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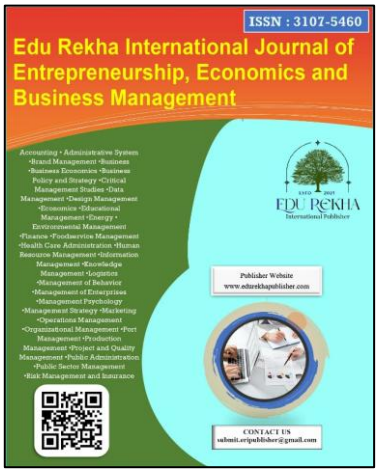
Examining the importance of economic policy in China's software foreign policy in developing regions.



Jamshid Rasooli[1]*, Muaiyid Rasooli[2], Prof. Dr. Erdal DURSUN[3]

[1] Bachelor's degree, Faculty of Economics Department of Banking and Finance, Jawzjan, University,

[2] PhD Candidate, School of Law, Xi'an Jiaotong University, China,

[3] Rector, International Science and Technology University, Warsaw / Poland.

Abstract

China wants the world to see it as a newly developed nation, and it's using this image to boost its soft power—especially in developing regions. China knows it holds real economic clout, both globally and among developing countries. Even though it has a deep cultural and historical legacy, China's soft power strategy leans hard on its economic strength.

Beijing's approach to these regions focuses on drawing them toward the Chinese development model, following what's often called the Beijing Consensus. The Belt and Road Initiative is a giant project built around economic needs, and China keeps stressing that its growth will be peaceful and good for everyone involved.

Instead of showing off its culture, China puts economics at the center of its agenda. It's all about helping other developing countries grow, and by doing so, making China more attractive to them. Western countries built their soft power on culture and values, but China runs into problems trying to make its own culture go global. That's why Beijing sticks to its economic edge as the main tool in foreign policy.

This paper digs into how China uses its economy in soft power strategies, especially in developing regions. To do that, we need to get a handle on what soft power really means and what happens when it's tied to economics. The research is descriptive and analytical, focusing on how China fuses economic power with its foreign policy goals.

So here's the main question: What role does economic power really play in China's soft power approach toward developing regions? The idea is that China wants to build spheres of influence through economic and political means, using economic tools first, and then culture.

China's leaders want to look softer by promoting their culture, but they're getting there by relying on economics. 2017 stands out as a big shift: at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping's ideas about "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" got written into the Party Constitution, tying political aims to economic goals in foreign policy. The documents show it clearly: China puts economic tools front and center to reach its foreign policy targets.

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Corresponding author:

Jamshid Rasooli

1 Bachelor's degree, Faculty of Economics Department of Banking and Finance, Jawzjan, University

China stands out as a key trading and investment partner, a major donor in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and a big source of scholarships for these regions. People often call China a "development model" for the developing world, and honestly, most of its soft power comes from its economic influence.

Here's the thing: Even though China's economic presence keeps growing around the world, that doesn't mean it's exporting its values or culture. When folks in these regions pay attention to China, it's usually about the money, not the culture. That's what sets China's soft power apart—it's not the typical model you see elsewhere.

What really draws countries in is what China delivers, not just what it promises. Sure, China has a long, rich history, but its industrial, scientific, and technological strength comes from that foundation. As China's economy keeps advancing, its soft power grows alongside it.

It's interesting, though—despite China focusing a lot on Southeast and Central Asia through its "software-oriented" foreign policy, its biggest wins, both politically and economically, have happened in Africa and Latin America.

1. Introduction

Soft power isn't exactly a new idea, but lately, it's getting a lot more attention from people who study foreign policy. Folks like Josephine have tried to pin down what soft power really means, and honestly, that's mostly because the idea of power itself keeps shifting. Countries use soft power in different ways, depending on what they're good at.

At first, theorists focused on culture and political values—things like national identity or ideals—as the main ingredients of soft power. But as more countries, especially China, started to embrace the concept, the theory changed. Now, people see economic strength as a big part of soft power, too.

China's a perfect example. It's grown fast and isn't just a global heavyweight—it's a major regional player, especially among developing nations. Sure, China has a rich cultural history, but when it comes to foreign policy, it leans heavily on its economic muscle. The Chinese government wants other developing countries to buy into their own model of growth, something they call the Beijing Consensus.

When China looks at the world, it thinks in terms of economics. That's clear in its massive "Belt and Road Initiative." The idea is simple: China's rise should be peaceful, and everyone involved should benefit.

But here's the thing—China hasn't put much energy into promoting its culture as a reassurance to others. Instead, it's all about highlighting the economic advantages for developing regions. The goal? Attract new partners, boost their own political influence, and make sure everyone sees the perks of teaming up with China.

2. Research Background

When you look at the research on this topic, you see two main camps. First, there are the sources that dig into the foundations, sources, and tools behind China's soft power around the world. Some key articles here: "The Emergence of China's Soft Power" (2005), "Why is China Weak in Soft Power?" (2012) by Chengcheng, "The Hidden Logic Behind China's Foreign Aid Agency" (2019) by Glasser, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: A Forward-Looking Perspective" (2009) by Yanzhonghuang and Shengding, "The Hidden Body of the Dragon: An Analysis of China's Soft Power" (2006) by Alan Hunter, "Soft Power: China on the World Stage" (2009) by Woodnow, "The Concept of Soft Power in Discourse Paradise" (2008), "China and International Coordination: The Role of Confucian Institutions in Strengthening Beijing's Soft Power" (2009), Pourahmadi (2017), and "The Political Economy of China's Foreign Policy in the Age of Economic Globalization" (2017). These writers lay out what China can do on the world stage, but they don't shy away from the mystery and limits of Beijing's approach. They often point out that China's economic might mixes with its soft power, raising concerns about the country's growing influence. Target countries tend to be wary, and that skepticism stands in the way of China's soft power ambitions.

Then there's the second group: sources that zoom in on how China uses soft power in developing regions. In Southeast Asia, for example, you've got Maydans' "Allies Won China's 'Soft Power' in Asia" (2007), Lu's "China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia" (2013), and Lanhe's "The Return of China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia" (2019). These authors look at China's economic and cultural reach in the region, but they also highlight the heavy weight of history—something that keeps getting in the way of China's influence there.

Central Asia gets its own spotlight too. There's Karimbaev's "Factors of China's Soft Power in Central Asia" (2020), Gokeredi's "China's Growing Influence in Central Asia" (2023), Julio-Venchen's "China's Changing Image in Central Asia: Exercising Soft and Hard Power" (2023), Irjangiuro's "Soft Power Tools: Assessing China's Soft Power and Sinophobia in Central Asia" (2021), Berdiaev's "The Importance of Central Asia in China's Foreign Policy and Beijing's Soft Power Tools" (2021), and Daparvur and Azizi's "Confucian Influence: The Place of Soft Power in China's Strategy Towards Central Asia" (2019). These authors talk about why Central Asia matters so much to China—its position in the "Belt and Road Initiative" is a big deal—but they also point out that old cultural and historical issues feed Sinophobia and complicate China's efforts to win hearts and minds in the region.

Plenty of writers have taken a close look at China's soft power in the Middle East. There's Sun with "China's Soft Military Presence in Middle East" (2015), Rukhmat's look at China's growing media influence in the Gulf (2017), Othman's work on positive Chinese imagery in the region (2017), Liu's deep dive into economic ties in the Middle East and North Africa (2014), and Mang's "China's Emergence in the Middle East" (2017). Each of them talks about how the Middle East is becoming more central to China's foreign policy. Most focus on energy and trade as the main reasons for Beijing's interest, though some see the region as a new arena for competition between China and the US.

In Latin America, Sullivan ("China's Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean," 2019), Maggioghli ("Chinese Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean," 2017), and Ellis ("Chinese Soft Power in

Latin America," 2011) notice the same pattern: China's trade, investment, and economic aid are all on the rise. For them, this growing economic presence is clear evidence of how Beijing projects soft power in the region.

Africa tells a similar story. Nagao ("China's Soft Power Investment in African Countries," 2016), Huang ("Soft Power Studies: China's Presence in Africa," 2018), Helgehorning ("How Much Soft Power Does China Have in Africa?" 2014), and Hosseini ("Components of China's Soft Power in Africa," 2018) all point to China's economic moves as reshaping the country's image across the continent.

Each of these sources zeros in on a different region but circles back to the same point: China's soft power goals hinge on economic engagement. This article draws from their work to map out where each region fits into China's broader strategy and what results have come out of it, setting up a real comparison of China's achievements in each place.

So, what matters most in China's soft power approach to developing regions? The big question is: where does the economy fit into this foreign policy? The working theory here is that China's using its soft power to build spheres of influence — mixing political and economic aims, with economics leading the way and culture following behind.

The goal is to break down how economics fits into China's soft power game in developing regions, all through the lens of soft power theory. The research uses a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on the link between economics and soft power, and explains how this shapes China's regional policy.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Software foreign policy really leans on soft power—think less about force, more about influence. It's all about pulling others in, getting them on your side through things like persuasion, conversation, and sharing what you have, instead of pushing them around. Soft policy doesn't force anyone's hand. It's non-binding; nobody's marching armies anywhere. Instead, countries use the resources that make them attractive—culture, ideas, open dialogue—to shape what others do, all while staying out of military conflicts.

Nye, in his early work, pointed out that soft power comes from culture, political values, and both domestic and foreign policies. Later, he added economics to the mix, seeing how money and markets can sway people just as much as art or ideals. For him, soft power is almost like civilian power—a blend of cultural and economic pull. At first, he kept it broad, but then he recognized how economic influence can charm or persuade just as much as cultural vibes.

People looking at this from a neo-liberal economic angle highlight things like global interdependence, the rise of cross-border organizations, and technology's spread. These let countries extend their reach without old-school arm-twisting. Economic power splits into two main types: direct and indirect. Direct power comes from carrots and sticks—think government incentives or sanctions. Indirect power grows out of the tangled web of global economies, where everyone relies on everyone else. With this kind of influence, countries can boost what they have at home just by making smart moves abroad. Some call these "hard" and "soft" economic power. Hard economic power feels more like control—sanctions, incentives—while soft economic power is all about attraction: economic development, cultural draw, economic diplomacy, and even things like foreign aid or free trade deals. It's about creating a model others want to follow, building relationships, and offering opportunities people actually want. When you break it down, economic soft power forms at two levels. Sometimes countries use their economic resources to chase softer goals, like building goodwill or sharing culture. Other times, they use cultural or diplomatic tools to reach economic goals. Either way, it's the mix—how they match their resources to their ambitions—that really shapes who holds influence on the world stage.

When we talk about economic soft power, the key thing is that either the goals or the resources—sometimes both—are economic. That's really all it takes. So, if you're using economic tools to reach economic goals, that's pure economic soft power. But it's not always that straightforward. Sometimes, countries use cultural or political resources to chase economic goals, or they use economic resources to go after cultural or political objectives. Those are both types of non-pure economic soft power (Saif, 2011: 21).

The main goals of economic soft power? They're pretty clear:

- Changing how people act economically—convincing them, attracting their attention, maybe even shifting their tastes or habits.
- Relying more on subtle economic influence, not force or pressure.
- Making your economy more attractive (Saif, 2011: 21-25).

When countries lean on soft power, they build a positive image, earn trust, and get others to willingly follow their lead—no threats needed. In the end, it's all about growing influence. If a country gets soft power right, it ends up shaping whole spheres of influence without ever reaching for the stick.

4. Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics

The East Asian financial crisis in 1997 and China's move to peg the yuan really shook up its reputation as a stable force in the region. That was the turning point—what some call the birth of China's soft power. After that, Beijing realized it had a lot of work to do on how it projected itself and decided to back off the tough-guy attitude in its diplomacy.

Ever since, China's been pushing hard to lead in the developing world. Nye even talks about "the rise of Chinese soft power and the decline of American soft power." For China, soft power isn't just some buzzword—it's a strategy. They use it to boost their influence and get what they want on the world stage.

So how do they do it? There's cultural outreach, building economic partnerships, working the diplomatic channels, and showing off their tech game. Xi Jinping summed it up back in 2014: "We must improve China's soft power, present a good narrative of China, and better convey China's message." In other words, China wants the world to see its softer side. It's a mix of charm—sometimes pretty aggressive—and a way to push back against the whole "China as a threat" story. They're not looking to pick fights with the West or replace Western values with their own. Instead, they're betting that their development-focused approach tells a better story about the future. These days, Beijing leans a lot on economic tools to shape its image and influence. It all ties back to China's place in the world economy. Their foreign policy pushes them to use economic clout to carve out spheres of influence, especially in developing regions. They've zeroed in on areas

where their interests really matter, often working to secure exclusive rights and special privileges there.

5. China's software policy towards developing regions

5.1 China's software relations with Southeast Asia

Up until the late 1990s, China basically relied on muscle in Southeast Asia. The neighbors didn't love that, and most of them leaned into alliances with Washington instead. After a while, Beijing realized that pushing hard wasn't winning any friends. Then the 1997 economic crisis hit, and suddenly, China had a chance to change its approach. They stepped up and offered "cooperation and assistance" to countries hit hardest by the crisis, and that seriously improved China's reputation in the region (Shambaugh, 2015: 99-107).

Fast forward to the COVID-19 pandemic, and China tried to cast itself as the regional problem-solver with what's now called "vaccine diplomacy." By September 2021, Beijing had donated or sold more than a billion vaccine doses, which is a huge number. Even though Southeast Asia still got more vaccines from Europe and the U.S., China kept expanding its regional reach (Caro, 2022: 17).

All this help made a difference. More countries in the region started looking at China in a positive light and even saw it as a "development model," mixing free-market economics with a more hands-off, illiberal political style (Narimani: 2018, 181). Beyond just aid, China pushed low-interest loans, trade deals, and investment agreements. They've thrown their weight behind regional projects like "ASEAN 3+," the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative. It's all part of a bigger plan to lock in their influence (Organizer: 133: 2014).

China's soft power isn't just about money. They've ramped up tourism, student exchanges, and connections with the Chinese diaspora, all designed to boost economic ties and spread shared values. Chinese media has become much more visible across the region too—think Xinhua, Chinese newspapers, and satellite TV. You see Chinese culture everywhere now—food, calligraphy, movies, herbal medicine, fashion (Cheow, 2005: 336). Beijing's pouring effort into public diplomacy, trying to shape its image and spread its culture through partnerships (Narimani, 2018: 182).

By 2023, these soft power moves paid off, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, where 83 percent and 75 percent of people had a positive view of China. Across East Asia, the numbers climbed too—36 percent saw China's global influence as a good thing, up from just 15 percent in 2003 (Silver et.al. 2023). China's "soft economic power" in Southeast Asia keeps growing, thanks to its focus on diplomacy, development, and shared values. The Chinese diaspora in the region plays a big role socially, economically, and culturally (Lum, 2013), and they manage it all pretty independently from Beijing.

China's soft power really leans on its overseas communities. The Chinese diaspora connects with local groups and works together on economic projects that matter to people on the ground. They're not just businesspeople—they help spread China's influence throughout the region (Chee-Beng, 2024: 24).

Chinese universities also do a lot to boost China's image. Honestly, it's not just about the language or the culture classes. The real draw? The reputation and quality of education. That's what pulls in so many international students. Right now, around 70,000 students from ASEAN countries are studying in China, and most of them have a pretty positive impression of their time there (He, 2019). Thailand tops the list with 29,000 students, followed by Vietnam with over 11,000, Malaysia with 10,000, Singapore with 5,000, and Cambodia with 4,000. Thais are especially keen—they submit the most scholarship applications to Chinese universities, about 2,000 every year (Caro, 2022: 21-25).

On top of that, China funds 33 Confucius Institutes and 35 Confucius Classrooms across ASEAN countries. These numbers show just how popular Chinese education has become in the region (Chee-Beng, 2024: 19-20).

But not everything is rosy. China's growing presence also brings unease. People worry about military and economic threats—76% of Japanese, 66% of Taiwanese, 64% of South Koreans, and 48% of Hong Kongers see China as a major threat (Silver: 2023). Beijing tries to calm these fears. It wants to show that its trade and investments are responsible, not something to worry about.

Still, China isn't just sitting back. It's actively pushing its economic and soft power to balance out US influence in the region (Rogozhina, 2019). This whole competition matters because China knows it can't ignore what its neighbors want or how they act. Building trust and attraction—without using force—is the only way forward (Dinh, 2024: 300).

5.2 China's software relations with Central Asia

Central Asia sits right in the middle of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, which makes it a key piece in China's plans to grow its influence and shape the region's future. It's not just about politics or trade—cultural ties between China and the Central Asian countries really matter too. They help both sides understand each other better (Laowattanabhongse, 204: 3519).

Still, plenty of experts have called out China's efforts to use Asia for its own gain. The Chinese hoped their system would catch on here and pull the region into their orbit, but honestly, Central Asia hasn't bought into the Chinese model (Christophersen, 2024).

So, can China actually offer Central Asia something new—a system that backs the rule of law, a strong civil society, real transparency, and accountability from leaders? (Nurgozhayeva, 2020: 265). Right now, China's soft power doesn't go far in Central Asia. That's partly because of Chinese traditions, but also because the governments in the region lean authoritarian. China still prefers to work government-to-government. It's just starting to try "people-to-people diplomacy," and while Chinese cultural centers are popping up, they're only beginning to make a difference.

Central Asian governments actually like the official, government-level approach. They're suspicious of "people-to-people" efforts, seeing them less as bridges for cultural exchange and more as attempts to shake up their political systems.

Because of that, Beijing's taking its time with these people-focused initiatives, hoping to build soft power without stirring up trouble (Goble, 2018).

5.3 China's Software Relations with the Middle East

China's approach to the Middle East really highlights how much geoeconomics matters now—using economic leverage to chase bigger political goals (Husain, 2023: 481). Since the 1990s, China's strategy

in the region has revolved around economics and energy security. Trade, infrastructure, investment, and diplomatic moves all play a part. They don't just talk business, either; Beijing tries to keep a low profile in regional disputes, working soft power from the sidelines.

Flexibility and pragmatism have shaped China's diplomacy here. You see this in big programs like the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, and the China-Arab Strategy (Osman, 2017: 11-13). On the ground, China's influence in the region comes in three main forms. The first is economic soft power. China's all about trading first. Between 2005 and 2009, its trade with Middle Eastern countries shot up by 87%, hitting $100 billion, and by 2012, that number jumped to $222 billion (Kazemi, 2014: 41). By 2013, China was the region's second-largest trading partner, and the biggest partner for ten countries. Two years later, it became the second biggest exporter to the region (Hindy, 2017).

To keep this momentum, Chinese leaders work hard at building relationships across the Middle East. They push for "win-win" deals, focusing especially on energy, infrastructure, and manufactured goods. Back in 2014, Xi Jinping introduced the "1 + 2 + 3" formula, putting energy, trade, investment, and space tech at the top of the cooperation list (Osman, 2017: 14). Economic diplomacy isn't just about money—it's a way to build soft power while staying out of the region's political messes.

China's got strong ties with Saudi Arabia, a good relationship with Iran, and strategic links to Israel. They've even played a hand in patching things up between Tehran and Riyadh. When sanctions locked Iran out of global markets, China stepped up as Iran's top trading partner. This economic presence, and China's support for regional development, have done a lot for its image in the Middle East.

The numbers tell the story: between 2005 and 2009, Middle Eastern exports to China jumped 25%, while exports to the US fell 45%. What started as economic cooperation has paved the way for more interaction—like cultural exchanges—especially as the Belt and Road Initiative opens new doors across the region (Osman, 2017: 17). On the cultural side, too, China's been busy. As it looks to burnish its national image, the Middle East has become a key target for China's cultural soft power efforts.

China runs 17 Confucius Institutes and 5 Confucius Classrooms across the Middle East. It's signed deals on book publishing and translation with countries in the region, set up a Chinese-Arabic translator training program for Arab League students, and keeps offering more scholarships to young people there. You'll also find language training programs in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China tailors scholarships for students from countries along the route.

Back in 2012, the number of Arab students in China topped 10,000. These educational exchanges aren't just for show—Beijing sees them as crucial for building partnerships in the region (Osman, 2017: 18-19).

Trying to boost its image and push back against the Western narrative, China has started "internationalizing" its media. Along with Xinhua's Cairo office, Chinese state TV launched an Arabic news channel, which is now CGTN. "China Today" even airs an Arabic-language version, reporting on China and the Middle East.

In 2015, China's International Relations Center struck a $10 billion deal with Abu Dhabi's National Picture Company to develop the film industry. By late 2016, the two sides launched a joint fund and kicked off Quest Arabia, which broadcasts Arabic-language shows across 22 countries.

China's media strategy makes it clear: it wants the world to see it as an emerging "cultural superpower" (Rakhmat, 2017).

When it comes to soft power, China sticks to principles like sovereignty and non-interference. These ideas matter not only at home, but they also line up with what most countries in the region want (Niblock, 2020: 485).

China's ties with the Middle East have warmed up in recent years, though politically, it keeps a pretty low profile. Non-interference plays a big role in this approach, especially when dealing with rival states, because Beijing sees these relationships as opening doors for business (Osman, 2017: 22). For China, the Middle East is a vital energy source and a big customer for Chinese exports, so it tries to keep friends with everyone. Since China doesn't have much political baggage in the region, it steers clear of getting involved in local disputes (Alterman, 2008: 79). China's supported Palestine and only officially recognized Israel in 1992, but now it stays neutral and is steadily expanding its diplomatic efforts (Signh, 2014: 10).

China ramped up its presence in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Beijing got closer to the Egyptian government, which wanted to lean less on the West, and the two sides signed a bunch of deals. Those agreements didn't really go anywhere after the Brotherhood fell, but the relationship kept getting better anyway (Liu, 2014: 4). In Syria, China stood by the Assad government, sticking to its usual non-interference approach. Still, Chinese officials did sit down with the Syrian opposition and even said they supported regime change at one point (Evron, 2013: 84-87). China's peacekeeping work in South Sudan and Afghanistan, helping out with the Iran nuclear deal, and mediating between Tehran and Riyadh all gave it a more peaceful image (Osman, 2017: 23-24).

From the Chinese perspective, the Middle East is a "graveyard of great powers." They'd rather not get too involved. China's neutral stance and the region's strategic economic position have pushed Beijing to build stronger ties with Middle Eastern countries. You could see this during the Chinese President's 2016 tour, when he visited Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt. China's more low-key but steady involvement in important regional issues shows how quietly influential it's become compared to the U.S. (Osman, 2017: 24-25).

China's hunger for natural resources, especially oil and gas, has driven these closer relationships. At the same time, distrust toward the West and Muslim countries has shaped the way China and the Middle East interact. While the West tends to use an ideological approach in its dealings with the Islamic world, China prefers a more moderate, practical style (Burton, 2021: 198).

On the military front, China doesn't keep any permanent bases in the Middle East or try to throw its weight around. Protecting its economic interests comes first, so it's not looking to get caught up in local conflicts or make enemies. Instead, China has used soft power—temporary deployments, humanitarian efforts, peacekeeping missions, and setting up joint training and intelligence centers (Sun, 2015). Its ships escorting anti-piracy vessels in the Gulf of Aden and near Somalia are good examples of this approach. All of this helps China project a positive image in the region (Osman, 2017: 26).

China doesn't just flex its military muscles in the Middle East—it takes a softer approach by sending peacekeepers to places like Lebanon, Western Sahara, South Sudan, Darfur, and even the tense borders around Israel. Back in 2017, the UN counted 1,721 Chinese personnel involved in peacekeeping missions. For China, these peacekeeping efforts aren't just about helping out. They're a way to protect its own economic interests, boost its image, and build up global influence.

By getting involved in Middle Eastern affairs, China ends up strengthening its ties with countries all across the region. That opens up even bigger economic opportunities. You can see this in its Belt and Road Initiative—China's not just after trade routes; it wants a strategic foothold in the region.

When it comes to working with countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, China's pretty clear about wanting stability. It doesn't want anything messing up the regional order, and it's careful about who it partners with and how. All of this lines up with China's bigger strategy of deepening bilateral relations and keeping its Belt and Road priorities front and center.

5.4 China's Software Relations with Africa

China's relationship with Africa isn't just about friendly handshakes or cultural exchanges—it's all about strategy. Beijing has its eyes set on Africa's oil and gas, pumping money into the energy sectors of places like Sudan, Angola, and Nigeria. They want to lock in those resources for the future. But that's not the only play. Africa is a massive market for Chinese exports, which helps China rebuild its economy—without having to rely on costly Chinese labor back home.

There's a political angle too. China wants more global clout. By getting closer to African nations, Beijing gains more influence on the world stage. And let's not forget stability. China needs Africa to be steady, especially if its own economic interests are on the line.

Now, when you look at the way China uses soft power in Africa, it's pretty layered. There's direct investment, of course. Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China pours money into the continent, touching on everything from politics to business to culture.

But the real soft power push comes through what they call "indirect investment." It's all about building connections between people. At the 2024 FOCAC Summit, Beijing doubled down on its commitment to Africa's future—launching new vocational programs, building tech schools, and upgrading training workshops and schools across the continent. They promised 60,000 education opportunities for African students.

China's also planning to shake up how it collaborates with Africa on science and education. They're setting up regional centers for digital education and rolling out the "Cultural Silk Road" initiative, inviting 1,000 African cultural and tourism professionals to China. They even declared 2026 the "Year of China-Africa People-to-People Exchanges."

Scholarships, student exchanges, and Confucius Institutes are at the heart of this strategy. Scholarships, in particular, are a big deal—China uses them to build goodwill and support African students. Back in 2006, they bumped up the number of scholarships from 2,000 to 4,000 a year, and by 2015, they promised 30,000 over three years.

The numbers tell the story. In 2018, China hosted 80,000 African students—50,000 of them were on scholarships. That's a 60 percent jump in just three years. In fact, African students now make up 17 percent of all foreign students in China, compared to just 2 percent back in 2006.

Confucius Institutes have spread too. The first one opened at the University of Nairobi in 2005. By 2016, there were 56 across Africa. Now, there are more than 67 in over 40 countries.

So, when you look at the big picture, China's approach in Africa is calculated, ambitious, and definitely working to reshape relationships on the continent.

Beijing's growing network of Confucius Institutes and scholarship programs shows just how much China wants to expand its soft power in Africa (Nagao, 2016: 30). But it's not just about culture and education. China's making real investments too. Take the Malaria Prevention Center in Liberia, the National School of Visual Arts in Mozambique, and that massive opera house in Algeria—these all stand as clear examples of China putting its money directly into soft power projects.

You'll spot the same pattern elsewhere: Lusaka Central Hospital in Zambia, the football stadium in Mali, and the Grand National Theatre in Senegal (Nagao, 2016: 34-35). And China hasn't stopped there. By 2024, it's helped build and upgrade 10,000 kilometers of railways and another 10,000 kilometers of roads, funded more than half of Africa's clean energy projects, and set up most of the continent's 3G and 4G networks (Focac, 2024).

Foreign aid is another key piece. China's aid to Africa keeps climbing. Since 2003, it's quadrupled, hitting $1.4 billion by 2009. Some reports say the jump is even bigger—from $10 million in 2002 to $18 billion in 2007 (Huang, 2018: 14), or from $631 million in 2003 to around $3 billion by 2015, which works out to a 14 percent yearly growth rate (Nagao, 2016: 36).

China's also pumping more direct investment into countries like Algeria, Zambia, the Republic of Congo, and Nigeria. Between 2009 and 2012, Chinese investment in Africa grew by 20.5 percent. In 2008, for the first time, Chinese FDI in Africa even beat the United States. All this points to China's real commitment to working with its African partners (Huang, 2018: 14-15).

There's another layer here too—China and many African countries share a history of struggling against colonialism. China likes to stress that it stands for equal sovereignty, and a lot of Africans see China's presence as positive. This shared background, along with China's approach of not interfering in domestic affairs, helps many Africans view China as a "benevolent" partner.

Even back in 1989, when Liberia recognized Taiwan, Beijing kept supporting social projects there, including private Chinese hospitals (Huang, 2018: 22-23).

Finally, there's the development model itself. Many Africans look at China's rise and see a roadmap for their own progress. They value the opportunities—jobs, technology, capital—and see China as a genuine example to follow (Huang, 2018: 25-26).

A lot of African countries look to China's development model because they're not convinced the West's way—what people call the Washington consensus—really helps them. There's a deep-rooted skepticism toward Western countries, which makes sense when you remember the colonial history. For many Africans, China offers something different—an alternative to the Western path. Some even

feel they should try to follow in China's footsteps (Brautigam, 2014: 346-52).

China's soft power is a hit across the continent. Polls show most people see China in a positive light, and this attitude doesn't look like it's changing anytime soon. Just look at the numbers: 77% of Tanzanians, 74% of Kenyans, 71% of Senegalese, 70% of Nigerians, and 61% each in Uganda and Ghana say they have a favorable view of China.

It's not just about image, either. Surveys show African countries generally welcome China's economic growth and its growing presence in the region (Silver, 2023b).

Still, it's not all smooth sailing. There's real unease about becoming too dependent on China's economy, especially in industries like oil and raw materials. People are also worried about environmental problems tied to Chinese development projects. Some Chinese companies ignore safety rules, which has led to disasters: a refinery blast in Nigeria back in 2006, injuries to Zimbabwean miners in 2010, even protests in Gabon over corruption and environmental damage linked to Chinese investment.

Another big worry is debt—Africans are more cautious than most about falling into China's so-called "lending traps" and giving up economic advantages as a result (Hassing, 2012: 12-13).

So, Africans aren't blindly welcoming China or seeing its presence as an obvious good. There's a mix of hope and doubt. Supporters talk up China's economic leadership and the benefits of working together. Critics, though, aren't shy about pointing out problems with labor practices and the environment when it comes to Chinese companies.

5.5 China's Software Relations with Latin America

China's growing interest in Latin America really comes down to what it needs: resources like iron, steel, and oil. Trade and investment are the main ways China gets them. There's another angle too—China wants to pull Latin American countries away from Taiwan, hoping these nations will side with Beijing and cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Congressional Research Service, 2008: 16).

China's approach in Latin America isn't just about business. It's about politics, too. On one hand, China's looking for raw materials and new markets for its products, all part of its bigger development plans. On the other, it's trying to win over countries that still recognize Taiwan, pushing them to switch sides.

Here's how it plays out: Out of 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 21 now have official relations with China, while 12 still stick with Taiwan. China's built stronger ties with some of the region's biggest players—signing "Strategic Partnership Agreements" with Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, and Argentina. It's also set up "Cooperative Partnership Agreements" with places like Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Peru. Student exchange programs are part of the picture, too.

China keeps up the pressure. It encourages countries to drop Taiwan, using economic incentives and diplomatic moves. Taiwan used to be a major donor and investor in the region, but China's aggressive diplomacy is making it tough for Taiwan to keep its foothold. Since 2004, Dominica, Grenada, and Costa Rica all switched their recognition from Taiwan to Beijing—clear wins for China's strategy (Congressional Research Service, 2008: 17-18). China won't establish ties with any country that still recognizes Taiwan's sovereignty, and that policy has chipped away at support for Taiwan throughout Latin America.

Honduras was the latest to switch in 2023, joining the growing list. Pressure is building on others—like the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti—to follow suit (Roy, 2023).

China isn't just working one-on-one, either. It's active in regional organizations, tapping into the Organization of American States, the Union of Latin American Integration, the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

China even sent peacekeepers to Haiti in 2004 as part of the UN stabilization mission, staying there until 2008. All this institutional engagement serves one main purpose: to chip away at Taiwan's influence and diplomatic presence in Latin America (Congressional Research Service, 2008: 18-19).

6. Economic Links

China's hunger for natural and mineral resources, plus the sheer size of the regional market, really drive its economic ties with Latin America. Trade between China and the Americas jumped from just $8.2 billion in 1999 to about $70 billion by 2006. That's not a small leap. During those years, the region's share of China's world trade doubled, moving from 2.3% to 4%. For a lot of these countries, China isn't just another trading partner—it's the biggest one they've got, handling a big chunk of both their exports and imports. China also inked free trade deals with Chile and Costa Rica along the way.

All of this—those numbers, the trade agreements—shows just how central China has become to the region's economic life (Congressional Research Service Library of Congress, 2008: 20-21).

Investment tells a similar story. As foreign investment in Latin America grew, China's slice shot up too. Chinese direct investment in the region hit $11.5 billion in 2005, up from $4.6 billion just two years before. That's a 14% jump and it made up almost a third of China's total direct investment at the time. Most of this money went into industry and technology, showing off China's scientific and economic muscle—and, honestly, its growing influence in Latin America. People there notice. About 72% of Latin Americans give China high marks for its tech and scientific progress—one of the more impressive aspects of its soft power (Congressional Research Service Library of Congress, 2008: 22-24).

Tourism is part of the picture, too. China has approved 16 Latin American countries as tourist destinations for its citizens. That's a big deal, since countries in the region have scrambled to make themselves more attractive to Chinese visitors, often by signing agreements with Beijing. Cuba led the way in 2003, and now 15 more countries have jumped in. With so much money in tourism, it's no surprise these countries are rolling out the red carpet (Li, 2007: 848).

Foreign aid is another tool China uses in the region. Latin America actually gets about 10% of all Chinese foreign aid—only Asia and Africa get more. China leverages this aid as part of its economic diplomacy, building closer ties and persuading countries to rethink their diplomatic stance toward Taiwan.

Look at what this aid covers: building sports stadiums in Grenada, Jamaica, and Barbuda; handing out educational scholarships; setting up Confucius Institutes, schools, hospitals, railways, highways. When disaster strikes—like the hurricane in Grenada in 2004 or Peru's

earthquake in 2007—China steps in with relief. There's debt forgiveness, grant loans (Jamaica got $12 million in 2000; Suriname, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago pocketed $539 million in 2007), and even a joint development fund with Venezuela, with China chipping in $4 billion (Congressional Research Service Library of Congress, 2008: 27-28).

China's soft power push in Latin America shows just how many angles Beijing is working. They're not just trading goods or signing deals—they're building cultural connections, showing up in the media, and getting involved with local Chinese communities. All these moves help China boost its image and open the door for deeper political and economic ties.

It's not just about looking good, either. By stepping up its presence, China's making it clear that it has its own way of doing things—different from the Western playbook. That puts real pressure on the old dominance of Western liberal democracy in the region.

Plus, China backs up Latin American countries on the world stage, like at the UN (Song, 2023). That kind of support doesn't go unnoticed.

Conclusion

China figured out a long time ago that it couldn't just keep its head down and focus on its own borders. If it wanted to keep developing, it had to look outwards, too—play the steady, grown-up neighbor in its region and act responsibly on the global stage. That shift kicked off in the 1970s, and after the Cold War wrapped up in the 1990s, things really started to pick up speed.

Back then, China realized it needed to calm its neighbors' nerves and shake off that old "China threat" reputation. For China, there's always been this tension: how do you push for development without bumping up against other people's interests? The answer was to change the narrative.

So, alongside building up their economy and military muscle, Chinese leaders started leaning into what people call "soft power." They wanted to show themselves as a major player, but not a bully. That meant using cultural, political, economic, and military resources to reshape their image—think Confucian institutes popping up around the world, exchange programs, scholarships for foreign students, sending their own students abroad, publishing in global media, boosting tourism, and staying connected with overseas Chinese communities.

China knows its biggest advantage is economic power, and they use that to build influence—"regional spheres of influence," as they like to say. It's not just about deals and investments; it's about building softer ties with governments and everyday people everywhere. Public diplomacy has helped China spread its values, improve its image, and get other countries to see things its way. You can see the results—neighbors trust China more, and the old image of a looming threat has started to fade.

Now, China stands as one of the world's top trading and investment partners, a huge donor to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, a model for development in the eyes of many countries, and a major source of scholarships and aid.

But here's the thing: China's soft power is mostly about economics. People in developing regions are drawn to China because of its industrial strength, technology, and the chance for growth—not because of some deep fascination with Chinese culture or values. That's a big difference from the Western way of doing soft power, which usually leans on culture, politics, or history.

So, as China's economic influence grows, its soft power grows too. But interestingly, despite all the focus on places like Southeast Asia and Central Asia, China's biggest wins have actually come in Africa and Latin America. That's where its approach has really paid off.

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