation of the Chinese ambassador to peace negotiations. [164]

However, while some elements of this initiative reflect a soft power approach, the motivations behind the Chinese involvement remain tied to strategic national goals; the approach is thus more aligned with smart power. This early phase in Xi Jinping's presidency appears to lay the basis for a future shift toward soft policy tools to address strategic priorities. The Chinese leadership seems to recognize that reliance on hard power alone incites fears, while a smart power approach can enhance the country's international image both among foreign governments and their populations. [165]

The beginning of Xi Jinping's presidency seemed to signal a shift toward a strategy if not of soft power or smart power, with renewed confidence in diplomatic tools for resolving international tensions. However, the Chinese leadership's increasing assertiveness in territorial disputes, human rights limitations, and growing reliance on rigid propaganda in the years that followed have undermined those initial signals.

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[163] B. Gill and B. Schreer, "Smart Power Potential under Xi Jinping," *East Asia Forum*, March 7, 2013, https://eastasiaforum.org/2013/03/07/smart-power-potential-under-xi-jinping/.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.

Under Xi Jinping, China's international engagement has become increasingly paradoxical: while the CCP has tightened its controls and restricted freedoms in various fields, external propaganda claims that China is embracing openness for free trade and global cultural communication. [166]

In spite of the Party's efforts to promote a positive national image, in an article published in 2018, Joseph Nye affirmed that, following China's backlash in democratic countries, it seems more accurate to define the country's approach to international relations as "sharp power". [167]

In his article Nye points out how sharp power fits the Chinese strategy considering that the country's soft power efforts sometimes blur into sharp power because of their high reliance on Party control, media manipulation and covert channels of communication. [168] These practices undermine the intrinsic characteristics of a soft power strategy of openness and credibility and instead reflect the manipulative and coercive aspects typical of sharp power.

While the initial approach taken by the Chinese leadership seemed to signal a shift toward soft power, Xi Jinping's foreign policy is increasingly perceived as based on sharp power. The notion of sharp power and its relevance to China's international strategy has been largely discussed.

China's growing economic strength, military force, technological progress and, most importantly, transnational cultural and value influence, have raised concerns in the Western world about the emergence of Chinese sharp power and its potential erosion of Western democratic values. [169]

Much of this concern comes from China's increasingly authoritarian approach to domestic policy. Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds an unchallenged monopoly on political authority and exercises a strict control over

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[166] J. Shao, *"*Exploring China's "Sharp Power": Conceptual Deficiencies and Alternatives*"*, *Transcommunication* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2019), pp. 136-137.

[167] J. S. Nye, "China's Soft and Sharp Power," *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018, accessed July 28, 2025, https://prosyn.org/crxziCp

[168] Ibid.

[169] J. Shao, "Exploring China's "Sharp Power", pp. 129-130.

international debate on sensitive issues. [170] During his leadership, Xi Jinping blurred the lines between domestic and foreign policy, with sensitive or security issues abroad being perceived as a threat for national stability and Party legitimacy. [171]
This perception of foreign issues as internal threats led the Chinese leadership to a more assertive and sometimes coercive foreign policy and recently, China's soft power tools have increasingly been categorized as sharp power, aimed at exerting an illicit control over public opinion. [172]
As Chinese sharp power continues to develop, a crucial question emerges: what instruments does China employ to exert sharp power on the global stage?

The tools of sharp power are varied, but they share a heavy reliance on coercive influence, often exercised through unethical means. Among these tools, Chinese sharp power relies mostly on information control and influence operations.
The concept of information control itself has changed, while before it was limited to China's domestic space, now it has spread globally. With the internationalization of the media, the Chinese leadership became increasingly concerned with how the country is portrayed abroad, particularly in relation to sensitive issues.[173] As a result, the Chinese censorship system has gradually penetrated abroad, with growing censorship of the international media in order to shape the foreign elites' understanding of China and its political system.[174]
The second instrument of Chinese sharp power concerns influence operations. These operations are mostly conducted by the United Front, through a comprehensive strategy aimed at controlling and mobilizing the masses to achieve the CCP's strategic objectives. [175]

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[170] Roman Štěpař, "China's Sharp Power," *Journal of Political Risk* 10, no. 8 (August 2022), https://www.jpolrisk.com/chinas-sharp-power/
[171] Ibid.
[172] M. Repnikova, "Chinese Soft Power", Elements in Global China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[173] Roman Štěpař, "China's Sharp Power".
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.

These tools denote the party's growing presence and influence on the international stage. At the same time, concern is growing in the Western world, which perceives Chinese censorship and influence as a threat to democratic values of freedom.

China is frequently accused to implement sharp power globally to spread its influence. These accusations involve a range of practices including financial pressure, the promotion of self-censorship, restrictions on freedom of expression, dishonest economic cooperations and the use of propaganda. Such actions have raised concerns about the spread of the country's authoritarian influence abroad.[176] However, the concept of sharp power itself is the object of criticism for its many flaws: it suffers from conceptual ambiguity, it lacks clear evaluative criteria, it relies on ideological and political dimensions, and it fails to offer concrete solutions.[177]
These limitations will now be briefly analyzed to determine whether they may limit the applicability of the concept to Chinese strategy.

The first limitation of the concept of sharp power refers to the difficulty of distinguishing it from hard power and soft power given their common characteristics. While sharp power and soft power are distinct concepts, they share some similarities: both aim to influence public opinion to achieve strategic outcomes, often using culture, values and policies. In practice they also rely on similar channels. [178]
The blurred boundaries of this distinction are even more evident when considering China's sharp power. In his initial definition and implementation sharp power was defined as "authoritarian soft power attempts" of non-democratic countries like Russia and China. [179] This definition illustrates how sharp power is a vague concept, which blurs partially into soft and hard power without coinciding entirely with either of them. The difficulty, therefore, lies in identifying what constitutes sharp power, especially since soft and sharp power are often mingled. [180]

[176] J. Shao, "Exploring China's "Sharp Power", pp. 132-133
[177] Ivi., p. 133
[178] Ivi., p.131
[179] Ivi, p. 133
[180] Ibid.

In China's case this ambiguity emerges when considering the role of Confucius Institutes. They are often defined as a soft power tool, aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture abroad. However, they were recently accused of "turning sharper" by restricting the debate on sensitive issues concerning China in university circles. [181]

This sharp evolution of Confucius Institutes demonstrates how a soft power tool can turn into a sharp one, making it difficult to give a clear definition of what falls within the scope of sharp power and what does not.

The second limitation of sharp power lies in its being an outdated concept. While often treated as a new phenomenon, sharp power actually dates back to the 20th century, particularly with manipulation practices conducted during the Cold War.[182] Its renewed relevance today is a natural consequence of globalization and the rise of the information age. This development, combined with China's rise as both a hard and soft national power and the relative decline of Western democracies, has resulted in growing concerns over the spread of alternative values within democratic societies. [183]

Given that sharp power is seen as an outdated concept in the context of the global information age, a new perspective emerges. In this light, Chinese sharp power can be defined as a form of smart power exercised by an authoritarian State. It combines elements of China's growing economic and military power with the use of softer tools of influence, yet it remains characterized by an authoritarian "sharpness". [184]

In an increasingly globalized world, where prominent players such as China rely not only on economic and military strength, but also on narrative power and strategic persuasion, traditional concepts of power have become outdated. A fusion of strategies is being, with a blending of soft, hard, smart and sharp elements. This trend requires new frameworks to better understand the recent developments in international relations.

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[181] Ivi.,p. 132
[182] Ivi, p. 134
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ivi, p. 137

The final limitation on defining China's strategy as sharp power becomes evident when considering the Chinese perspective, which rejects the term as ideologically biased and shaped by Western narratives. The emergence of Chinese soft power was dictated by the need to counter the perception of the "China threat". Similarly, the Western emphasis on sharp power reflects a growing concern for a new Chinese threat. [185]

From China's point of view, sharp power is perceived as a tool of demonization full of Western prejudices. The Chinese leadership has rejected the term in multiple official occasions accusing it of promoting a double standard. It argues that China's international strategy is no different from Western uses of soft and smart power. Moreover, sharp power as a concept is criticized for its drawing a line between authoritarian regimes and democratic politics, often targeting China and Russia and drawing an ideological distinction between the West and East with their respective openness and sharpness. [186]

These limitations add another dimension to the sharp power debate. Although certain Chinese foreign policy practices align with the characteristics of sharp power, the theoretical framework used to analyze them remains limited in ideological and conceptual terms.

After an initial evolution of Chinese foreign policy toward smart power, with the right combination of hard and soft power elements and a greater interest in resolving conflicts through negotiation, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's approach turned sharper.

The Western world increasingly perceives China's approach to foreign policy as sharp power. According to the data presented by the Pew Research Center, China's contribution on the international stage is mostly perceived as driven by national

[185] Ivi., p. 135
[186] Ivi, p. 136

interests and as contributing negatively to global peace, in contrast with the country's aspiration to project a positive and proactive national image for global well-being. [187]

China's growing investments in information warfare and coercive propaganda reflect a broader global trend where sharp power is eclipsing traditional soft power and smart power emerging as the dominant strategy for international influence. Today, with an increasingly interconnected world full of conflicts, these distinctions blur with global powers blending cultural appeal, information control and coercive practices. In this evolving context, China has emerged not only as a major player on the economic and military scene, but also a narrative power, seeking to shape the global perception through the projection of its values, culture and world order. With China asserting itself on the international stage perceived as a threat by the Western world, the question posed by Joseph Nye becomes increasingly relevant "Are Westerns ready to adjust to Chinese civilization re-emergence as one of the main sources of the global order?".

[187] Pew Research Center, *"Views of China and Its International Behavior,"* in Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, *"China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews in 24-Country Survey,"* July 27, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/chinas-approach-to-foreign-policy-gets-largely-negative-reviews-in-24-country-survey/.

Chapter 3

The Role of Chinese Soft Power in China-Europe Relations

3.1 China's soft power tools

China-Europe relations are characterized by Beijing's strategic use of soft power tools to promote and strengthen its influence across the European continent. The effectiveness of these tools and their similarities and differences compared to traditional soft power instruments remain open to debate.

In recent years, there has been growing Chinese strategic involvement in Europe, through increased investment in various sectors and the Chinese commitment to a renewed collaboration.

On the European side, commitment to greater engagement with China stems from the recognition of the country as a key global player and technological and economic power, whose growing presence not only worldwide but also in Europe requires greater responsibility and commitment to the formulation of appropriate policies.[188] Europe's commitment to strengthening relations with China also coincides with Beijing's aspirations. China, has been extremely active in promoting a positive image of its economic and political model in European countries, highlighting the successes of some of its policies and its economic progress to enhance its influence on European countries. [189]

Previously, it emerged that China uses a wide variety of tools to exercise soft power, however its approach to European countries can be limited to three broad sets of instruments: the promotion of Chinese culture and exchanges in education and research, economic cooperation and social media use and political messaging. [190]

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[188] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council*, (Brussels, March 12, 2019), p.1

[189] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, eds., "China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times*"* (European Think-tank Network on China Report, April 2021), p.109.

[190] Ivi., p.7

The promotion of Chinese culture has emerged as fundamental dimension of the country's soft power strategy; its role in shaping relations with Europe will be now analyzed now its application to the relations with Europe will be analyzed.

It is difficult to identify a strategy common to all European countries, but as far as cultural soft power is concerned it appears that China uses a uniform approach, with a similar strategy for all European countries based on culture promotion and educational exchanges. [191]

In Europe, as in the rest of the world, Chinese culture and language are mainly promoted through official institutions affiliated with the Chinese government, such as Confucius Institutes. These institutes have a stable presence in most European countries, with the notable exception of Sweden. According to available data, in 2020 there were approximately 200 Confucius Institutes across Europe, many of them affiliated with European Universities and faculties related to Asia, international relations or language learning. [192]

In addition to Confucius Institutes, other institutions such as Chinese Embassies and China Cultural Centers (CCC) also have an important role in strengthening China's cultural soft power through the organization of cultural events and festivities aimed at promoting Chinese culture among the European public. [193] These institutions seek to increase the appeal of Chinese culture both through academic engagement and entertainment, to encourage the European public to appreciate the country's traditions and language.

Apart from institutional engagement, another dimension of Chinese cultural soft power in Europe lies in the notion of cultural kinship, systematically put forward by China to enhance relations with certain European countries such as Italy, Greece, and Portugal. [194] These European countries are often regarded as fellow ancient civilizations of China, with cultural and diplomatic ties deepening through sister

[191] Ibid.
[192] M. Gramatyka, "Examining the Influence of Chinese Cultural and Soft Power in Europe," *European Guanxi*, September 26, 2023, https://www.europeanguanxi.com/post/examining-the-influence-of-chinese-cultural-and-soft-power-in-europe
[193] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", op. cit, p.8.
[194] Ibid.

city and regional partnerships. [195] In 2023, Xi Jinping replied to letters from Greek scholars by emphasizing the historical contributions of both Chinese and Greek civilizations to the development of human civilization. This narrative had already emerged on the occasion of the President's state visit to Greece in 2019, where he and the Greek leaders actively promoted mutual learning and cultural exchange. [196] This frequent reference to the historical and cultural heritage of the two civilizations proves how China uses cultural kinship as a key element of its soft power strategy in Europe.

China's cultural soft power strategy in Europe also relies on educational exchanges and international academic mobility. These have emerged as important aspects of China's broader influence efforts, with many students choosing China as their study destination. As of 2018, Europe ranked as the third region for the number of international students in China, with 73,618 students, accounting for approximately 15% of the total amount. [197]

This proves that student mobility is an important soft power tool, contributing to deepen ties between the European Union and China. The growing presence of European students in China facilitates cultural exchange between the two sides, in line with China's aspiration to establish a relationship with Europe based on mutual understanding.

While cultural ties remain a fundamental dimension in Sino-European relations, economic instruments and trade exchanges also play an essential role in China's soft power strategy in Europe, where economic cooperation with China is often viewed as a strategic opportunity.

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[195] Ibid.

[196] Hu Yuwei, "Reply Letter from Chinese President to Greek Scholars Fortifies Academic Relations between Two Great Civilizations," *Global Times*, February 28, 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1286398.shtml.

[197] "Number/Percent of international students by continent" in Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, April 18, 2019 http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html

China is valued for its role as one of Europe's most significant trading and economic partners and the importance of developing a more balanced and reciprocal economic relationship with this major international actor is often stressed. [198] On the other hand, China is becoming increasingly involved economically with European countries, and this involvement has important soft-power effects. [199]

China's economic engagement in Europe is mainly realized through strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and "17+1" cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries. [200] The main purpose of these projects is to promote deeper economic integration and foster closer regional cooperation with European countries. [201] In this perspective, China's strategic initiatives are mostly aimed at consolidating its position as a vital economic partner in the region.[202] In the context of China's rapid economic growth, these efforts reflect the country's broader *grand strategy* and its global governance ambitions. [203]

In 2012, China launched the "16+1 Cooperation Framework" to increase trade, investments and transportation networks with 16 countries located in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe through bilateral and multilateral initiatives. With the addition of Greece in 2019, the framework was renamed 17+1. Through this economic project China has strengthened its economic, diplomatic and cultural relationships with Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. [204]

The "17+1" project demonstrates how China uses economic resources strategically to consolidate its presence and increase its influence in areas of Europe perceived as strategically important.

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[198] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*., p.6

[199] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe*"*, p.8

[200] Ivi., 109

[201] Z. Zhang, "The Dilemma of China's Soft Power in Europe," in Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics, 1st ed. (2019), p.157

[202]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe*"*, p. 109

[203] F. Ghiretti, "China's Approach to the Belt and Road Initiative and Europe's Response," *ISPI* (Italian Institute for International Political Studies), May 6, 2020, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-approach-belt-and-road-initiative-and-europes-response-25980.

[204]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe*"*, p.109

Economic instruments are central in China's soft power strategy in Europe. However, its growing economic engagement with European stakeholders has not translated into the desired appeal or a perception of China as a reliable economic partner. Instead, it has contributed to shape a European view of China as an economic competitor, rather than a collaborator. [205]

Moreover, China's economic investments in large and expensive infrastructure projects often push European countries into what is referred to as a "debt trap". In such cases, countries accumulate significant debt towards China in order to finance Chinese-backed projects, often struggling to repay the amounts owed. For instance, Serbia's deepening economic relations with China resulted in significant infrastructural and industrial investments, causing the Serbian debt to Beijing to rise dramatically. [206]

Another important dimension of China's cooperation with Europe, closely connected to the economic dimension, is trade. One of China's key strategies to strengthen ties with Europe has been to expand trade relations. Although Beijing considers trade as one of its most effective tools of engagement, it still poses significant challenges for EU-China relations.

The issue of trade imbalance has often been discussed during official meetings by government officials. The last occasion was during the July Summit, when European Commission President Ursula Von Der emphasized how the two countries economic ties have reached an "inflection point" with a trade deficit of 300 billion euros ($350 billion) as of last year. [207]

This trend is illustrated in *Figure 7*, which shows that imports of goods from China steadily maintained a higher value compared to exported goods throughout the period from 2014 to 2024.

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[205] Z. Zhang, "The Dilemma of China's Soft Power", op.cit, cit. p.156

[206] G. Fruscione and G. Manca, "Xi Jinping's European Friends," ISPI, May 10, 2024, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/xi-jinpings-european-friends-173391

[207] N. Gan, "China's Xi Urges Europe to Make 'the Right Strategic Choice' amid Global Trade Turbulence at Key Summit," *CNN*, updated July 24, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/cnn/2025/07/24/china/china-eu-summit-beijing-intl-hnk .

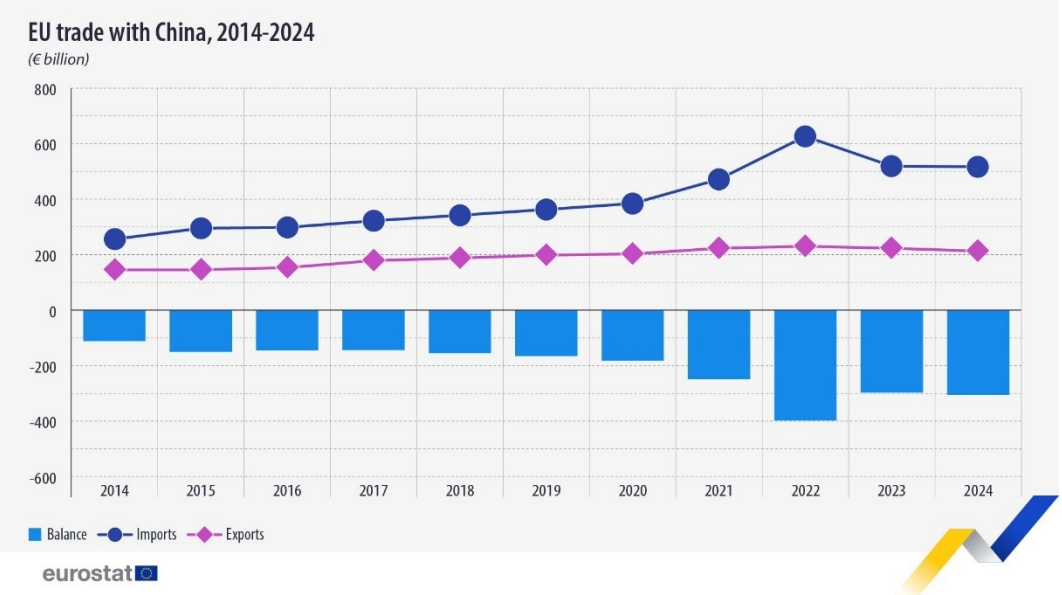

Figure 3: Trend of trade balance between EU-China in the last ten years [208]

The third instrument of China's soft power concerns media use and political messaging, a dimension that has become even more important in the era of global information. With the country's growing investments in the internationalization of its media outlets, China increasingly aims to influence international audiences and shape global narratives.

In the last decade, China has sought to assert its presence in the European media landscape in three ways. First, by establishing branches of Chinese media outlets across Europe, then by promoting partnerships and institutional cooperations with European press agencies and media outlets and finally by to engaging more actively with European media outlets through op-eds, interviews, and advertisements. [209]

Figure 4 shows that, among 17 European countries analyzed, more than a half have a national branch of a Chinese state-media outlet. In addition, almost all of European countries have established cooperation agreements between local media and Chinese state medias, except for Denmark, Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden and United Kingdom.

[208] EU trade with China, 2014–2024. Source: Eurostat, "Slight decline in imports and exports from China in 2024" https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250304-1.
[209] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", cit., p.9

	Chinese European-language media *National branch of Chinese state-media publishing/broad-casting in local European language*	Partnership *Partnership agreements of local media (newspapers/news agencies) with Chinese state media*
Austria	Yes	Yes
Czech Republic	Yes	Yes
Denmark	No	No
France	Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes
Greece	No	Yes
Hungary	Yes	Yes
Italy	Yes	Yes
Latvia	No	Yes
Netherlands	No	No
Poland	Yes	Yes
Portugal	Yes	Yes
Romania	Yes	Yes
Slovakia	No	No
Spain	No	Yes
Sweden	No	No
United Kingdom	Yes	No

Figure 4: Chinese European-language media and partnership agreements in European states [210]

The growing presence of Chinese media in European countries and the large number of partnership agreements between Chinese and European media outlets prove how media control became an essential tool for the China's soft power strategy in Europe.

Another important instrument of Chinese soft power is the strategic use of social medias to convey political messages and shape European public opinion. China's foreign policy in Europe has been defined by a shift from a reactive stance to a proactive one, with growing efforts to project itself as peaceful actor. [211] This trend is evident when analyzing the development of the use of social media, which has now become an integral part of China's soft power strategy

Even though social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook are banned in China, their strategic use by Chinese Officials and diplomats has significantly grown in recent years. [212] Through an active, and sometimes assertive, presence on these media platforms, China seeks to reach a wider audience while proving a pro-

[210] Ivi., 8
[211] O. Sayama, "China's Approach to Soft Power", op.cit., p. 8.
[212] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", p.10

active stance in international relations. This approach aims to influence foreign public opinion in response to the ongoing public debate in many European countries over China's attitude and other controversial issues. [213]

This strategic communicative effort through demonstrates that the digital space has become an essential platform for Chinese soft power, where not only the public opinion can be shaped, but negative narratives can be countered as well.

Chinese officials' activity on social medias platforms in Europe became particularly relevant during events that were perceived as a potential threat to the country's credibility and image in Europe, such as the COVID-19 crisis.

In fact, it was especially during the pandemic that the use of social medias became fundamental to China's soft power strategy. Chinese embassies across Europe increased their social media activity, often promoting a positive image of the country, for instance by posting pictures on Twitter of European officials gratefully receiving Chinese medical supplies. [214]

China's growing activity on social media highlights its recognition of storytelling and public influence as essential soft power tools. In an increasingly interconnected world, the Chinese leadership sees these platforms as valuable channels for shaping China's global image and projecting it as a responsible international actor.

[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.

3.2 Dualism in the Reception and the Exercise of China's Soft Power in Europe

Europe's reception of Chinese soft power is characterized by a dual nature and a growing skeptic approach towards Bejing's initiatives. On one hand, economic co-operation with China is viewed as an important opportunity for European countries; on the other, China is often perceived as a threat to European interests and democratic values.

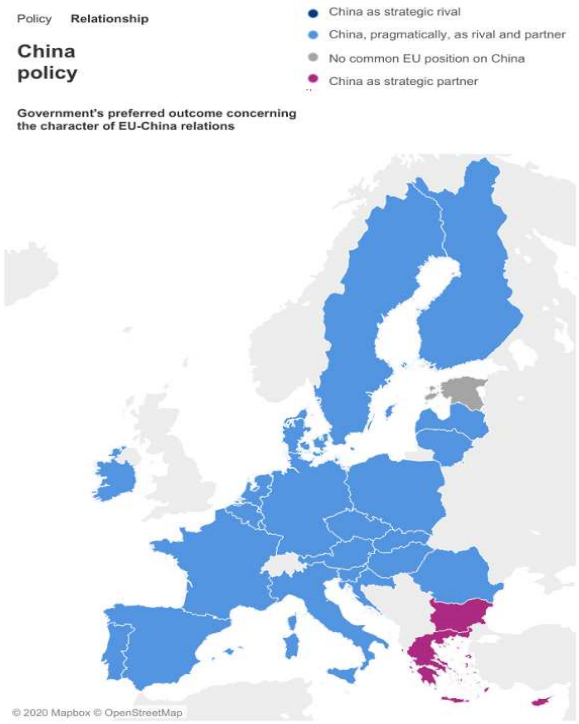

Figure 5: Perceptions of EU-China relations [215]

The dualism of EU-China relations becomes evident when examining what are the governments preferred outcomes about the character of EU-China relations.
As shown in *Figure 5*, most of European countries desire a pragmatic outcome for EU-China relations, with China as both a rival and partner. It should be noted that Greece and Bulgaria differ and hope that China will become a strategic partner.

[215] J. Oertel, "The New China Consensus", op.cit. p.3.

This image shows that there is an almost unanimous idea of future relations with China in which a rivalry persists, with just a few countries showing the desire for a partnership.

While the desired outcome for European relations is either rivalry, partnership, or both, analyzing the perception of Chinese soft power in European countries reveals a more nuanced vision.

A 2021 report, analyzing the reception of Chinese soft power in 17 European countries, categorized them into four groups, based on both their attitudes toward China and the effectiveness of Chinese soft power tools. [216]

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of each category and lists the countries that belong to them.

Category	**Characteristics**	**Countries**
No need for soft power	Limited Chinese soft power activity Low political and public interest	Austria, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia
Damage control	Considerable Chinese cultural and economic soft power threatened by a decline in China's appeal and growing skepticism	Italy, Greece
Growing vigilance	Economic attraction remains important, Chinese soft power	Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain and the UK

[216]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", op.cit. pp. 11-12

	viewed in a politicized manner; its appeal is declining.	
Facing a Free Fall	Soft-power efforts failing Negative and critical perception of China	The Czech Republic, Denmark, France and Sweden

Table 1: Reception of Chinese soft power in European countries.

The emerging trend highlights the importance of China's soft power, particularly its economic and cultural influence. However, in most European countries, this influence is increasingly undermined by a growing skepticism and a decline in China's appeal. As a result, European perceptions of China have become highly unfavorable. By comparing European attitudes towards China with the global trend, it emerges that Europe's view is one of the most unfavorable with 54%, 22% higher than the global average. [217] The categorization highlights a weakening of China's soft power, as negative perceptions and critical attitudes toward China continue to grow in most European countries.

The dual reception of Chinese soft power not only characterizes the state members' approaches, but it is also evident when examining European Union's institutional attitude towards China, characterized by both a desire for economic cooperation and geopolitical caution.

Since the Eurozone crisis in 2009, the EU has increasingly perceived economic cooperation with China from a geopolitical perspective, paying greater attention to both economic issues and human rights. [218]

[217] Z. Zhang, "The Dilemma of China's Soft Power", op.cit p.191.
[218] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", p.12

China's human rights violations and its policies and actions in regions such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong are viewed by Europe as failure of its diplomatic efforts towards Beijing. [219] Furthermore, these external events highlight the differences in political values between China and Europe, further undermining China's image in the eyes of European public opinion. [220]

China's ambivalent stance towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict is another example of how geopolitical events intensify tensions between Europe and China. Beijing has been described as providing a form of "hybrid support" in the conflict, maintaining its image as a reliable partner to Moscow while avoiding a direct conflict with the Western bloc and NATO. [221]

China's controversial stance in situations of international relevance often strengthen doubts from the European public and institutions, contributing to a negative perception and skepticism towards its promises of greater multilateralism and global engagement.

Therefore, if European institutions were to be included in one of the categories defined above, they would fall under "growing vigilance", where economic attraction remains a key aspect of Chinese soft power, despite its diminishing appeal and growing politicization. [222]

On the one hand, Europe as an institution has become more critic of China, on the other it has not rejected economic cooperation. The 2019 Strategic Outlook for EU-China relations reflect the EU's willingness to strengthen economic and trade ties with China. The document emphasizes the goal of promoting sustainable economic development and building a more balanced trade and investment relationship. [223] Europe acknowledges China's growing global presence and economic strength, and

[219] J. Oertel, "The New China Consensus*"*, pp. 7–8.
[220]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg*, "*China's Soft Power in Europe*"*, p. 111
[221] J. N. García-Nieto, *"*Year Two: Appraising Chinese Foreign Policy towards the War in Ukraine" , *European Guanxi*, updated December 27, 2024, accessed August 2, 2025, https://www.european-guanxi.com/post/year-two-appraising-chinese-foreign-policy-towards-the-war-in-ukraine
[222] Ibid.
[223] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*., p.5

views economic collaboration with Beijing as both an opportunity and a challenge.[224] However, despite Europe's stated goals of promoting economic and trade cooperation, Beijing's expanding economic presence in the region is met with concern. The growing Chinese investments are perceived by many as creating an over-dependence and exposing Europe to greater political and economic risks. [225]

European countries perceive this growing economic dependence with a sense of imbalance and uneasiness. [226] As a result, this perceived imbalance had a negative impact on Sino-European relations, as the European Union came to view cooperation with China as unbalanced and expressed concerns over China's expanding control of strategic sectors, especially after the Eurozone crisis. [227]

China views economic relations as a vital component of its ties with Europe, particularly through growing investments and trade. However, while Europe acknowledges China as a key economic partner, it remains wary of the limitations and risks associated with this relationship.

This approach reflects European countries' desire to benefit economically from closer ties with China, while avoiding increased dependency and pursuing a more balanced economic partnership. [228] It is therefore correct to affirm that China's attractiveness or persuasiveness in Europe derives mainly from its economic weight. [229]

So far, it has emerged that the reception of Chinese soft power in Europe is characterized by a dichotomy between rivalry and partnership. This is true both from the point of view of individual countries, which generally have a negative view of China but do not reject strategic partnership, and from the point of view of Europe as an institution, which sees China as an economic partner but fears its geopolitical ambitions.

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[224] Ivi., p.1
[225] J. Oertel, "The New China Consensus*"*, pp. 7–8.
[226] Ivi, p.7
[227]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe*"*, p.111.
[228] J. Oertel, "The New China Consensus", p.7
[229]T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe*",* p.13

It is not only the reception of Chinese soft power in Europe that has a dual nature, but also its exercise from the Chinese leadership.

On many occasions, China has framed its relationship with Europe in terms of strategic partnership and mutual cooperation, but its foreign and domestic initiatives often hinder these claims. In 2023, during a meeting with the top EU officials in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted the strategic value of China-EU cooperation for global peace, stability and prosperity, calling for mutually beneficial cooperation, stronger political trust, and joint efforts to tackle global challenges.[230] This official rhetoric demonstrates that China considers Europe a strategic partner rather than a rival and seeks to deepen ties based on shared interests and collaboration.

However, China's efforts in building European political trust and strengthening cooperation are often undermined by its authoritarian practices and coercive influence which, make Beijing's initiatives to be perceived as sharp power rather than soft power. China' perspective on democracy and freedom contrasts with how these values are understood in Europe and its rhetoric and limitations of said rights undermines the effectiveness of China's soft power strategy. [231] As China's domestic influence campaign has strengthened, it has become more difficult to improve the country's image among Europeans and the charm campaign for Chinese soft power, has instead become a charm offensive. [232]

Views of China's international behavior are mostly negative, and most countries perceive its foreign policy as based on interference and personal gains. This contrasts with China's official discourse, and its international behavior reveals a dual nature in the exercise of soft power: while it aims to achieve legitimacy through cooperation, China's strict control undermines trust and makes its efforts appear as sharp power in the eyes of European publics.

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[230] W. Qi and C. Zishuai, "China-EU Ties Essential to Global Peace, Stability and Prosperity: Xi," Global Times, December 8, 2023. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303260.shtml

[231] Z. Zhang, *"*The Dilemma of China's Soft Power*"*, op. cit, p. 155

[232] Ibid.

3.2.1 China's soft power strategy during Covid-19

China's soft power strategy and its reception in Europe are characterized by a strong dualism. This dual nature becomes evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which offers a clear example of the complexities of China's soft power projection in European countries.

In response to the pandemic crisis, China sought to emerge as a reliable international actor by providing medical aid and support to European countries. This initiative aimed not only at deepening ties with Europe, but also at restoring the country's credibility and repairing its damaged international image.

However, China's efforts were met with skepticism and its diplomatic initiatives achieved only limited success. Therefore, the pandemic highlights the limitations and tensions underlying China's soft power strategy in Europe.

During the pandemic, China promoted its global image through a soft power strategy of comprehensive humanitarian aid. Europe, as one of the first regions where the virus spread, became one of the first countries to receive China's medical aid and support. China's pandemic aid strategy was later defined by Western media as "mask diplomacy", to refer to a government-sponsored effort to provide medical supplies and assistance to other countries. [233]

In March 2020, as the situation in Europe worsened, Beijing started delivering medical equipment to other countries at market prices or as donations, both from the Chinese government and major Chinese companies. The first shipments were sent to the most affected countries, and they later were extended to Serbia, Ireland and Hungary. [234] For instance, in Italy, where the situation was critical, the Chinese Red Cross organized a flight to deliver 30 tons of medical equipment, including masks and respirators. [235]

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[233] J. Qi, S. Joye, and S. Van Leuven, "Framing China's Mask Diplomacy in Europe during the Early COVID-19 Pandemic," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14, no. 4 (2021), p.206.

[234] Ivi, p.106

[235] C. Balmer, "China Sends Medical Supplies, Experts to Help Italy Battle Coronavirus," *Reuters*, March 13, 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-sends-medical-supplies-experts-to-help-italy-battle-coronavirus-idUSKBN2101ZV/

Chinese mask diplomacy did not only include medical supplies, but also an exchange of medical information through videoconferences with the members of the "17+1" initiative and the sending of Chinese doctors from Wuhan to share their experience on managing the disease in Europe.[236]
China's commitment to offering medical aid and support to European countries demonstrates the desire to strengthen ties with Europe and offer its help during the initial phase of the pandemic.

However, China's mask diplomacy not only aimed at offering medical assistance to European countries; in more strategical terms it also sought to influence overseas opinion and promote the country's soft power. [237] From this perspective, China's mask diplomacy during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic became a key component of its broader soft power strategy. While it involved sending medical aid to European countries, its main purpose was to influence international perceptions and restore the country's image, which had been damaged by the dubious origins of the virus and the critics regarding the Chinese government's initial handling of the crisis. [238] In this context, mask diplomacy allowed China to present itself as a generous and responsible partner, while regaining narrative control and projecting a more positive image abroad. [239]
Despite China's efforts, the effectiveness of this strategy and how it was perceived in Europe remain to be discussed. One of the main goals of mask diplomacy was to restore China's international reputation. However, as shown in *Figure 6*, almost all European countries agree that China gained from the COVID-19 pandemic on economic terms, while only a few believe that its international reputation improved.

[236] S. Kahn and E. Prin, *In the Time of COVID-19, China's Mask Has Fallen with Regard to Europe*, European Issues, no. 569 (September 8, 2020), Foundation Robert Schuman, https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0569-in-the-time-of-covid-19-china-s-mask-has-fallen-with-regard-to-europe.
[237] J. Qi, S. Joye, and S. Van Leuven, "Framing China's Mask Diplomacy", p. 206
[238] Ivi., 214
[239] Ivi., 213-14

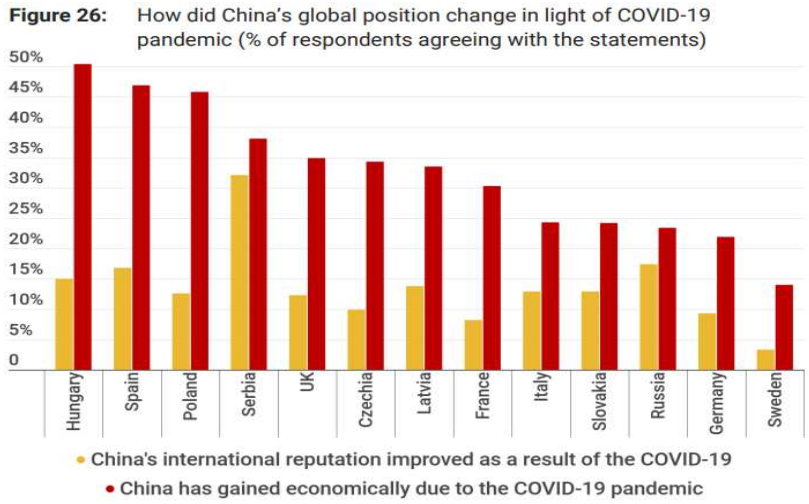

Figure 6: Perception of China's gains after the COVID-19 Pandemic. [240]

This graph demonstrates that, despite China's efforts to improve its credibility and international reputation, the concrete results of mask diplomacy were limited. Most European countries perceived China as having gained economically rather in terms of reputation.

The limited results of China's diplomatic strategy may also be attributed to an intensification of public debate and increasingly negative perceptions that emerged in the wake of COVID. In fact, the centralization of China's communication campaign during the pandemic intensified global criticism and increased existing concerns over its geopolitical ambitions, human rights practices and strong economic influence. [241]

During the pandemic, European perceptions of China as a rival and a potential threat to regional integrity and security intensified. Western media often portrayed mask diplomacy as a failed form of propaganda used strategically by China to gain gratitude for future benefits. [242]

The intensifying public debate and Western negative framing demonstrate that China's soft power strategy in Europe during the pandemic has had limited success.

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[240] R. Q. Turcsányi, M. Šimalčík, K. Kironská, and R. Sedláková, "European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent", Olomouc: Palacký University/CEIAS; Paris: Ifri, (November 16, 2020), p.23

[241] T. Dams, X. Martin, V. Kranenburg, "China's Soft Power in Europe", p.116

[242] J. Qi, S. Joye, and S. Van Leuven, "Framing China's Mask Diplomacy", p.219

The party and its legitimacy, both internal and external, is a fundamental aspect of the Chinese soft power strategy. The growing suspicions towards China and worsening public debate were perceived by the CCP as a threat to its legitimacy and credibility, both within and outside the country. When the negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis became evident, the propaganda system came into operation, especially through extensive government activity on social media. According to data, in the first months of 2020, government-related Twitter accounts issued about 144,000 tweets, four times more than in the four months before. [243]
The growing number of social media accounts demonstrates how China's soft power strategy during the pandemic shifted toward the strategic use of digital platforms.

During a period that China perceived as a crisis of international credibility and legitimacy, its soft power strategy focused on building a flexible narrative that could be adapted to the changing global circumstances.
In the first phase of the spreading of the virus, China's soft power efforts focused on promoting a defensive narrative, accusing other countries of spreading misinformation to undermine the international social order. [244]
As the situation later worsened, the narrative shifted to a proactive approach, with China celebrating the government's efforts and highlighting the support received from foreign leaders and international organizations for its commitment to fighting the virus. [245] As the virus spread globally while China contained the domestic outbreak, the country's international narrative shifted from a defensive approach to global projection, deflecting blame and promoting the country's commitment to assisting other nations in fighting COVID. [246]
China's commitment to defining the narrative of the pandemic, both domestically and globally, demonstrates the centrality of storytelling in its soft power strategy.

[243] B. Gill, "China's Global Influence: Post-COVID Prospects for Soft Power," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2020), p.101
[244] Ivi., pp.101-102
[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid.

Furthermore, it reaffirms the importance of the Party's legitimacy and the need to maintain its credibility in the face of external criticism.

Chinese narrative efforts during the pandemic were aimed at defending the country's image in the face of increasingly harsh criticism, especially in the West, while highlighting the country's role as a reliable and collaborative partner. However, this soft power strategy did not have the desired outcomes, and China's presence in the Western medias and online platforms, sometimes characterized by an aggressive tone, rather increased the perception of a Chinese threat.

It is precisely because of this often-aggressive approach that mask diplomacy, presented by China as part of its soft power strategy, was perceived as a form of aggressive diplomacy. [247]

This more assertive approach of China's diplomacy during the COVID-19 is often described with the expression "wolf warrior diplomacy", a reference to two famous Chinese films. The term was used during the pandemic to indicate the centrality of nationalism and China's assertive international strategy as it aimed at becoming a protagonist in global security. [248]

This assertive stance of Chinese diplomatic efforts became evident in Europe, where the narrative primarily aimed at discrediting the United States for their poor global management of the pandemic while countering the perceived hostility from the West. To achieve this goal, Chinese diplomats employed in European embassies engaged in a in a major social media campaign to defend China's global image and promote its efficient response to the pandemic. [249]

A clear example of this "wolf warrior" diplomacy is the activity of the Chinese Embassy in France during the pandemic. In April 2020, in an article published on

[247] S. Kahn and E. Prin," In the Time of COVID-19, China's Mask Has Fallen with Regard to Europe", European Issues, no. 569 (September 8, 2020), Foundation Robert Schuman, https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0569-in-the-time-of-covid-19-china-s-mask-has-fallen-with-regard-to-europe.

[248] Ibid.

[249] Ibid.

the website of the embassy, Ambassador Lu Sheye accused nursing home staff of neglecting elderly patients and leaving them to die. [250]
This episode illustrates China's strategic use of narrative-shaping during the pandemic, to clear its international image amid growing global accusations.

After having outlined China's soft power strategy during the pandemic, it is necessary to evaluate whether it has proven effective or not.
This report is a result of a wide-scale study of public opinion in 13 European countries on China conducted in September and October 2020.
As shown in *Figure 6*, by autumn 2020, most European countries had a negative or neutral perception of China. The countries with the most negative perception included Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Czechia and Hungary. The only exceptions were Russia and Serbia, where positive sentiment towards China constituted the majority.

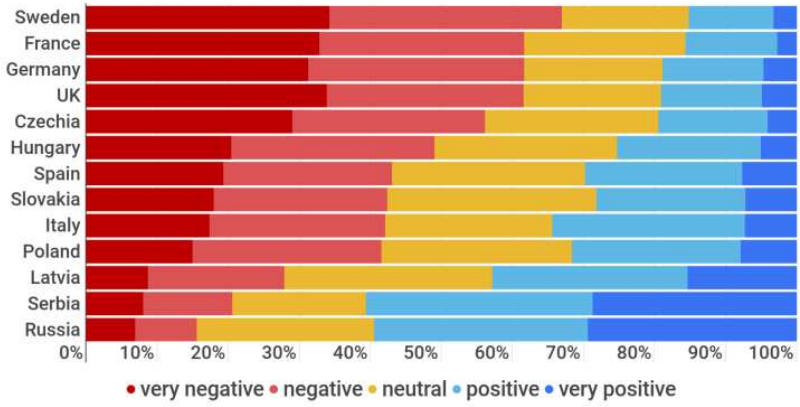

Figure 6: Sentiment towards China in European countries during the pandemic. [251]

[250] P. Wintour, "'France Summons Chinese Envoy after Coronavirus 'Slur'," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2020, accessed August 7, 2025, in *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/15/france-summons-chinese-envoy-after-coronavirus-slur
[251] R. Q. Turcsányi, M. Šimalčík, K. Kironská, and R. Sedláková, "European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19: Differences and Common Ground across the Continent", Olomouc: Palacký University/CEIAS; Paris: Ifri, (November 16, 2020), p. 11.

Considering these data, the effectiveness of China's soft power strategy during the pandemic, embodied in both "wolf warrior" and "mask diplomacy", appears limited. This limited impact can be attributed in part to the shortcomings that mask diplomacy revealed.

First, part of equipment supplied by private Chinese companies revealed to be defective, this contributed to damage China's international image, fueling doubts about the reliability of its medical aid. In addition, the accusations China moved to many European countries' handlings of the pandemic upset various EU member states and institutions. [252]

Moreover, China's diplomatic presence in peripheral European countries was perceived as a threat to European unity and the broader process of European integration. In this perspective, mask diplomacy was often framed as a controversial strategy that, aimed at exploiting the pandemic crisis to sow mistrust among EU members. [253] Contributing to greater skepticism was the negative framing by Western media, which often portrayed Chinese diplomacy as external propaganda, aimed at securing future benefits. At the same time, the media maintained a critical stance toward the country's legitimacy as a responsible global actor. [254]

Another essential aspect of China's soft power strategy during the pandemic was narrative-shaping. However, this was often characterized by aggressive rhetoric and propaganda, which produced limited results in improving China's international credibility.

In fact, as of 2021, if the country's image recovered with regards to its handling of the pandemic, with positive views especially in Europe; its overall unfavourability remained historically high, and the perceptions that China was responsible for the pandemic persisted. [255]

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[252] S. Kahn and E. Prin, "China's Mask Has Fallen", op.cit.
[253] J. Qi, S. Joye, S. Van Leuven, "Framing China's Mask Diplomacy", cit, p.216
[254] Ivi., 219
[255] China Power Project, *"Is China Succeeding at Shaping Global Narratives about Covid-19?," China Power Project*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed August 4, 2025, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-disinformation-global-narratives/

The limited effectiveness of Chinese narrative campaign can ultimately be attributed to the fact that audiences with negative views of China are unlikely to be receptive to its narratives. Even in countries where public opinion acknowledges China managed the pandemic well, Beijing's combative tone and lack of transparency have continued to reinforce the negative sentiment. [256]

China's efforts of shaping the international narrative were undermined by its often-assertive stance, which further deepened existing doubts about its credibility on the global stage and the Western negative perception.

3.3 China's Soft Power in Europe: Strategic Communication and the Role of Social Media

China's domestic and foreign policy aims to shape the European perception through a strategy that develops on multiple levels. Key vehicles for achieving this include building political trust with European countries by promising a stronger engagement in multilateralism, desecuritizing geopolitical narratives and legitimizing domestic policies. [257]

China's soft power projection in Europe has been characterized by both a proactive and defensive approach. On the one hand, China wants to present itself as a positive and reliable partner, on the other it often restricts the debate on issues it perceives as threating to its national image or strategic interests. [258]

The Party plays a central role in shaping the country's narrative abroad. While in China, the Party's strong influence over media outlets is often seen as a stabilizing factor, enhancing control and coordination of information, in Europe this same feature is perceived negatively, as European audiences and media value independence, transparency and open public discourse. [259]

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[256] Ibid.
[257] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, eds., "China's Soft Power in Europe", op. cit, p.109
[258]Ibid.
[259] Ibid.

The government's strong and often assertive role in the media sector often tends to undermine the credibility of the media outlet. [260] Moreover, increasing limitations and pressure from China on foreign media could lead European audiences to perceive Chinese narrative as manipulative, which could result in their distancing from the Chinese narrative. [261] As a result, China's media and narrative efforts in Europe have had limited success so far.
This is best exemplified by analyzing how social media platforms have increasingly been used as strategic tools in China's soft power efforts.

In a 2013 speech, Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of the Internet in the battle for public opinion and stressed the role the Party must play in adapting to new technologies in order to lead information and communication. [262] This marked China's commitment to strategically use social media to convey its narrative and project itself on the global stage. Twitter, for instance, has become an important platform for China's media presence in Europe.

Since 2013, with the launch of the official account of China's mission in the European Union, the country established its digital presence in the region. In the following years, Chinese embassies all over Europe began creating their own accounts, and many Chinese ambassadors launched personal profiles to further spread China's messaging.[263] Although their tweets often recorded low engagement, some still went viral, particularly those related to the situation in Hong Kong or posts portraying foreign governments, such as the United States, in a negative light. [264]
This demonstrates the role these accounts play in contributing to China's broader mission of amplifying its voice abroad and coordinating efforts when it comes to political issues. [265] Through social media platforms like Twitter, China aims at

[260] Ibid.
[261] Ivi., 164
[262] B. Gill, China's Global Influence: Post-COVID Prospects for Soft Power, *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2020): 99 https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1771041.
[263] V. Blablová, "China's Twiplomacy in Europe in the Shadow of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" (Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2023), p.14
[264] Ivi., p.17
[265] Ivi, p. 23

building a narrative that targets external audiences, while, at the same time, promoting its own perspective on both domestic and global events. Moreover, China's activity on Twitter serves another important purpose within its soft power strategy: projecting a positive image of the country by sharing information and visuals that highlight its history, culture, traditions, travel destinations and technological achievements. [266]

While China's initial digital engagement focused mainly on platforms like Twitter, in more recent times the growing popularity of short-videos platforms has reshaped Beijing's approach to international communication. [267] In this context, TikTok, a short video social app developed in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance, has achieved remarkable success in overseas markets. According to statistics, by 2021, it had more than 2 billion downloads worldwide, becoming one of the most popular social media platforms globally. [268]

One of China's key strategic objectives is to strengthen its international communication by more effectively displaying its culture, values and achievements, with the aim of increasing understanding and recognition around the world. [269] From this perspective, an active engagement and efficient leverage of social media platforms overseas are crucial for broadening China's global influence, as they enable the dissemination of content and interaction with a worldwide audience. [270]

It has emerged that social media platforms hold great potential for advancing China's strategic objectives and spreading its narrative globally. However, in recent years, the country's digital presence has become increasingly assertive, particularly amid growing geopolitical tensions with the United States and criticism of its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift reflects a more proactive and some-

[266] Ivi, p.27
[267] J. Hu and R. Liang, "The Overseas Social Media Platform and the Improvement of China's International Communication Abilit: Taking TikTok as an Example," *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology* 5, no. 16 (2023), pp.132–136, p.133
[268] Ivi, 134
[269] Ivi, 133
[270] Ibid.

times and even aggressive approach to public messaging, characterized by the systematic use of social media. [271] In this context, the aim of China's digital strategy is no longer to gain likeability, but rather to limit negative publicity and criticism, through the creation of alternative messages and the dissemination of counter-information. [272] For instance, on the occasion of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, China was accused of conducting a significant state-backed disinformation campaign, and in response Twitter and Facebook removed the accounts that aimed to delegitimize the protests and sow political discord. [273] This episode demonstrates how China is increasingly using social media to influence international perceptions of critical events and to shape a more favorable narrative.

China's ambitions to improve international communication have had limited success in Europe, where Beijing's activity on social media platforms is often perceived as overly aggressive in both pace and volume of dissemination. [274] The situation is further aggravated by the lack of reciprocity in EU-China digital relations. While Chinese authorities can freely use Western social media platforms and have a direct access to the European audiences, the use of Western platforms remains significantly restricted in China. [275]

Both China's aggressive presence on social medias and its restrictions on Western platforms undermine its soft power efforts in Europe. Rather than enhancing its image, these factors contribute to reinforcing the country's negative perception among the European public.

The factors analyzed so far shape a negative European perception of China and they also define how Chinese soft power efforts are received. The general opinion is that the Chinese soft power campaign is perceived by European audiences as a form of authoritarian influence. [276]

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[271] Z. Zhang, "The Dilemma of China's Soft Power", op.cit., p.13
[272] Ibid.
[273] S. Frosina, "Digital Revolution: How Social Media Shaped the 2019 Hong Kong Protests," ISPI, June 8, 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/digital-revolution-how-social-media-shaped-2019-hong-kong-protests-30756
[274] K. Edney, S. Rosen, and Y. Zhu, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics", op. cit. p.163
[275] J. Oertel, "The New China Consensus", op.cit, p.22
[276] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, eds., "China's Soft Power in Europe", cit, p.161

In a rapidly evolving international context, Europe faces the challenge of defining its stance towards China. The relationship is marked by both opportunities for co-operation and risks of dependency and rivalry, requiring the EU to pursue a nuanced approach rather than a binary choice. Soft power plays an important role in this strategic decision, as it represents not only a tool to gain influence, but also a lens through which the European public perceives China. In this regard, social media platforms have become essential instruments of soft power, allowing China to improve its international communication and shape the global narrative. However, to exploit their potential, China must focus on a communication strategy free from aggressive and propagandistic tones, aiming instead to present itself as a credible and respectful global actor.

Chapter 4

The Belt and Road Initiative as Part of the Chinese Soft Power Strategy in Europe

4.1 Soft Elements of The Belt and Road Initiative

In recent years China increasingly invested in huge infrastructural projects, these investments fall within the scope of China's soft power strategy as they contribute to portray a positive image of the country on the global stage and the respect and trust of other international actors. The Belt and Road initiative is a clear example of a strategical project and a tool of Chinese soft power, but before determining what the criteria are for it to fall within the soft power sphere it is necessary to briefly define it.

The concept of "Silk Road Economic Belt" was first introduced by Xi Jinping during his visit in Kazakhstan in September 2013. The following month the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" was integrated and, in the following years, the project rapidly developed through a series of agreements and governmental plans.[277]
Given its complexity, it is difficult to give a standard definition of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but it can be said that it primarily relies on regional connectivity and merges the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road into a large network of railways, roads, pipelines, ports and telecommunications infrastructure in order to promote economic integration from China, through Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, to Europe and beyond. [278]
From this first definition of the BRI, connectivity and infrastructure clearly emerge as essential aspects of the initiative, while its soft power dimension remains latent.

[277] M. Yağcı, "Rethinking Soft Power in Light of China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 15, no. 57 (March 2018): 67–78, p.74.
[278] E. Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 9, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power.

Figure 7: Mapping of China's Belt and Road Initiative [279]

The definition of the Belt and Road Initiative as soft power is quite controversial and mainly reflects Beijing's framing of the project, which not always is recognized abroad. Many view the initiative more as a geopolitical or economic hard power strategy, considering only the related cultural initiatives as soft power. Despite its difficult categorization as a purely soft initiative, there are certain aspects of the BRI that may facilitate its recognition as a form of soft power.

The first soft aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is its categorization as a global public good. According to Joseph Nye, countries must invest in global public goods, that is to say in initiatives whose benefits can also be enjoyed by other international actors; it is through these investments that they can act as smart power players on the global stage. [280] From this perspective, the BRI as well represents a global public good for its promotion of infrastructural investments in other countries, mutual development and win-win cooperation. [281] The extension of the BRI

[279] Figure 7: Mapping of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Eleanor Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 9, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power.
[280] M.Yağcı, "Rethinking Soft Power", op.cit., p.69
[281] Ivi. p.74.

and its potential role as a public good becomes clear when analyzing in detail some of the projects carried out by China within the initiative. For instance, the China-Europe freight train, which illustrates how BRI investments extend beyond Asia and aim to promote open cooperation, mutual benefits and economic integration by facilitating trade and enhancing regional connectivity between Europe and Asia. [282]

Another soft aspect of the BRI lies in its goals. While the initiative is mainly driven by geopolitical and economic interests, such as developing new trade links, accessing export markets, increasing national income and exporting the country's excess productive capacity, defining it as a purely economic project would be reductive. [283] The BRI also falls within China's broader ambition of building global consensus, attracting attention internationally, and legitimizing its role as an emerging global leader. [284] These strategic objectives are mainly pursued through economic diplomacy, in fact as of 2023, China had already spent $1 trillion on BRI initiatives and experts suggested that China's total expenses could reach $8 trillion in the following years. [285] This economic outreach is tied to the promotion of a narrative focused on inclusive globalization, showing China's willingness to embrace the liberal economic global order. [286] Therefore, China once again strategically employs its economic strengths not only for purely economic or commercial purposes, but also to gain global influence.

Narrative power has already emerged as an essential aspect of China's soft power. China consciously offers its own narrative on the international stage to shape a positive image and influence public opinion. The BRI is also presented internationally through a strategic narrative that underlines its connection with the ancient Silk

[282] Freight train becomes key link between China, Europe," *State Council of the People's Republic of China*, December 2, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202412/02/content_WS674d1c04c6d0868f4e8ed960.html
[283] J. , N. Berman, and A. Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative.
[284] M.Yağcı, "Rethinking Soft Power", p.69
[285] J. McBride, N. Berman, and A. Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative", op. cit.
[286] M.Yağcı, "Rethinking Soft Power", p.76

Road and the positive image of China that was associated with it. [287] The past is evoked to demonstrate that economic and cultural ties are necessary to make nations prosperous. [288] Another essential dimension of the BRI that falls within the broader Chinese narrative is the goal of reducing other countries' perception of China as a threat. Through this initiative China wants to project as a benevolent and responsible global actor. [289] China's narrative makes strategic use of the past to shape the present, promoting the BRI as a cooperative and positive initiative aimed at encouraging international actors to take part.

So far, it has been discussed how the Belt and Road initiative is part of China's soft power strategy, achieving its objectives through soft means such as economic influence and narrative shaping. Another essential dimension of China's soft power, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road, is culture. Previously, the promotion of Chinese culture and language was defined as one of the most important aspects of the country's soft power. The Belt and Road Initiative emerge as a vehicle for promoting the national cultural and historical heritage while emphasizing the importance of intercultural dialogue. [290]

In fact, the BRI has brought with it a series of cultural initiatives: Confucius Institutes were expanded, new educational programs were funded abroad, and more festivals and cultural events were organized. China also increasingly invested in the promotion of cultural heritage through international organizations such as UNESCO. [291] Through the BRI, China wanted to promote multiculturalism, using culture as a foundation of soft power in its strategic outreach. This cultural strategy aimed to internationalize Chinese culture not only by promoting economic integration, but also by increasing connectivity, people to people exchange programs and

[287] C. Chiusi, "The Belt and Road Initiative as China's Pathway Towards Soft Power," *Working Paper Series in Public and Cultural Diplomacy*, no. 3 (September 2021), pp. 5-6, https://www.dispoc.unisi.it/sites/st10/files/allegatiparagrafo/30-08-2021/chiusi_wpspcd_3.2021_1.pdf
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ivi., p.7
[290] Ibid
[291] Ivi, pp. 7-8

infrastructures building, leading to the development of cultural awareness and interest in Asia. [292] Consequently, the Belt and Road Initiative, although primarily an infrastructural and economic project, fits into China's broader objective of promoting Chinese culture abroad.

4.2 European Reactions to the BRI

To examine European Reactions to the Belt and Road Initiative it is first necessary to outline the role Europe plays within the Chinese strategy. While the Chinese investments in Europe compared to those in Africa and Asia, are lower both in terms of their total number and volume, European countries have nevertheless played an important role in China's plans since the beginning. The relevance of Europe is linked to China's strategic objectives in the region, which include the reshaping of the landscape of infrastructures and trade. [293] Chinese investments targeted European countries and through the BRI China sought to strengthen trade relations with Europe and gain greater access to European markets, fostering growth and commercial opportunities for Chinese businesses. In this context, the BRI's focus on infrastructure development wants to facilitate the movement of goods and enhance regional connectivity. [294] As of 2021, in spite a general drop in BRI financing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, China had invested in 1000 projects in European countries amounting a total investment volume of over $226 billion. [295] This suggests that, even though some aspects of the BRI can be interpreted as instruments of soft power, China's strategy in Europe is more shaped by commercial and economic objectives rather than by a desire to enhance its attractiveness or gain cultural influence.

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[292] D. P. Sterling, "*A* New Era in Cultural Diplomacy: Promoting the Image of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative in Asia" *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (2018): p.111 https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2018.62010

[293] *China's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe: Assessing Germany and Italy's Responses and Strategic Shifts*, EFSAS Study Paper No. 4 (April 2024).

[294] Ibid.

[295] Ivi, p.5. The numbers vary depending on the source, and actual investments often differ from announced commitments; most are estimates.

While China's official narrative emphasizes historical and cultural ties, cooperation and mutual benefits, the Belt and Road Initiative is mainly driven by gain commercial and economic objective. Thus, the soft power dimension of the BRI becomes questioned when examining in more detail the European reception of the initiative. In fact, the BRI has been the subject of intense debate and heavy criticism from the Western world. [296] Both EU representatives and BRI target countries have become increasingly apprehensive over the sustainability of BRI projects and the financial transparency of Chinese investments**.** Their concerns mainly derive from the debt issues incurred by the recipient countries**.**

A notable example is Montenegro, where the government borrowed 1 billion from China to finance the construction of a highway under the BRI, resulting in a debt of more than a third of the country's annual budget and raising fear of potential bankruptcy.[297] In other European strategic regions, such as the Balkans, China's growing influence has been met with increasing suspicion by Brussels. Chinese investments in these areas were increasingly perceived as harmful to the long-term interests of European countries and EU's role in the broader European neighborhood. [298] This response to China's expanding presence and economic investments connected to the BRI reflects the cautious approach and concerns that in general characterizes Sino-European relations and the European reception of Chinese soft power.

The reception of the BRI's trade and investment strategy in Europe was generally characterized by a growing concern. However, this is a generalization, and given the diversity of European countries, it is difficult to define their response uniformly. Despite China's ambition to foster win-win relationships based on friendship and mutual trust, the Belt and Road Initiative was met with mixed reactions across Europe. [299]

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[296] G. Di Donato, "China's Approach to the Belt and Road Initiative and Europe's Response," *ISPI* (April 2024), accessed 18 August, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-approach-belt-and-road-initiative-and-europes-response-25980

[297] C*hina's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe*, EFSAS Study Paper No. 4.

[298] Ibid.

[299] G.Di Donato, "China's Approach"

Key concerns regarding controversial issues, such as environmental and human rights standards, transparency, open procurement and debt sustainability, made it difficult for European countries to adopt a consistent and positive approach. While some partnered with China through bilateral and multilateral agreements, others remained strongly skeptic and maintained a cautious engagement. [300] This diversity in responses to the BRI highlights Europe's struggle to adopt a unified approach, as it continues to engage with China bilaterally rather than as a united institution with shared goals and intentions.

After having outlined Europe's reception of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to analyze the reasons behind its cautious approach. Europe's limited engagement and scarce enthusiasm in response to the Chinese initiative can be attributed to a lack of mutual trust and widespread skepticism in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness. This climate of tension is further intensified by the great differences in values, ideologies and political systems between the two actors. [301] Given the geopolitical implications of the BRI, another key factor fueling mistrust is EU's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its historical alliance with the United States. In a global order increasingly characterized by multilateralism and the rise of new powers, Europe's dependency from the US shapes its perception of China's strategic initiatives. [302] External alliances and significant political and ideological differences, prevent Europe from having a positive response to the BRI, an initiative mainly aimed at increasing China's strategic presence and influence beyond its borders.

Other factors derived from internal organizational challenges, both from Europe and China, contribute to shaping the reception of the BRI. From China's perspective, the BRI suffers from a lack of political and bureaucratic coordination, resulting in an unclear assignment of responsibilities. This internal fragmentation contributes

[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.
[302] Ibid.

to the initiative's lack of transparency, raising concerns in the eyes of foreign investors and partners and making it difficult for China to adopt a uniform approach in its dealing with EU member states. [303] On the European side, the absence of a cohesive response further contributes to a negative perception of the Chinese initiative, driven by internal fragilities and dividing national interests. [304] Both the management of the BRI and Europe's response to it suffer from a lack of institutional coherence and coordination, thus reinforcing a climate of uncertainty.

When analyzing Europe's reception of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to consider how member states' perceptions have shifted over time in response to external developments. While in 2017 there was a general positive sentiment across European countries towards the BRI, this perception became increasingly negative in the following years. [305] This shift is closely linked to the evolution of EU-China relations. Growing concerns over Chinese investment in Europe's high-tech sectors, negative media framing of BRI related projects and the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic all contributed to the European Union's redefinition of China as a 'systemic rival' rather than a strategic partner. These developments together led to a more cautious and critical European engagement with China. [306] As a result, the BRI soft power impact in Europe remains limited, as rising tensions and controversies continue to reinforce skepticism towards China's strategic initiatives.

[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Alicia García-Herrero and Robin Schindowski, *Global Trends in Countries' Perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Working Paper 04/2023 (Bruegel, April 25, 2023), figure 10.
[306] A. García-Herrero and R. Schindowski, "Global Trends in Countries' Perceptions", p.14, https://www.bruegel.org/working-paper/global-trends-countries-perceptions-belt-and-road-initiative

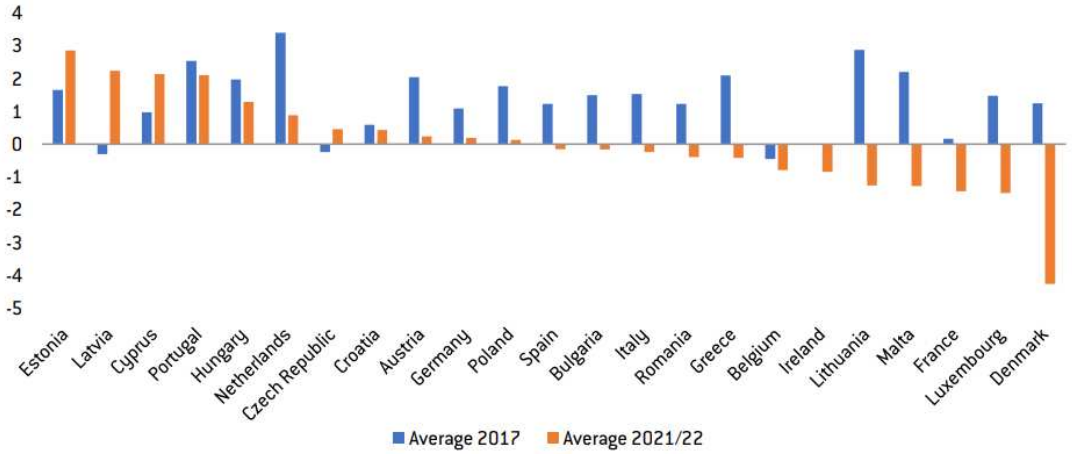

Figure 8: Shift in perception of the BRI in European countries [307]

When analyzing Europe's perception of the Belt and Road initiative, it is also important to consider its strategic response, characterized by the launch of the Global Gateway. This initiative was announced as a €300 billion infrastructure plan spanning between 2021 and 2027 aiming to provide an open, democratic and transparent alternative to the BRI. [308]By promoting political harmony and rejecting authoritarianism, Europe aims to strengthen its ties with other countries, especially in Africa, where the Global Gateway wants to offer smart and sustainable investments as an alternative to China's approach. [309] Analyzing this response, it becomes clear that Europe perceives the BRI as a challenge to the democratic and Western-style order. As a result, Global Gateway demonstrates Europe's efforts to preserve its influence in strategic regions and counter China's growing influence.

The limited effectiveness of the soft dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative can also be attributed to its geopolitical and strategic aims, which often overshadow its narrative of cooperation and mutual development. As a result, the BRI is often associated with hard power. Through its projects, China promotes soft power while at the same time extending its geopolitical influence and laying the foundations for

[307] A. García-Herrero and R. Schindowski, "Global Trends", cit. figure 10.
[308] A. Amighini, *Europe Needs to Take Advantage of Its Global Gateway to Face China's BRI*, ISPI, June 5, 2024, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/europe-needs-to-take-advantage-of-its-global-gateway-to-face-chinas-bri-175614.
[309] Ibid.

projecting hard power. [310] For example, China's acquisition of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka demonstrates how the BRI serves China's strategic and geopolitical interest. [311] Similarly, the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti shows how the initiative related projects serve military purposes as well. Although these cases do not directly concern Europe, they demonstrate the link between China's ambitions and its strategic and geopolitical interests, and therefore the limited soft power dimension of the initiative.

4.3 The Italian Case: China's failed Soft Power Ambitions

Since its launch in 2014, Italy showed a strong interest in cooperating within the framework of the BRI and, in 2019, during a State visit by Xi Jinping in Rome, the Italian government under the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte officially signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China, making Italy the first G7 country to formally join the initiative. [312] This strong engagement and official commitment show that Italy's initial response to the initiative was overwhelmingly positive. Italy was particularly attracted by the potential commercial benefits that the BRI could offer to its crisis-ridden economy as well as the need to mitigate the potential impact of President Trump's protectionist measures. [313]

Italy's active engagement and cooperative stance toward China marked a strategic shift in the country's foreign policy, previously more focused on relations with Western and Mediterranean partners. This new approach was met with growing concern, especially since Italy's alignment seemed to go beyond a purely commercial and economic partnership, indicating a broader future alignment with China.

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[310] A. G. Ross, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Economic Development for All or a Geopolitical Power Play?" (Royal United Services Institute, May 18, 2020), https://rusi.org/commentary/belt-and-road-initiative-economic-development-all-or-geopolitical-power-play

[311] Ibid.

[312] European Foundation for South Asian Studies, *China's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe: Assessing Germany and Italy's Responses and Strategic Shifts*, EFSAS Study Paper No. 4 (April 2024), 12

[313] Ibid.

[314] If on the one hand Italy's participation in the BRI strengthened bilateral cooperation with Beijing, on the other it contributed to a further deterioration in relations with the European Union, which maintained a more cautious stance of the BRI. [315] Europe's response proves the importance of the Chinese initiative on the international scene, with a country's engagement having both symbolic value and geopolitical implications.

Before analyzing the effectiveness of the BRI in Italy, it is important to outline the main dimensions of China's soft power in the country. In Italy, China mainly exerts influence through two channels: culture and economy. [316] When discussing the motivations behind Italy's engagement with China within the Belt and Road, it becomes clear that economic benefits played a fundamental role. China's economic appeal and market strength not only influenced Italy's decision to join the BRI but also contributed to shape its generally welcoming and friendly attitude towards China. This confirms the importance of economic tools not only within the BRI, but also in China's broader soft power strategy. Economic appeal plays an important role in strengthening China's ties with other countries and encouraging positive engagement.

Economic tools have emerged as one of the fundamental aspects of China's soft power. In fact, Italy's main motivation for strengthening ties with Beijing through the Belt and Road Initiative was commercial and economic gain. [317] Italy's economic interests converged with China's strategic ambitions for a stronger presence in the country, particularly given Italy's geographic position in the Mediterranean Sea and its increasingly complex relations with the European Union at the time of the BRI launch.[318] These factors contributed to increase Italy's attractiveness for

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[314] L. Poggetti, "Italy Charts Risky Course with China-Friendly Policy," *MERICS Comment*, October 11, 2018, https://merics.org/en/comment/italy-charts-risky-course-china-friendly-policy

[315] European Foundation for South Asian Studies, "China's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe", cit, p.12

[316] L. Mariani and F. Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture: Two Tracks for China's Soft Power in Italy," in China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times, ed. Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin, and Vera Kranenburg, ETNC Report (The Hague: Clingendael, April 2021), p.52

[317] Ibid.

[318] Ibid.

China, which attempted to strengthen its influence in the region through strategic infrastructure investments, such as the acquisition of ports. [319] However, Italy's expectations of economic benefits from the BRI were later disappointed, as the actual outcomes had a limited impact on the country's economic growth.

It is important to examine the Belt and Road Initiative's results in terms of cultural influence and exchanges. Culture has emerged as one of the main dimensions of China's soft power, and one a key tool for gaining influence in Italy. The cultural aspect of the relationship between the two countries has often been strategically used by both sides for its rhetorical value. Both Italy and China have frequently referred to their cultural ties to emphasize the uniqueness of their collaboration, grounded on a shared sense of historical importance and artistic sensibility. From this perspective, numerous events and agreements were launched to promote cultural cooperation and exchanges. [320] Culture continues to emerge as one of the main tools of Chinese soft power, allowing China to leverage its historical and cultural heritage to deepen ties with other international actors. Despite its main economic and geopolitical focus, the BRI also integrates cultural diplomacy as part of China's broader soft power approach in Italy.

The role of cultural cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative is particularly evident when examining the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2019, which formalized Italy's entry into the initiative. [321] Among the main areas of cooperation outlined in the MoU, people to people connectivity is especially relevant, highlighting the two sides' commitment to strengthening cultural ties. As stated in the related section of the agreement:

> "The Parties will endeavor to expand people-to-people exchanges, to develop their sister cities network, to fully utilize the platform of Italy-China Culture Cooperation Mechanism to cooperate for the finalization of the twinning

[319] Ibid.
[320] L. Mariani and F. Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture", op.cit, p.54
[321] *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum_Italia-Cina_EN.pdf

> among Italian and Chinese UNESCO world heritage sites, to promote cooperation arrangements on education, culture, science, innovation, health, tourism and public welfare among their respective Administrations. The Parties will promote exchanges and cooperation between their local authorities, media, think tanks, universities and the youth." [322]

This demonstrates the initial engagement of both parties in the educational and cultural dimensions of the BRI, through a stronger cooperation in various fields, such as the preservation of UNESCO heritage sites, and the promotion of exchanges at both the local and educational level. Having established the relevance and presence of culture within the official framework of the BRI, it is now necessary to assess whether these objectives resulted into a real Chinese cultural influence, as part of its broader soft power strategy in Italy.

One of the most relevant cultural initiatives within the Belt and Road Initiative was the celebration of China-Italy Year of Culture and tourism. Initially planned for 2020, the event was postponed to 2022 but due to the covid pandemic. It was aimed at strengthening cultural and people-to-people exchanges, promoting cooperation in the cultural field, as outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries. [323]

The opening of the celebration featured a series of discussions on bilateral cooperation in the touristic and cultural areas; moreover, throughout the year, numerous events and projects, such as art exhibitions, were supposed to be organized to promote cultural dialogue between the two countries. [324] This initiative confirmed the importance that both China and Italy place on cultural ties within the broader framework of the BRI and the value of culture as a tool in their respective soft power strategies.

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[322] Ibid.

[323] M. Traverso, "The BRI and Italy-China Cultural Relations: An Overview of the '2020 Year of Culture and Tourism,'" in *Asian Studies: The Twelfth International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 12)*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 724–735, p.729, https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048557820/ICAS.2022.084

[324] Ibid.

Another fundamental aspect of China's strategy, strengthened through the BRI, is the strategic use of media. As examined in the previous chapters, in recent years China has promoted the internationalization of its state medias to shape its image abroad and to tell its own narrative. This strategy has also been pursued in Italy, where the Italian news coverage of China increased significantly following the country's entry in the BRI. As part of the MoU, ANSA, Italy's most relevant press agency, signed a partnership agreement with China's national news outlet, Xinhua, which included the publication of the translated articles. [325] This collaboration is a clear example of Chinese soft power exercised through media partnerships. It illustrates how the BRI is not only an infrastructural and economic initiative, but it is also part of China's broader strategy of international projection, aimed at shaping public opinion through soft rather than hard power tools. However, despite the agreement's relevance in terms of soft power, it is important to note that many Western analysts perceive China's state media more as a spreading a coercive form of information, rather than authentic soft power.

After having outlined the main areas of the Belt and Road Initiative in Italy, it is now necessary to assess the outcomes of these collaborations in order to determine whether the initiative can be considered a success or a failure.

In terms of economic cooperation, the benefits Italy hoped for through joining the Belt and Road Initiative did not ultimately materialize as the economic integration between the two countries was not further explored, both in terms of trade and direct investments. [326] In fact, despite the Memorandum of Understanding objective of rebalancing the trade relationship, Italy's exports to China only slightly increased and Italy continued to register a large trade deficit. In addition to these limited commercial gains, the investment dimension of the BRI also reached an impasse, with Chinese's foreign direct investments dropping sharply from $650 million in 2019 to just $20 million in 2020, and only $33 million in 2021. [327] Moreover, while Italy

[325] L. Mariani and F. Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture", p.55
[326] G. Manca, "Italy's BRI Dilemma," *ISPI Commentary*, July 27, 2023, accessed August 17, 2025 https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/italys-bri-dilemma-137315
[327] Ibid.

had hoped that joining the BRI would help build a privileged relationship with China, Chinese investments and exports remained largely concentrated in other European countries, many of which were non-BRI members. [328] The economic benefits of the BRI were one of the main reasons behind Italy's decision to join the initiative. However, the disappointing results in terms of commercial and economic gains undermined the climate of trust and collaboration that China wanted to build through the Belt and Road, ultimately leading to Italy's withdrawal from the Memorandum of Understanding.

Several factors such as the high costs of the agreement, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the perception of Chinese news' coverage as a form of propaganda, led to the breakage of the partnership between the media outlets in 2022. [329] Through the partnership between ANSA and Xinhua China aimed to expand its media presence in Italy and reach the Italian public, however the abrupt end of the agreement highlights the limited success of this initiative, demonstrating that an increase in the amount of information about China does not necessarily result into an improvement of its perception in the target audience. [330]

The last area of the Belt and Road Initiative in Italy whose results need to be examined is the educational and cultural one. As mentioned before, one of the main objectives of the MoU signed between Italy and China was to promote cultural exchanges between the two parties. This included exchanges between universities and young people, with the aim of mutual cultural enrichment and deeper intercultural understanding. [331] However, as illustrated in *Figure 9* based on MERICS data and elaborated by ISPI with the title "Italy-China: Drop in University Exchanges" the number of collaborations between Italian and Chinese university experienced a significant decrease in the years following Italy's entry into the BRI. The COVID-19

[328] Ibid.

[329] ANI, "Italian newswire ANSA ended agreement with Xinhua News Agency," *The Print*, August 14, 2022 https://theprint.in/world/italian-newswire-ansa-analled-agreement-with-xinhua-news-agency/1081958/

[330] L. Mariani and F. Ghiretti, "Economy and Culture", p.55

[331] M. Villa and F. Fasulo, "Italia fuori dalla Via della Seta cinese: un bilancio in 5 grafici," *ISPI*, December 19, 2023, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/italia-fuori-dalla-via-della-seta-cinese-un-bilancio-in-5-grafici-155935

pandemic situation and the subsequent countermeasures implemented by Beijing contributed to this decline. However, there has been no recovery in university exchanges even after the lifting of restrictive measures. [332] Further evidence of the limited impact of the BRI in the cultural sphere is the absence of academic material on the subject. Existing literature focuses instead on the economic and infrastructural value of the initiative for Sino-Italian relations, neglecting its cultural dimension. The steady decline in university exchanges and the absence of academic material on cultural cooperation highlight the difficulty in implementing the BRI's strategic objectives in this field.

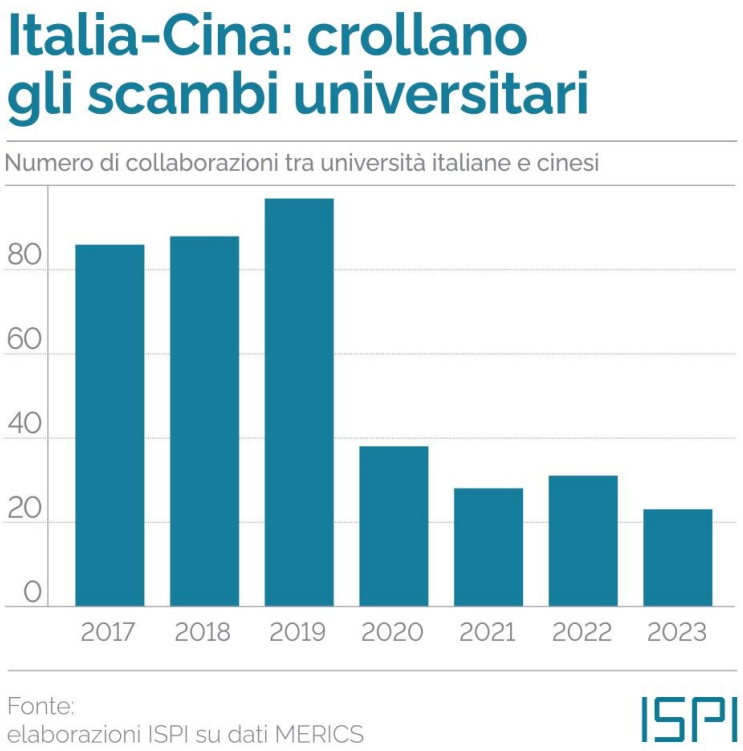

Figure 9: Drop in University Exchanges between Italy and China [333]

After having examined the limited outcomes of the Belt and Road Initiative in various fields, it is essential to discuss in more detail the fact, more than anything else, helps determine whether the BRI has been a success or a failure of China's strategy in Italy and the motivations that led to the decision: Italy's withdrawal from the

[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid.

initiative. On December 6, 2023, just a few months before its expiration in 2024, the Italian government formally announced the decision of not renewing the 2019 memorandum of understanding (MOU). [334] There were several reasons for this decision, including domestic politics, economics, and foreign policy. First, due to changes in the Italian leadership first with the Mario Draghi and later with Giorgia Meloni there was a significant shift in the approach to China, that became increasingly critical, resulting in a more negative perception of the BRI as well. [335] In addition to this ideological shift, the Italian leadership under Draghi and later Meloni chose to realign with the US on China policy, thus distancing itself from Beijing after a short period of rapprochement. [336]

This change in attitude not only depended on the different ideological and structural stance of the Italian ruling party, but also on the limited economic benefits generated by the Chinese initiative. While Italy viewed the BRI as an opportunity to boost exports and attract the Chinese investments, Italy's exports to China remained modest when compared to those of other major European economies. Moreover, during the period of Italy's participation in the BRI, imports from China grew disproportionately compared to exports, resulting in a significant trade deficit. The economic imbalance was aggravated by the limited number of high-level investments from China. [337]

In addition to economic and political factors, symbolic considerations in terms of foreign policy also played an important role. Italy's decision to join the BRI was met with strong criticism from both the European union and the United States, who accused Rome of breaking the Western unified stance on the Chinese initiative. [338] Within this broader context of international alliances, Italy's withdrawal from the

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[334] I. Mazzocco and A. L. Palazzi, "Italy Withdraws from China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, December 14, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/italy-withdraws-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative

[335] European Foundation for South Asian Studies, *China's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe: Assessing Germany and Italy's Responses and Strategic Shifts*, EFSAS Study Paper No. 4 (April 2024), 14.

[336] Ibid.

[337] I. Mazzocco and A.L Palazzi, "Italy Withdraws"

[338] G. Prodi, "Italy's Soft Reset with China after Dropping the Belt and Road," *East Asia Forum*, September 28, 2024, https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1727512698

BRI has strong symbolic value as it signals an open realignment with the United States and NATO, reaffirming its role as a strong and reliable partner. [339] With this move, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni wanted to send a message not only to Washington, but also to the European Union. In fact, Italy's withdrawal and its new approach to China reflect the general climate of skepticism towards Beijing present in Europe. [340] Italy's decision was therefore not a sudden or unmotivated choice, but rather the result of a strategic and conscious repositioning on the global stage alongside its traditional allies.

Having examined the limited results of the Belt and Road Initiative in Italy and the country's final decision of withdrawing from the initiative, it becomes evident that China's strategy was unsuccessful in the Italian case. It is now necessary to consider what were the broader implications of this failure for China's soft power strategy in Italy. An online article published by *East Asia Forum* titled "Italy's soft reset with China after dropping the Belt and Road" suggests negative consequences for Chinese soft power and makes assumptions about the future evolution of Sino-Italian relations. However, despite what the title suggests, the article argues that Italy's withdrawal had limited impact, especially since the two parties maintained a strong cooperation in strategic sectors through a new series of agreements. [341] The main difference, according to the article, is that Sino-Italian ties once again fit into the context of the broader framework of Western alliances. [342]

More concrete evidence of the effects of Italy's withdrawal on Chinese soft power emerges when examining data from the China Index. Italy's ranking in terms of China's soft power dropped between 2022 to 2024. [343] This decline can be better understood by considering the factors used to elaborate the Index, which include: the level of Chinese influence, the pressure exerted by the PRC and the extent to which the target countries accommodate China's influence. Italy's withdrawal is

[339] I. Mazzocco and A. Palazzi, "Italy Withdraws", cit.
[340] Ibid.
[341] G. Prodi, "Italy's Soft Reset", cit
[342] Ibid.
[343] *Figure 10: Decline of China's soft power in Italy between 2022-2024*

explicitly mentioned among the key points for 2024 analysis, thus emphasizing its relevance to the shift in the outcomes. [344]

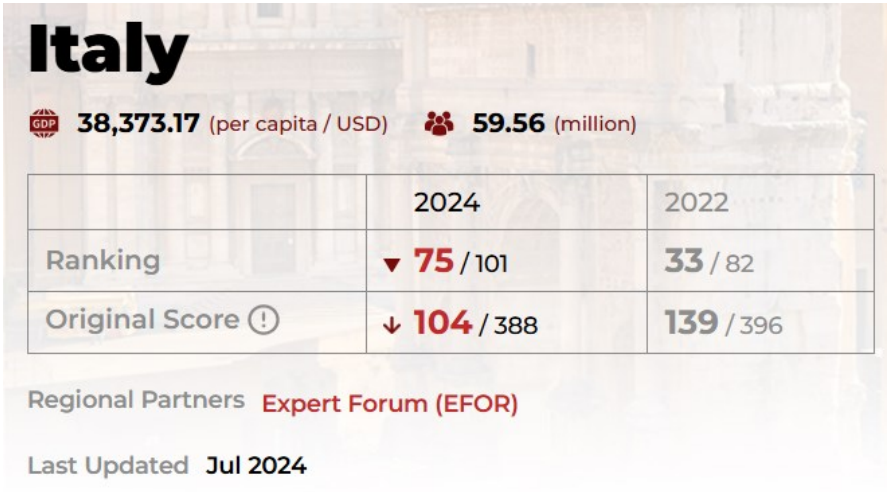

Figure 10: Decline of China's soft power in Italy between 2022-2024 [345]

In conclusion, while Italy's withdrawal from the BRI did not have dramatic consequences for Sino-Italian cooperation, aside from its repositioning within the broader network of Western alliances, it did have a negative impact on China's soft power, reflected in a decline in its influence and ability to exert pressure in the country.

[344] *Figure 10: China's soft power in Italy*, *China-Index, image captured from the webpage, accessed August 22, 2025, last updated July 2024.*
[345] Henri and the China Index Committee, "Italy," *China Index* (China In The World network), last updated July 2024, accessed August 22, 2025, https://china-index.io/country/Italy

Chapter 5

The Recent Developments of China's Soft Power Strategy in Europe

5.1 China and Europe Today: Navigating Soft Power in a Divided Relationship

Eu-China relations have increasingly been characterized by a growing duality: on one hand Europe has always pursued economic cooperation with Beijing, through infrastructural projects and trade exchanges, while on the other its attitude has increasingly been marked by a strong skepticism and growing concern over China's rise in the global stage.

In the last five years, critical events of global significance, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine led to growing frictions between Europe and China, sparking debates over the risks of Europe's economic dependency on Beijing and the implications of China's close relationship with Russia. As a result, these events contributed to shaping a more negative European perception. [346]

In addition to these developments, Europe's renewed engagement with the United States during Joe Biden's presidency, with Washington support for Ukraine, led several European governments to adopt a more critical and assertive stance towards China, choosing to align with the United States' position. [347]

It can be affirmed that the current strategic and economic frictions between China and the EU are the result of shifting global power dynamics and the transformation of the international order. The international scenario is characterized by the rising tensions between geopolitical rivals, growing protectionism and increased competition in emerging economic sectors. Taken together, these factors lead to a deterioration in strategic trust between China and the EU. [348]

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[346] J. Borràs, "Green Soft Power: China's New Strategy in Europe*"* (Barcelona: CIDOB, May 2025), p.1 https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/green-soft-power-chinas-new-strategy-europe

[347] Ibid.

[348] G. Stec, interview by *MERICS Forum: Engaging in Times of Tension – Views from Europe and China*, interview with Arancha Gonzalez; Jin Ling; Alicia García Herrero; Cui Hongjian; Jakub Jakóbowski; Yan Shaohua; Mikko Huotari, *MERICS*, July 23, 2025, https://merics.org/en/comment/merics-forum-engaging-times-tension-views-europe-and-china

European foreign policy has recently witnessed a realignment with Washington. However, when examining in more detail the European Union's approach to China, two main currents can be identified: the first still hopes for a renewed cooperation with Beijing, believing that it could help stabilize the EU' s economic and political position in the world, the second highlights the increasing economic and strategic tensions with China, highlighting the growing frictions between the two parties. [349] Despite these different perspectives, a broad consensus on China seems to have been reached among EU member states, with the acceptance of what is defined as a "triple positioning", taking up the definition used by the European Commission of China as a "cooperative partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival". [350] This definition reflects the complex European's perception of China and the challenges that have always characterized Sino-European relations. On the one hand, Europe has continued to hope for and pursue cooperation with Beijing due to its perceived benefits; on the other hand, the deepening strategic and economic tensions have increasingly limited this desire for collaboration, shaping a vision of China as a competitor, rather than a cooperative partner.

The evolution of EU-China bilateral relations and their recent developments were briefly addressed by EU Ambassador Jorge Toledo in occasion of the conference on 50 years of EU-China relations in Beijing. The ambassador referred to the complexity of this relationship, highlighting China's role both as a European partner and a competitor and systemic rival. He also outlined the major challenges for Sino-European relations, such as China's political and diplomatic support to Russia, diverging views and narratives about human rights, China's actions in the South China Sea and the trade imbalance between the two sides. Given these points of tension, the ambassador stressed that the two sides must commit to developing solutions at the bilateral level in order to achieve concrete results. [351]

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[349] Ibid.

[350] F. Zhongping, "European Integration, Strategic Autonomy, and China-EU Relations," op. cit., p.9

[351] European External Action Service (EEAS), "Opening Speech by EU Ambassador Jorge Toledo at Conference on 50 Years of EU-China Relations in Beijing," Beijing, May 15, 2025.

The current critical issues in relations between China and Europe were also the focus of the bilateral summit that took place in Beijing at the end of July.

On the one hand, in a global context increasingly marked by tensions, China urged the European Union to "make the right strategic choice" by deciding to strengthen cooperation with Beijing. [352] On the other hand, the European side expressed concern over the widening trade deficit with China, emphasizing how EU's economic ties with Beijing "have reached an inflection point", with a trade deficit now amounting to €300 billion euros ($350 billion). [353] In the face of this growing gap, the European side stressed the need to rebalance the EU-China relations bilaterally to make the collaboration more sustainable and mutually beneficial. [354] There is currently a strong consensus on the need to de-risk Europe's economic relationship with China, while maintaining a positive collaboration. Despite the different perspective on the extent of the de-risking, the implementation of appropriate measures has become a mandatory strategic objective within the European agenda. [355]

Economic cooperation remains an essential dimension of China's engagement with Europe and one of its main tools to exert influence. However, the intensification of economic and trade relations with Brussels has also contributed to escalating tensions and prompted Europe to elaborate a de-risking strategy. These commercial issues, if not resolved, could deepen Brussels' skepticism and wariness of cooperation with Beijing.

Until now, economic issues have emerged as one of the main sources of friction between China and Europe, and these have also been discussed at recent official

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https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/opening-speech-eu-ambassador-jorge-toledo-conference-50-years-eu-china-relations-beijing_en

[352] N. Gan, "China's Xi Urges Europe to Make the 'Right Strategic Choice' amid Global Trade Turbulence at Key Summit," *CNN*, July 24, 2025. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/24/china/china-eu-summit-beijing-intl-hnk

[353] Ibid.

[354] K. Moritsugu, "Europe and China Agree to Take Action on Climate Change and Nothing Else in Tense Beijing Summit," *AP News*, July 24, 2025 https://apnews.com/article/european-union-china-trade-summit-beijing-0f2f0b67435b88a78adef3aa001d0099

[355] F. Zhongping, "European Integration, Strategic Autonomy, and China-EU Relations", op.cit , p.10.

meetings, such as the one in July. Economic influence is one of the main instruments in China's soft power strategy, however Beijing uses other tools to exert its influence and shape the global opinion. To analyze the current state of EU-China relations, it is necessary to consider other factors that have contributed to growing challenges with Europe, thus limiting China's soft power in the region.

In addition to economic concerns, the points of contention between Europe and China can also be attributed to political and geopolitical challenges.

While the differences between the two sides' political systems are not perceived as an obstacle to cooperation, external developments, such as the conflict in Ukraine, have had a negative impact on relations between Beijing and Brussels. [356] Despite China's claims of neutrality, many in Europe perceive Beijing as secretly supporting Russia military operation, or as an accomplice. [357]

European leaders have repeatedly called on Beijing to use its strategic influence over Russia to help end to the conflict, including during the July summit, but with little results. [358] Furthermore, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait continue to affect European interests and the international rules based global order, thus shaping negatively China's image in the eyes of European leaders. [359]

As a result, despite the symbolic and diplomatic value of recent events, such as the July Summit, for EU-China cooperation, their concrete outcomes remain limited, as the global context of conflict and uncertainty continues to influence the two actors' unyielding position on critical issues. [360]

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[356] EEAS, "Opening Speech by EU Ambassador Jorge Toledo", cit.

[357] D. Tang and S. McNeil, "Reeling from Trump Rebukes, Europe Weighs Deeper Ties with China," *Associated Press*, June 26, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/china-european-union-trump-tariffs-trade-93e5f748cf868155853e6776639eaf24

[358] EEAS, "Opening Speech by EU Ambassador Jorge Toledo"

[359] Rachel More, "Indo-Pacific Tensions Impact European Interests, German Minister Warns," *Reuters*, August 20, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/indo-pacific-tensions-impact-european-interests-german-minister-warns-2025-08-20/

[360] "Europe and China Agree Action on Climate Change at Beijing Summit," *AP News*, July 24, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/european-union-china-trade-summit-beijing-0f2f0b67435b88a78adef3aa001d0099

The increasingly tense relationship between Europe and China translates in China's growing difficulty in exercising its soft power in the region. In fact, Beijing's efforts to expand its influence through cultural initiatives, education and research exchanges are often met with caution by Europe. The limits of China's soft power appeal depend largely on the external factors previously outlined, which tend to overshadow Beijing's attempts at projecting its influence and shaping a positive image. In addition to cultural and educational initiatives, China's soft power strategy in Europe relies heavily on economic attraction; however economic appeal as well is proving to have limited results, as economic cooperation with China is increasingly viewed in a geopolitical light. [361]

The limited effectiveness of China's soft power strategy in Europe becomes even more evident when analyzing the European public perception. Based on a survey conducted by the Internationale Politik in 2025 across 11 EU member states, only 4% of Europeans view China as an ally, while more than a third consider it as a rival or an adversary. [362]

The largely negative perception of China among the European public demonstrates the scarce effectiveness of Beijing's soft power initiatives. This shortcoming is partly caused by growing bilateral tensions between the two sides, which have made strategic areas of cooperation, such as the economy, more challenging, especially in an increasingly complex global context. Faced with constraints and growing challenges in the traditional sectors through which China exercises its influence in Europe, Beijing has strategically diversified its investments into new areas, particularly those related to energy and green technology, while maintaining its engagement in established economic and cultural channels.

In the face of increasingly divided cooperation between China and Europe, it is necessary to explore solutions that could help reduce the tensions. In a recent initi-

[361] T. Dams, X. Martin, and V. Kranenburg, eds., "China's Soft Power", op. cit, p.13,
[362] L. Johnson, "What Europe Thinks … about China in 2025," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, March 26, 2025 https://ip-quarterly.com/en/what-europe-thinks-about-china-2025

ative, the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), questioned different researchers on what compromises each side should make to advance a more constructive agenda. Despite different perspective, all of them tend to agree on one point: China and Europe should work toward a more functional and open relationship based not on conflictual stances, but on mutual understanding, openness and renewed trust. [363]

On the European side, a more uniform approach is needed. Meanwhile, with regard to China, scholars and think tanks argue that a sustainable agenda would require an end to market distortions and a reduction in geopolitical assertiveness. The two parties' future collaboration should begin with a mutual acknowledgement of economic and political differences, followed by the development of a common agenda focused on shared objectives and dialogue. This agenda should aim at establishing reciprocal and open markets, encouraging mutually beneficial investments, fighting jointly against climate change and shaping a rule based international order. [364]

Although the future role of soft power in EU-China relations is not explicitly discussed, a joint commitment in resolving tensions would contribute to shaping a more positive image of China, thereby enhancing its attractiveness in Europe.

5.1.1 China's New Green Approach to Soft Power in Europe

China's traditional soft areas of influence in Europe, particularly economic cooperation, have yielded diminishing returns in terms of soft power effectiveness. At the same time, tensions in diplomatic relations with European institutions have intensified. The limited effectiveness of Chinese soft power in the region, together with a perceived deterioration of relations with Brussels, have prompted China to invest in new strategic sectors.

[363] *MERICS Forum: Engaging in Times of Tension*, MERICS, July 23, 2025
[364] Ibid.

One of the most significant shifts in China's strategy has been the growing investment in green technologies in European countries, particularly in the electric vehicle sector, which has experiences rapid growth in recent years.
By 2023, EV related investments accounted for 70% of Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe. In addition to this financial commitment, China also chose to establish EV battery manufacturing facilities in several European countries, including Hungary, France, Germany, Slovakia, Spain, and Poland, thus increasing its industrial presence in the region. [365]

Growing investments in the green sector reflect a broader shift in China's soft power strategy in Europe, now focused on developing soft tools of influence perceived as non-threatening. In fact, unlike economic investments in more sensitive sectors, investments in green technologies allowed China to avoid the dynamics of securitization and de-risking that define Europe's cautious approach to engagement with China. [366] Initially, investments in electric vehicles were not perceived as posing a threat to national security or strategic autonomy, allowing China to engage without triggering immediate securitization dynamics. making them a safe sector for Chinese engagement. However, recent EU investigations into the risks of overdependence on Chinese EVs and batteries indicate that this sector, too, is increasingly viewed through a geopolitical lens. As a result, through green technologies China was able to maintain its influence and presence in the region in a period of European geopolitical distancing from Beijing. [367] Considering this, it can be affirmed that the green evolution of China's strategy in Europe is the result of a deliberate choice that considers the most secure channels to exert influence in a period of rising geopolitical tensions and strategic realignment.

China's green investments in Europe are part of the country's broader development strategy and its evolving commitment to sustainability and fight against climate change. In the past China was often seen as an obstructing force in global climate

[365] J. Borràs, "Green Soft Power: China's New Strategy in Europe", CIDOB, May 2025, p.1 https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/green-soft-power-chinas-new-strategy-europe.
[366] Ivi., p. 2
[367] Ivi. pp.2-3

governance, firmly believing that developed countries had to bear the economic expenses of climate change due to their historical responsibility. [368] However, over the past decade, Beijing's approach to climate governance significantly evolved. Official policy documents increasingly showed the country's commitment to sustainable development. With the 2020 carbon neutrality announcement, China set a climate goal for the long-term, while also expanding its engagement in international climate governance and sustainable finance. [369] This green evolution was reaffirmed by President Xi Jinping, when at the United Nations General Assembly, he announced that China would aim to become carbon neutral before 2060. [370] China openly acknowledges the importance of working with the international community on issues of shared concern, which include climate change and biodiversity loss. The reasons behind China's international engagement are similar to those of Europe. On one hand, the Chinese population growing awareness of the climate change related challenges is helping to advance the climate agenda within the country. On the other, the global market for climate and sustainability-related technologies is expected to become a major source of innovation and create export opportunities for national companies. [371]

China's investment strategy in the green technology sector reflects its broader commitment to environmental sustainability, aligning with its effort to emerge as a green leader on the international stage.

In addition to China's green development, another factor that facilitated Beijing's green investments in European countries is the ongoing strong cooperation between Europe and China in the areas of sustainability and climate change. In recent years, EU-China relations have increasingly focused on achieving shared goals related to a sustainable development and addressing the challenges posed by climate change.

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[368] J. Oertel, J. Tollmann and B. Tsang, "Climate Superpowers: How the EU and China Can Compete and Cooperate for a Green Future" (Bruxelles: European Council on Foreign Relations, December 3, 2020), https://ecfr.eu/publication/climate-superpowers-how-the-eu-and-china-can-compete-and-cooperate-for-a-green-future/

[369] Ibid.

[370] Ivi., p. 4

[371] J. Leino, "Battle of the Hearts: China's Aim to Become a Soft (Super)power and Europe's Response," *European View* 20, no. 2 (October 2020), pp. 213-214

Furthermore, both parties have showed active support for a low-carbon transition, working within the framework of the international climate governance system based on the United Nations Convention on Climate Change. [372]

The two parties' joint engagement towards sustainable solutions was the focus of the joint statement on climate published on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union (EU) and the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement. In this document, both Chinese and European leaders underlined the necessity for the major economies to address climate change and acknowledged the importance of strengthening EU-China cooperation in this field and the value of the two sides green partnership. [373]

The importance of Europe and China green collaboration and its potential for improved EU-China relations emerged during the summit held in Beijing in July as well. On this occasion, while there were significant disagreements and limited results on several key issues, climate change stood out as the only area where both sides reached an agreement. This engagement resulted in the issuing of a joint statement in which Europe and China urged on more emission reductions and a greater use of green technologies, while reaffirming their strong support for the objectives outlined in the Paris Climate Agreement. [374]

Cooperation between Europe and China in the environmental field appears to be a productive aspect of their partnership, yielding tangible results and a relative absence of tensions, unlike other areas of their relationship.

The shared commitment of Europe and China to fighting against climate change and promoting sustainable development becomes even more strategically significant in light of the position adopted by the United States during President Donald Trump's presidency. In 2017, President Trump first decided to withdraw from the

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[372] L. Yang, "Green Is Distinctive Hallmark of China-EU Cooperation: FM," *Global Times*, July 7, 2025, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202507/1337833.shtml

[373] C*ouncil of the European Union.* "Joint EU-China Press Statement on Climate." Press release, July 24, 2025. Consilium: European Council Press Releases. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/24/joint-eu-china-press-statement-on-climate/

[374] *Associated Press.* "Europe and China Agree to Take Action on Climate Change and Nothing Else in Tense Beijing Summit," AP News, July 24, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/european-union-china-trade-summit-beijing-0f2f0b67435b88a78adef3aa001d0099

Paris agreement, symbolizing the US' abdication from its role as a global innovation leader and demonstrating a shift towards what has been defined as a "climate isolationism". [375]

With Biden taking office, Washington renewed its efforts for a sustainable development and rejoined the Paris agreement. However, with his re-election, Trump reaffirmed his previous stance, deciding for a second time to withdraw from the agreement. This decision was formalized through an executive order in January, followed by an official letter for the United Nations notifying the U. S exit. Although it will take about one year for the withdrawal to be formalized, it clearly signals a renewed American disengagement in the climate field.[376]

In contrast, China is expanding its influence in the green energy sector through a strong commitment to renewable energy and an ambition to accelerate the development of green technologies. The U.S' recent position on sustainable development and the possibility of a future exit from the Paris agreement could pave the way for stronger cooperation between Europe and China. In fact, together with Europe, China has already reaffirmed its commitment to the development and deployment of green energy technologies, while reaffirming its support for the Paris Climate Agreement framework. [377]

The strengthening of cooperation between Europe and China on environmental issues, combined with the recent decline in U.S engagement in sustainability and climate change, could lead to a future rapprochement between Beijing and Brussels, potentially combined with a distancing from Washington.

Despite the potential of their shared environmental commitment to foster more positive relations, cooperation between China and Europe in this area is increasingly affected by growing tensions.

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[375] W. Hill, "China and the EU Move Forward on Green Energy Without the US," *Forbes*, August 4, 2025. https://www.forbes.com/sites/wesleyhill/2025/08/04/china-and-the-eu-move-forward-on-green-energy-without-the-us/

[376] D. Noor, "Trump Signs Order to Withdraw US from Paris Climate Agreement for Second Time," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/20/trump-executive-order-paris-climate-agreement

[377] W. Hill, "China and the EU Move Forward", cit.

China's strong role in this strategic sector has raised concerns in European countries, particularly because of its expanding industrial presence in the region. While Chinese investments have been economically successful, they have also been perceived as a threat to European local industries. In response, the European Union decided to increase tariffs on Chinese-built electric vehicles up to 45%, in an attempt to protect the European mobile industry. [378]
The imposition of tariffs reflects Europe's attempts limit China's growing influence and it reveals that strategic cooperation with Beijing remains characterized by skepticism and caution.

So far, cooperation between China and Europe on environmental issues has been discussed, highlighting both its potential and its challenges. China's rising investments in green technologies and its shared climate commitment with Europe have emerged as significant dimensions of Sino-European relations. The focus will now shift to examining the role of these developments in advancing Chinese soft power. Investments in green technologies and the shared environmental sustainability goals have provided China a strategic tool to repair its political and economic ties with Europe, which, as was previously mentioned, had reached a breaking point. These investments have positively influenced China's image in many European countries by creating jobs and supplying high-quality products at competitive prices. As a result, local and central European governments have chosen to strengthen their relations with Beijing. [379]

This growing cooperation between China and Europe, both at the institutional and local levels, suggests that Beijing's engagement in green technology is not only motivated by environmental concerns, but that it also serves strategically to increase China's international influence and prestige. China's engagement in green technologies offers an important opportunity to reshape its image in Europe and to diversify the instruments of its soft power. [380] However, the EU's growing concerns about

[378] J. Borràs, "Green Soft Power", op.cit, p.3
[379] Ivi., p.1
[380] Ibid.

strategic dependence and the introduction of tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles highlight the structural limits of its strategy. While green investments may enhance China's attractiveness by creating jobs and contributing to the low-carbon transition, its long-term effectiveness as a soft power tool will depend on Europe's regulatory responses and the broader geopolitical climate.

China's soft power strategy has thus been enriched with a new dimension: sustainable technologies. This new aspect complements its more traditional tools of economic and cultural influence, potentially enhancing Beijing's prestige in Europe through engagements in a rapidly evolving section. However, the impact remains limited, as European skepticism, de-risking measures, and protective policies constrain the full realization of China's green soft power ambitions.

5.2 China's Soft Power Ambition and the EU's Strategic Response

On 1 July 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that "through tenacious struggle, the Party and the Chinese people showed the world that the Chinese people were capable of not only dismantling the old world but also building a new one". [381]

Four years after this statement, in 2025, China rose to second place in the soft power index, achieving its highest position to date and surpassing the UK for the first time. This rise was possible thanks to statistically significant gains across most Soft Power pillars and improvements in 25 out of 35 nation brand attributes. Analysts attribute this achievement to Beijing's growing strategic efforts to enhance its global image, such as the infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road, a renewed focus on sustainable development, more competitive Chinese brands and the country's reopening to international visitors following the pandemic. [382]

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[381] J. Leino, "Battle of the Hearts: China's Aim to Become a Soft (Super)power and Europe's Response," *European View* 20, no. 2 (2021), p. 211 https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv

[382] K. Jagodzinski, *Global Soft Power Index 2025: The Shifting Balance of Global Soft Power*, Brand Finance Insights, February 20, 2025 https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2025-the-shifting-balance-of-global-soft-power

President Xi Jinping's statement and the country's recent soft power achievements, reflect China's broader ambition to assert is influence on the global stage and emerge as a strong soft power actor. However, these ambitions are hindered by the growing perception among other international actors of China as a challenge to the current world order, fueled by its rise as a military, economic and institutional power. This negative perception makes soft power an essential element that China must integrate into its agenda. If it aims to assuming a hegemonic role, military force, economic strength and institutional influence alone are not enough. Only by successfully establishing itself as a soft superpower, able to exert its influence on both the world's leaders and citizens, China can hope to set the international agenda and define the standards of the new world order. [383]

According to this vision the traditional means of influence, that is to say economic and military strength are not sufficient, and a country's soft appeal has become a fundamental requirement for its rise as a key player on the global stage.

China's soft power initiatives have not only been driven by its ambition for hegemony, but also by the desire to project itself as a positive and reliable partner for other countries, while telling its own story and positively shaping perceptions among international audiences. In the last decade, the Chinese government has committed to increase its attractiveness overseas, by developing an international media network and establishing cultural study centers around the world with vast funds backing programs to enhance the country's image globally. [384] The Chinese soft power strategy spans many dimensions, from cultural diplomacy and narrative framing to infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and, more recently, strong investments in green technologies.

China has always attached great importance to cooperation with Europe, maintaining a stable commitment and expressing a strong support for European integration and the strengthening of Europe's strategic autonomy. Europe's significance for

[383] Ivi., 212-213

[384] E. Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power," *Council on Foreign Relations* (Backgrounder, updated February 9, 2018), accessed 26 august, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power

China is primarily reflected in three areas: trade and economic partnership, collaboration within international institutions and organizations and strategic engagement in light of the growing competition with the United States. [385]

Despite Beijing's ambition for a stronger partnership with Brussels, China's soft power initiatives in Europe have seen limited success, while regional actors are attracted by the short-term economic benefits of Chinese initiatives, they remain cautious about aligning with Beijing's broader strategic goals. [386]

Until now, China's efforts to enhance its global appeal have had limited results, also due to the perception of the limits imposed by the U.S hegemony and the system of enduring Western alliances. In this context, the latest developments during Donald Trump's presidency seem to pave the way for a strengthening of Chinese influence, both globally and in relations with Europe.

With what are perceived as signs of the United States retreat from its role as a global leader under the Trump administration, China strategically positioned itself as a model of globalization and economic integration, perhaps implying a growing ambition to step in as a greater international leader. [387]

The potential implications of Donald Trump's disengagement in certain strategic sectors and international organizations have previously been examined in the case of climate commitment, with the positive effects Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement could have on cooperation between Europe and China.

Another area where U.S disengagement seems to favor Beijing's ambitions is the United Nations. For almost a decade, China has attempted to increase its influence in Geneva and has steadily expanded its presence in UN agencies. Recently, China's efforts to gain influence appear to have intensified, with renewed attempts to push its own agenda more assertively. This renewed assertiveness has emerged during a period of President Trump's disengagement at the multilateral level. While

[385] F. Zhongping, "European Integration", op. cit, pp. 10-11
[386] E. Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power"
[387] Ibid.

these moves increased China's visibility, their effectiveness in reshaping institutional norms remains contested, given persistent distrust among Western states and counterbalancing initiatives by the U.S and its allies. [388]

Another area where the US disengagement seems to offer new opportunities for China is culture. China's soft power ambitions are evident when examining its growing efforts to project cultural influence internationally.

China's efforts to promote its culture overseas might be favored by Trump's recent decision to withdraw from the UN cultural agency UNESCO, which will take effect at the end of next year. This decision reflects Trump's broader "America-first" foreign policy and disengagement from multilateral institutions. China has condemned the US stance, while at the same time reaffirming its support for the organization's work. [389]

Trump's decision to withdraw from the UN cultural agency, which was long shaped by the American leadership, leaves a significant vacuum that China appears eager to fill. In recent years, the country has increasingly used UNESCO as a platform to deepen regional ties, extend its influence and project soft power. [390]Although Beijing's initiatives within international institutions have gained traction, they also face structural limits and often encounter resistance.

The significance of the recent US withdrawal can also be understood in light of the 2017 events. In fact, after the US first withdrew from UNESCO in 2017, China increased its funding to $65 million, becoming the agency's most important contributor. Moreover, Chinese officials assumed leadership roles and used strategic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative to expand influence in developing nations, especially also in the areas of culture and education.[391]

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[388] R. Mercedes, H. Foy, L. Dubois, and J. Leahy. "Trump left a power vacuum at the UN. China saw an opportunity." *Financial Times*, July 23, 2025. Accessed August 27, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/e289023c-a7ac-4b6d-ab45-908ce4163b12

[389] J. Irish and D. Chiacu, "Trump pulls US out of UN cultural agency UNESCO for second time," *Reuters*, July 22 2025 https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-pulls-us-out-un-cultural-agency-unesco-second-time-2025-07-22/

[390] J. Karam and R. Carroll, "How US Exit from UNESCO Helps China," *Al-Monitor*, July 24, 2025. https://www.al-monitor.com/newsletter/2025-07-24/how-us-exit-unesco-helps-china

[391] Ibid.

After identifying the areas in which the U.S disengagement creates opportunities for China, it is important to examine the implications of this development for China's broader soft power ambitions.

China has strategically sought to leverage shifts in U.S global engagement and perceptions of American influence to present itself to the international community as a committed supporter of international norms and principles. Its primary objectives are to enhance its global image, broaden international support, strengthen its soft power, and secure greater space for future development and recognition of its values. If China succeeds in projecting itself as a defender of the multilateral trading system, it will not only gain more room for global influence but might also play a leading role in shaping the emerging global order. [392]

What appears to be a crisis of U.S hegemony has also offered a new direction for China's soft power strategy. The renewed tensions between Europe and the United States, provided Beijing with the opportunity to launch a charm offensive towards the EU. However, this effort remained largely superficial when compared to China's stronger engagement with the Global South, a large and diverse group of non-Western countries. In this context, China's sought to position itself as a reliable partner, offering an alternative to the U.S, particularly following the U.S' imposition of tariffs. [393]

China's soft power strategy in the Global South has led to a series of initiatives, aimed at gaining support and expanding its influence. In April, President Xi Jinping toured Southeast Asia, seeking to galvanize opposition to U.S tariffs and project China as the engine of regional economic growth. In May, a credit line of RMB 66 billion (approximately €8.3 billion) was announced by Bejing to support development across Latin American and Caribbean countries. Then in June, China announced a new economic agreement with Africa, which will cancel all tariffs on the 53 African states with which it maintains diplomatic relations. [394]

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[392] A. Ekman, ″China's turn towards the 'Global South': Europe is not Beijing's priority″, European Union Institute for Security Studies (Commentary), 17 July 2025, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/chinas-turn-towards-global-south-europe-not-beijings-priority.

[393] Ibid.

[394] Ibid.

These strategic initiatives align with China's broader soft power strategy, which mainly relies on economic means to increase its influence in key areas and promote a narrative of China as a reliable economic partner. This evolution in China's foreign policy also demonstrates a shift of focus, from Europe to other global areas, particularly the Global South.

The European Union long standing partnership with the United States has recently faced a series of challenges. The American tariff plan, coupled with concerns over a potential trade war, prompted European policymakers to reassess the EU's economic dependence on the United States and explore measures to strengthen strategic autonomy. While Europe is concerned about the impact of Trump's tariffs on its markets, which could suffer from a diversion of Chinese goods in the region, these vulnerabilities may enhance Beijing's negotiating position. [395]
China's strategic ambition and its potential rise as a global leader takes on a more concrete shape when viewed in light of a weakened Europe's partnership with the United States. Moreover, a reduction in European dependence on the United States could also have long-term effects on relations with China. When asked about the future of China-Europe relations, there seems to be a general hope on both sides for a more independent relationship. [396]

It is important to note that the American tariffs did not only target Europe but had a global scope, with strategic rivals like China particularly affected. In April, President Trump announced a complete three months pause on all reciprocal tariffs, reducing rates for all the affected countries rates to a universal 10%. However, this 90-days pause initially did not apply to Chinese goods, which instead were subjected to an increase in punitive tariffs from 104% to 125%, following China's announcement of retaliatory measures. [397] The rise of U.S tariffs was part of a broader

[395] D. Tang and S. McNeil, "Reeling from Trump Rebukes, Europe Weighs Deeper Ties with China," *Associated Press*, June 26, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/china-european-union-trump-tariffs-trade-93e5f748cf868155853e6776639eaf24
[396] Ibid.
[397] E. Buchwald and K. Liptak, "Trump Announces 90-day Pause on Reciprocal Tariffs with Exception of China", CNN, April 9, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/09/business/reciprocal-tariff-pause-trump

commercial and economic strategy, but it also served to limit China's growing ambitions and its ability to form new alliances.

By targeting China, the U.S appeared to be pursuing a dividing strategy aimed at preventing Beijing from forming a united front with other countries impacted by the reciprocal tariffs, including the European Union. The United States were thus determined to prevent the emergence of any strategic alliance that could pose a threat to its global position. [398]

U.S concerns may also stem from the limited impact that tariffs have had on China. Over the last decade, China has focused on strengthening its economic power, technological abilities and global influence. This shaped a long-term strategy focused on building the foundation for future competitiveness rather than limiting the short-term economic damages. In line with this approach, China responded to the U.S tariffs China with countermeasures with a long-term strategic value. [399]

China's long-term response demonstrates its strategic ambition to maintain a central role on the global stage, limiting the impact of tariffs on its economy while seeking opportunities to strengthen strategic alliances.

Th potential effects of Trump's tariffs on cooperation between Europe and the United States, especially in terms of a possible European distancing from Washington, have already been discussed.

Recently, European politicians have expressed growing concerns about the risks for Europe's falling from a major player to a spectator on the global stage. [400] These worries have intensified with the "America First Policy" pursued by Washington and an increasingly unilateral foreign policy. Faced with this development and the growing risks of Europe's marginalization on the international stage, Brussels' latest policy agenda has been increasingly defined by its ambition to achieve strategic autonomy and to defend its interests independently. While the focus of Europe's

[398] G. Qingyang, "The Trade-War Illusion: What Trump Doesn't Understand about China," *Global Asia* (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore), April 25, 2025. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/the-trade-war-illusion--what-trump-doesn-t-understand-about-china

[399] Ibid.

[400] F. Zhongping, "European Integration", op.cit., p.6

autonomy goals remains military defense, also in light on its longstanding dependance from the United States in this area, the strategy also encompasses the economic, energy, technological and industrial dimensions. [401] It is important to note that, even if Europe advocates stronger independence, its strategy remains closely aligned with the broader NATO framework. In this perspective, Europe does not want to completely severe ties with the United States and solely rely on its own capabilities but aims to maintain its transatlantic alliance while strengthening its role within NATO. [402]

China-EU relations are not only crucial for both parties but also carry significant implications for the broader international order. European actors have different perspectives on future China policy. Despite these differing views, EU future relations with China are likely to be characterized by a mix of cooperation, competition and caution. Bilateral engagement is expected to grow, while cooperation and competition will remain strongly intertwined. [403]

In response to China's growing ambition to expand its influence and soft power, Europe should focus on the development of its own strategic assets: its own soft power strategy and the capacity to promote common and values-based standards through the cooperation with likeminded partners. Internally, the EU must work toward defining clearly both its own standards and establishing mechanisms to deal with possible breaches. Externally, a clear division of labor and transparent decision-making processes are essential to enable the European Union to respond promptly and with a unified voice. Furthermore, EU policies and instruments should aim to strengthen local capacities and provide real alternatives to developing countries.[404]

Europe's future partnership with China is expected to remain defined by a dualism of cooperation and competition. Alongside the continued engagement with Bejing,

[401] Ivi., pp.6-7
[402] Ivi., p.8
[403] Ivi., p. 11
[404] J. Leino, "Battle of the Hearts*",* op.cit*, pp.* 216-217

Brussels' strategy must address both internal and external challenges in order to effectively navigate the evolving global order and its relations with Beijing.

Beijing's has shown increased ambitions for global influence, with a recent strategic shift on a deeper engagement with the Global South. Through a series of economic initiatives, China is seeking to project itself as an alternative partner to the United States in these regions. In recent times, Europe's soft power strategy as well has shifted focus to towards the Global South, reflecting broader strategic response to China's growing soft power.

Europe's renewed engagement reflects a recognition of the Global South as a significant collective force on the world stage. Acknowledging the shortcomings of its past policies, Europe has committed itself to strengthen its strategy and adopt a more effective role in shaping this area. The EU's renewed engagement is mainly focused on economic initiatives, including the promotion of free trade agreements and the implementation of strategic alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative, such as the Global Gateway Initiative. Moreover, Europe is offering greater benefits to the area through various multilateral mechanisms, thus reinforcing its charm campaign in the Global South. [405]

Europe's evolving approach to the region reflects not only a strategic response to China's expanding influence, but also a broader recognition of the region's growing importance internationally. By redefining its soft power and economic tools, the EU aims to project itself as a credible alternative. Both China and Europe's renewed focus on the Global South will be fundamental in shaping future global dynamics and determining the protagonists in a rapidly changing world order. In this context, the Global south is playing an increasingly influential role, and the success or failure of these strategies might have significant implications.

[405] G.Su, "Adjustments to the EU's "Global South" Policy: Analysis from an Interregional Perspective*"*, vol. 5, no. 33 (August 2025), China-CEE Institute, pp. 3-4 https://china-cee.eu/2025/08/25/adjustments-to-the-eus-global-south-policy-analysis-from-an-interregional-perspective/

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing international landscape, soft power has become an essential tool for actors wanting to expand their global influence.

This thesis has examined China's soft power strategy in Europe, focusing on cultural diplomacy, economic initiatives and narrative framing. Despite China's growing efforts, the research shows that its soft power strategy had limited success in the European context.

While the aim of strategic initiatives, such as the promotion of Chinese culture and language, educational exchanges and economic cooperation, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at strengthening China's global appeal and enhancing its image, ultimately, they did not shape a positive perception. Key global events, such as the global pandemic, proved China's difficulty in shaping a positive perception among the European public and political elites in the face of the reputational damage caused by the pandemic and the scarce results of China's mask diplomacy.

The analysis of Italy's withdrawal from the Belt and Road Initiative further demonstrates the declining appeal of Chinese initiatives.

The growing perception of China as a strategic rival, rather than a reliable partner is intensified by Beijing's growing assertiveness and ambiguous stance regarding critical events, such as the war in Ukraine. These challenges limit the effectiveness of Chinese soft power in Europe and cause Chinese strategic initiatives to be viewed more as sharp power, thus reinforcing the view of China as an authoritarian country. While on the one hand deeper strategic or political cooperation with Beijing is viewed negatively, economic relations are a core dimension of China-Europe relations. However, the growing trade imbalance and the perceived lack of mutual benefits have contributed to shape the European perception of economic cooperation with Beijing as increasingly problematic.

Nevertheless, China has succeeded in strengthening cooperation with Europe in the areas of sustainable development and green technologies. It was able to assert its

influence in Europe within these sectors thanks to increased investments in green technologies in European countries.

The thesis also explored how, recent geopolitical developments, such as the United States disengagement from multilateral institution and the imposition of tariffs on imported goods, could create opportunities for China's emergence as a more cooperative global actor and open new avenues for its partnership with Europe.

In conclusion, while soft power plays an important role in China's foreign policy, its effectiveness in Europe remains limited by internal and external challenges. Although there are currently new opportunities for cooperation, the overall trajectory suggests a relative decline for China's soft power in the region.

With the evolving global dynamics, the future evolution of EU-China relations, and the direction of China's soft power strategy remain uncertain. However, recent international conflicts have cast doubts on the validity of soft power as a primary tool for influence and seem to indicate a return to harder instruments of influence. These developments suggest a possible return to more traditional and hard power strategies in international relations.

In this constantly evolving international scenario, both China and Europe seem to have reoriented their focus on alternative areas of collaboration, such as environmental sustainability, and on other geographical arenas, such as the Global South. This shift of focus to new strategic areas may shape the future of the global quest for influence, within a context where soft power initiatives are increasingly overshadowed by intensifying geopolitical competition.

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