

Understanding China's Soft Power Tools in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Soft power, as conceived by Joseph Nye, defines a nation's ability to influence others through cultural, diplomatic, and ideological means rather than coercive methods like military force or economic pressure. This concept highlights the significance of cultural appeal, political principles, and diplomatic engagement in shaping global perceptions and alliances. China, leveraging its economic strength, political influence, and technological advancements such as AI and telecommunications, strategically employs soft power tools like cultural diplomacy and media outreach to shape global narratives and affirm its role as a leading global innovator. This study examines China's nuanced approach to soft power in Afghanistan, focusing on its diverse strategies across cultural, economic, and diplomatic spheres. It explores initiatives such as Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative aimed at promoting cultural exchange and economic cooperation, despite challenges posed by cultural sensitivities and geopolitical complexities. Through active engagement in international forums and mediation in peace processes, China aims to foster stability and positive bilateral relations, projecting an image of responsible global citizenship. In navigating these challenges, China's soft power initiatives in Afghanistan reflect its strategic goals of promoting regional development and stability while enhancing its global influence and leadership.

Keywords: Soft power, China, Afghanistan, Cultural diplomacy, Global influence

Introduction

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, describes a nation's ability to wield influence through non-coercive means such as culture, diplomacy, and ideology, contrasting with traditional forms of power like military force or economic coercion. This concept underscores the significance of cultural appeal, political principles, and diplomatic engagement in international relations. Countries utilize soft power to extend their global influence by disseminating their cultural products, political beliefs, and social standards. This influence is exerted through

various channels including media, entertainment, education, and diplomatic efforts. Soft power plays a crucial role in shaping opinions, forging connections, and garnering support in global affairs. Moreover, it brings tangible benefits by attracting tourists, students, investors, and consumers, thereby fostering economic growth and prosperity. In today's interconnected world, where collaboration and persuasion are highly valued, soft power has become indispensable for governments in navigating global politics and achieving foreign policy goals.

China's economic, political, and technological strengths have positioned it as a major global force. Its extensive trading networks, diplomatic engagement, and technological advancements, including AI and telecommunications, strengthen its influence. Through soft power initiatives like cultural diplomacy and media outreach, China shapes global narratives. Economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and technological innovations from companies like Huawei reinforce its image as a global leader in innovation and influence. Soft power is a crucial part of China's foreign policy and will help China build its positive image of development and prosperity. According to Kurlantzick (2006), China's experience exerting its soft power in Southeast Asia has successfully and effectively changed and attracted public attitudes towards China in Afghanistan. Also, China attempted to utilize its soft power tools to build a perception favouring Chinese objectives. After the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, it seems a suitable time to know about Chinese soft power tools, its challenges, reasons, and effectiveness in Afghanistan.

The article endeavors to scrutinize the singular soft power instruments employed by China within the context of Afghanistan. In pursuit of this objective, the article will furnish an exposition on the relations between China and Afghanistan. The principal emphasis will be directed towards discerning and comprehending the soft power tactics deployed by China in Afghanistan. Future inquiries may delve into the underlying motives prompting these strategies. However, it is noteworthy that the effectiveness of China's soft power endeavors is impeded by concerns regarding human rights violations and geopolitical complexities, thus underscoring the intricacies inherent within its overarching global influence strategy, a matter which presently remains beyond the scope of this article.

Afghanistan and China Relations: A Background

It's noteworthy that Afghanistan's modern history is marked by numerous military interventions, each ultimately unsuccessful in one way or another. In contrast, China's approach to Afghanistan appears distinct, as it bypasses the reliance on hard power tactics. Throughout history, entities like the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and more recently, the United States, have attempted military conquest in Afghanistan, all without success. Remarkably, there's no record of military conflict between Afghanistan and China. Despite China's formidable power, it has never sought to invade or occupy Afghanistan. This historical context underscores that military intervention has never been a consideration for China in its dealings with Afghanistan.

The historical ties between Afghanistan and China, dating back to the 7th century along the ancient Silk Road, laid the groundwork for subsequent cultural and diplomatic exchanges (Wei, 2018, p. 359). Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Afghanistan was among its earliest diplomatic partners (Pandey, 2019). Throughout the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, China provided support to the Mujahideen (Afridi, Yousufi, & Khan, 2014), though diplomatic relations were suspended when the Taliban seized power in 1996 (Felbab-brown, 2020).

Diplomatic ties between China and Afghanistan were reestablished in 2001 following the Bonn agreement, with China emphasizing cultural initiatives, economic engagements, and diplomatic relations (Ng, 2010). Despite concerns over the US military presence in Afghanistan, China pursued a non-interventionist approach, focusing on soft power strategies (Kley, 2014). By 2002, China actively engaged in diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, emerging as a significant regional actor in the Afghan conflict (Hong, 2013).

During subsequent administrations, including those of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, China maintained political, economic, and cultural ties with Afghanistan while also engaging with the Taliban in peace talks (Dumbaugh, 2010). This approach intensified with China's involvement in trilateral dialogues, advocating for the Taliban's participation in the peace process (Pakistan, 2018). As the US announced plans for troop withdrawal, China expanded its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, prioritizing security cooperation and economic interests in the evolving political landscape (Chew, 2021).

China's engagement in Afghanistan reflects a pragmatic approach, balancing economic, security, and political considerations while avoiding military intervention (Huasheng&Kuchins, 2012). With a focus on soft power initiatives, China seeks to influence Afghan affairs while maintaining a policy of non-interference in internal affairs (Khaliq, 2022). Despite concerns about regional geopolitics and terrorism spillover, China's engagement in Afghanistan underscores its evolving role as a key actor in the region.

Literature Review

This systematic review comprehensively evaluates the array of perspectives on China's engagement in Afghanistan as delineated in the literature. Scholars such as Pandey (2019) underscore China's multifaceted strategic motivations, including security concerns stemming from the potential terrorist spillover to Xinjiang, economic interests in accessing Afghanistan's resources and energy-rich Central Asian markets, and regional geopolitical calculations aimed at countering Indian influence. Similarly, Kley (2014) emphasizes China's desire for stability in Afghanistan to mitigate security challenges originating from the Wakhan corridor, while Ahmad (2018) focuses on the economic dimension of China's engagement, highlighting its potential for mutual benefit and Kabul's hesitance due to external pressures. Andersen and Jiang (2018) explore China's evolving stance on non-interference and its increasing involvement

in conflicts beyond its borders, particularly regarding security cooperation with the Afghan government against groups like ETIM. Murtazashvili (2022) delves into China's involvement following the disintegration of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021, stressing security concerns and economic interests, while Fischer and Stanzel (2021) suggest that China's post-withdrawal engagement prioritizes border security over significant economic investments. Zhang (2022) outlines China's evolving policy towards Afghanistan, transitioning towards a new engagement policy with the Taliban government and emphasizing stability in Xinjiang and economic opportunities.

The analysis of soft power engagement highlights a critical gap in existing literature, pointing to the need for a deeper understanding of Chinese soft power dynamics alongside military and economic strategies in Afghanistan. Despite the dominance of discussions on hard power strategies, the influence of Chinese soft power cannot be overlooked, particularly given its successes in regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and even Taiwan. The absence of a robust examination of Chinese soft power initiatives in Afghanistan represents a significant lacuna in scholarly discourse, necessitating further investigation into how China leverages cultural, educational, and diplomatic channels to shape perceptions and garner influence in the region.

The discourse among scholars concerning the foundations of soft power holds considerable significance in understanding international relations dynamics. Joseph Nye delineated political values, culture, and foreign policy as pivotal resources and instruments of soft power (Nye, 2004). Both Chinese and Western scholars have primarily directed their attention towards cultural and diplomatic factors in this regard. Chinese scholars often attribute China's soft power to its rich cultural heritage, encompassing aspects such as art, traditions, and culinary culture (Cho & Jeong, 2008; Huang & Ding, 2006). However, there exists a robust debate surrounding the conceptualization of soft power and the mechanisms employed by China to cultivate it (Zhu & Yang, 2022; Rahman, 2019). According to Zhu & Yang (2022) and Rahman (2019), Chinese soft power is delineated into three distinct dimensions: cultural, economic, and diplomatic, each comprising various tools elucidated in detail within accompanying frameworks. Given the multifaceted nature of Chinese soft power resources, this study opts to adopt a specific approach outlined in the framework, eschewing the conceptualization of soft power from the perspectives of Joseph Nye or others. Instead, the focus is placed on comprehending the concept of soft power as expounded by Zhu & Yang (2022) and Rahman (2019), thereby providing a nuanced understanding of China's soft power dynamics.

Research Method

This research employed the comprehensive research methods to investigate China's soft power approach in Afghanistan. The research design, conceptualized as a case study, provides a framework for analyzing Chinese soft power within a specific timeframe of 2002 to 2022. Utilizing qualitative research methods, data collection predominantly involved primary sources, with a focus on interviews conducted with professionals deeply engaged in China-Afghanistan relations. These interviews, conducted primarily in May 2022 in Afghanistan and later via online platforms with individuals residing in China and abroad, sought insights from diplomats, officials, and experts. The targeted sampling design encompassed 15 individuals intimately involved in Sino-Afghan affairs, chosen via a non-probability Snowball sampling technique due to the specialized nature of the population. The sampling elements were defined as Chinese or Afghan nationals serving as officials, diplomats, or experts in China-Afghanistan relations. Their identities are withheld to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Additionally, secondary data was utilized to supplement primary findings, enriching the research with existing literature. Moving to data analysis, thematic analysis emerged as the chosen method for transforming gathered data into meaningful insights. This process, outlined in six stages, facilitated the identification of patterns and themes across the dataset, aligning with the research's theoretical framework and uncovering nuanced insights into China's soft power strategies in Afghanistan. Through meticulous data collection and analysis, this research endeavors to contribute valuable perspectives on China's soft power dynamics in the Afghan context.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of soft power, tracing back to ancient Chinese civilization, was introduced into modern American discourse by Joseph Nye during the Cold War. Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2004, p.5). Contrasting hard power, which involves coercion and force, soft power relies on attraction and persuasion (Nye, 2011, p.11), and the combination of both is termed "smart power" (Nye, 2005).

Soft power aligns with the liberal complex interdependence theory, emphasizing cooperation, mutual benefits, and the exchange of ideas. Democracies are more inclined to use soft power, as the presence of dissent and self-criticism enhances credibility and attraction (Nye, 2011, p.109). Economic ties between nations foster cooperation and reduce the likelihood of conflict, promoting the use of soft power (Nye, 2004). Additionally, international institutions like the IMF and WTO serve as tools for enhancing a country's soft power by promoting international cooperation and liberal economic models (Nye, 2005, p.10).

China's approach to soft power is characterized by its unique strategies and sources, diverging from Nye's Euro-centric model. Chinese soft power encompasses cultural diplomacy, economic development, and political systems (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Honghua, 2007). Key

elements of China's soft power include its rich cultural heritage, gradual economic development, and proactive international engagement (Li, 2008). While Joseph Nye's definition focuses on attraction without coercion, Chinese scholars emphasize internal stability and international harmony, thus broadening the scope of soft power (Honghua, 2008; Zheng & Chi, 2007).

Economic development is a significant aspect of soft power. Economic success attracts other nations, enhancing a country's influence globally. Development models like China's serve as templates for other countries seeking prosperity (Nye, 2011, p.85). Economic interdependence fosters cooperation over conflict, making economic relationships a substantial source of soft power. Investments and aid projects further enhance a country's global image and influence. Economic development also promotes cultural exchange through trade, tourism, and international business, spreading values and norms. Moreover, economic power allows countries to play significant roles in international institutions, promoting their preferred norms and policies (Nye, 2005, p.10). China's economic growth has been a critical element of its soft power strategy, combining cultural diplomacy with economic initiatives to enhance its global standing (Zhu & Yang, 2022; Rahman, 2019).

In conclusion, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power offers a critical framework for understanding how attraction and persuasion, as opposed to coercion, can shape international relations and achieve strategic objectives. While Nye emphasizes political values, culture, and foreign policy as core components of soft power, Chinese scholars have broadened this framework by integrating economic development and internal stability. This expanded perspective highlights the diverse sources and strategies of soft power, with economic development playing a pivotal role. China's global ascent serves as a testament to the power of this nuanced approach, demonstrating how economic growth can significantly bolster a nation's soft power.

The diagram in Figure 1 delineates three key instruments of soft power: cultural, economic, and diplomatic. It further elaborates on these instruments, detailing their specific applications. China's strategic use of these soft power tools is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, aimed at fostering favorable perceptions and preferences in target countries. This research focuses on examining these dimensions of Chinese soft power, particularly in Afghanistan. It seeks to identify the specific tools employed, analyze the challenges faced, and assess the impact in terms of shaping preferences and attitudes towards China.

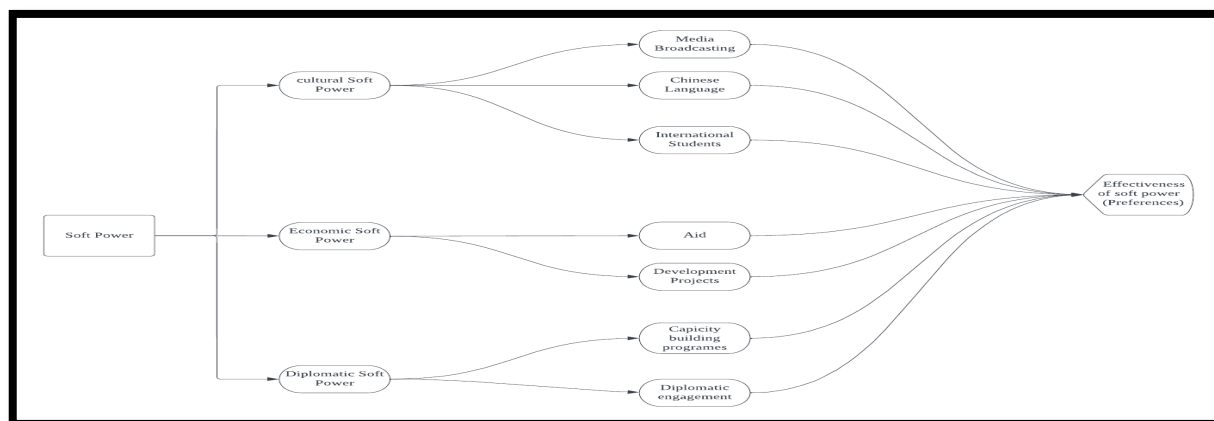


Diagram 1: Chinese Soft power and Corresponding Tools

Cultural Tools of Chinese Soft-power

When Joseph Nye introduced the term "soft power" to contemporary international relations studies, he identified three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye J. S., 2004). While the Chinese model of soft power differs, it still aligns with Nye's discussion. Chinese scholars are augmenting soft power with additional tools and aiming for broader influence, yet culture remains a central theme in discussions among American and Chinese scholars and politicians. In 2002, President Jiang Zemin emphasized the need for China to enhance its cultural soft power during his report to the National Congress (FMPRC, 2022). Subsequently, "soft power" became commonplace in Chinese political and academic circles, according to Li (2008). China then began implementing strategies to expand its soft power abroad, including in neighboring Afghanistan, where historical ties make it a significant focus. Interviews with respondents from China and Afghanistan revealed China's use of seven cultural tools to build and extend its soft power in Afghanistan: Chinese language promotion, media broadcasting, cultural initiatives by the Chinese Embassy in Kabul, goodwill ambassadors, and cultural promotion through education.

Chinese Language

The Chinese language stands as a key element of China's soft power in Afghanistan, as highlighted by nearly all respondents in interviews. One interviewee emphasized the pivotal role of Chinese language proficiency for effective communication and enhanced trade and people-to-people relations between the two countries (R1, personal communication, May 9, 2023). This sentiment was echoed by a Chinese expert on China-Afghanistan relations, who stressed the importance of Afghan nationals acquiring proficiency in Chinese to facilitate various aspects of bilateral relations (R5, personal communication, April 29, 2023).

China's efforts in this regard extend to the establishment of Chinese language departments in Afghanistan's leading universities, such as Kabul University and Nangarhar University. The Confucius Institutes, supported by the central Confucius Institute in

China, spearhead these initiatives. The Confucius Institute at Kabul University, founded in 2008, has been instrumental in training Afghan specialists in Chinese language, culture, and civilization, with ongoing support from the Chinese government in the form of educational scholarships (University K., 2019).

These language programs aim not only to teach language skills but also to impart an understanding of Chinese culture. The curriculum includes courses on various aspects of Chinese language and culture, offering Afghan students a comprehensive learning experience. Additionally, students benefit from scholarships that provide opportunities for further immersion in Chinese language and culture in China (Xinhua, 2022).

The significance of these language programs was underscored by a ceremony celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Confucius Institute, where Chinese officials praised the contributions of graduates to China-Afghanistan relations (China E. o., 2013). Similarly, the establishment of a Chinese language center at Nangarhar University reflects China's commitment to expanding its linguistic influence across Afghanistan (University N., 2022).

Despite recent security concerns, Chinese language programs at Kabul University and Nangarhar University remain operational, with efforts underway to ensure continuity through trained local instructors (R6, R7, personal communication, April 3, 2023). Moreover, China's initiation of Chinese language courses for Afghan diplomats further underscores its soft power strategy, aiming to foster positive perceptions of China among Afghan officials and facilitate bilateral interactions (R6, R7, personal communication, April 3, 2023).

In summary, China's focus on promoting the Chinese language in Afghanistan exemplifies its recognition of language as a crucial component of soft power. By addressing cultural and communication barriers, China aims to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan and foster closer ties between the two nations.

Media

Media cooperation serves as a crucial aspect of China's soft power strategy, aimed at shaping international perceptions favorably towards its global objectives. While there's considerable scholarly attention on China's media influence worldwide, less focus has been given to its role in shaping the Afghan media landscape, particularly during the period of U.S. military presence.

China sought to leverage Afghan television channels, radio programs, and newspapers by sponsoring them in exchange for disseminating Chinese content to the Afghan public (USCC, 2022). Emphasizing President Xi's directive to "tell China's story well" (R7, personal communication, April 3, 2023), Chinese officials aimed to present a positive image of China to Afghan audiences, countering narratives from Western media.

Recognizing the challenge of Western disinformation, China cooperated with various Afghan media outlets to foster positive public opinion in Afghanistan. HazratBahar's analysis of

Afghan media coverage revealed a predominance of positive framing regarding China's cooperation with Afghanistan (Bahar, 2022).

Chinese engagement extended to collaborating with Afghan TV channels and providing financial assistance to Afghan media corporations. This included partnerships with Afghan TV Shamshad and broadcasts by Chinese media outlets like CCTV and CMG, aimed at shaping the narrative of China's involvement in Afghanistan (R2, personal communication, April 14, 2023).

China also facilitated media exchange programs, bringing Afghan journalists to China to foster positive relationships and provide training (R1, R3, personal communication, May 9, 2023; April 18, 2023). Additionally, Chinese-sponsored radio channels like Spogmai Radio and CRI disseminated Chinese narratives to Afghan audiences, particularly in rural areas where radio is a primary source of information (R2, personal communication, April 14, 2023).

In print media, China sponsored newspapers such as "Huriyyat" and "Sarnawisht," focusing on China-Afghanistan relations and Chinese development projects (R2, personal communication, April 14, 2023).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including Taliban regulation of media in Afghanistan. However, China's continued engagement with Afghan media reflects its commitment to shaping a positive image in the region, though it faces competition from Western narratives supported by extensive U.S. media cooperation initiatives in Afghanistan (Kabul, 2021).

Cultural Initiatives by Embassy in Kabul

China hosted cultural events at its embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, including celebrations on the National Day of the People's Republic of China. These events were attended by various Afghan leaders, academics, think tanks, and youth representatives. One respondent from Afghan officials noted that China organized these events, inviting leaders from different sectors of Afghan society (R15, personal communication, 18 April 2023). However, another respondent expressed concerns that these events either lacked sensitivity to Afghan culture or were intended to embarrass Afghan political leaders (R10, personal communication, 16 April 2023).

One notable event occurred on September 29, 2018, during the 69th National Day of the People's Republic of China, where the embassy hosted a girls' dance performance with political leaders in attendance. This event sparked criticism from the Afghan public directed at the political leadership of the Afghan Republic (BBC, 2018).

Chinese officials at the embassy also mentioned supporting an annual cultural event in Bamiyan province during the Islamic Republic era. However, after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, cultural events at the Chinese Embassy in Kabul ceased, as the Taliban banned music festivals and other similar activities. Chinese officials expressed a willingness to resume

cultural events at their embassy if the situation permits, but Afghan officials emphasized the importance of respecting Islamic values and Afghan traditions (R6 & R7, personal communication, 29 April 2023; R6, personal communication, 3 April 2023; R11, personal communication, 8 April 2023).

These cultural events, particularly the one on China's National Day, stirred controversy in Afghan society, leading to a negative perception of China. This lack of cultural sensitivity has had a detrimental impact on China's soft power in Afghanistan. Recognizing the traditional values of Afghan officials, China has refrained from organizing similar events after the Taliban's rise to power.

Goodwill Ambassadors

China has made efforts to support Afghans in learning the Chinese language, while also witnessing a rise in Chinese individuals learning Pashto, Afghanistan's national language. Decades ago, Chinese students traveled to Kabul to study Pashto at Kabul University, subsequently returning to China to promote Pashto literature. One notable figure is Professor Che, who learned Pashto in 1959 and later compiled a Pashto-Chinese dictionary containing 50,000 words and expressions (Wee, 2014; Xinhua, 2015). Professor Che has been teaching Chinese at the Communication University of China since 2001 and notes a growing interest in Pashto among his students, with 13 currently enrolled (Xinhua, 2015).

In 2017, Professor Che and his Pashto-speaking students visited Kabul, garnering media attention and emphasizing their language skills as a bridge between China and Afghanistan (Shamshad, 2017). Their efforts have positioned them as goodwill ambassadors of China to Afghanistan, fostering positive perceptions and enhancing cultural exchanges between the two nations.

Another notable figure is "Da Chin Ghuty," a Chinese woman fluent in Pashto, affectionately dubbed "Flower of China" by Afghans. She serves as a goodwill ambassador, engaging with Afghan society on topics such as Chinese culture and traditions. Her respectful approach, including wearing Afghan attire, resonates well within Afghan culture, contributing to China's positive image in Afghanistan (R3, personal communication, 18 April 2023).

Professor Che, Da Chin Ghuty, and other individuals active on social media platforms utilize Pashto to introduce Afghans to Chinese culture sensitively. This approach, distinct from Afghanistan's war-torn narrative, prioritizes dialogue and engagement over intervention. These goodwill ambassadors are instrumental in promoting China's policies in Afghanistan, offering insights into Chinese society and fostering cultural understanding (R3, personal communication, 18 April 2023). Through these efforts, China aims to enhance its soft power and cultivate a positive perception among the Afghan public.

Educational Scholarship

Promoting China and its culture through educational scholarships has emerged as a significant component of China's soft power strategy. Educational exchanges, as noted by Yang (2007), are integral to soft power, with China actively leveraging this avenue to extend its influence. The Chinese Ministry of Education has undertaken initiatives to attract international students, offering scholarships and enticing foreign lecturers with favorable incentives (Kurlantzick, 2010). By 2004, China boasted around 300,000 international students, with 20,000 scholarships awarded annually, predominantly for Chinese language studies (Cao, 2018).

In Afghanistan, China has sought to expand its influence through higher education scholarships. These scholarships serve as a means for China to exert soft power, as highlighted by an expert on China-Afghanistan relations (R2). The Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan confirmed providing 300 scholarships annually (R7, personal communication, 3 April 2023). However, it's noted that some scholarships were awarded to Afghan politicians and their associates, potentially serving China's national interests (R8).

China's scholarship initiatives in Afghanistan extend beyond mere numbers. Scholarships, such as those under the One Belt One Road scheme, further China's influence in the country (R13, personal communication, 10 May 2023). Scholarships are regarded as a fundamental tool of Chinese soft power in Afghanistan, fostering people-to-people exchanges and enhancing bilateral relations (R1).

While there was a hiatus in scholarship provision during the Islamic Emirate's rule, China resumed its scholarship programs, offering opportunities for Afghan students (R3). These scholarships not only facilitate educational pursuits but also serve as a means to shape Afghan perceptions of China positively.

China's scholarship strategy in Afghanistan aligns with broader soft power objectives. Amid Afghanistan's educational challenges, China's scholarship programs fill crucial gaps, demonstrating China's commitment to Afghan development (R3). China's approach mirrors its successful soft power endeavors in other regions, such as Africa and Morocco, where education serves as a conduit for cultural exchange and influence (Hutchings, 2021).

In summary, China's educational scholarships in Afghanistan represent a cornerstone of its soft power strategy, fostering goodwill, enhancing bilateral ties, and shaping perceptions of China positively among Afghan students and elites. Through education, China aims to deepen its influence and cultivate lasting relationships in Afghanistan.

Economic Tools of Chinese Soft-power

In the framework outlined in above, economic tools of Chinese soft power are categorized into aid and development projects. Interviews further reveal China's economic initiatives in

Afghanistan, such as preferential trade policies, major economic projects, humanitarian aid, and development projects (Cao, 2018). Access to China's vast market is also utilized as part of its soft power strategy in other countries, strengthening its appeal through economic aid and market access (Nye J., 2005).

Krstinovska (2022) categorizes business and trade as key components of measuring China's soft power, while reports from the Congressional Research Center highlight culture, foreign aid, trade, and investment as non-military inducements of China's soft power (Lum, Morrison, & Vaughn, 2008). Similarly, respondents in this research identify trade, investments, aid, and development projects as China's economic tools for enhancing its soft power in Afghanistan.

Given Afghanistan's landlocked status, its reliance on regional markets for trade is pronounced. The Chinese market offers significant opportunities for Afghan businesses due to its large population. During both the Islamic Republic and the Taliban rule, China utilized access to its market as a soft power tool, facilitating trade and investments (Literature above, 2022).

Preferential Trade Policies towards Afghanistan

Over the past two decades, China's trade relations with Afghanistan have undergone significant growth. Kurlantzick (2007) notes China's strategy of offering preferential trade policies to developing nations as a means of exercising soft power. This approach became evident after China reestablished diplomatic ties with Afghanistan in 2002, following a period of severed relations due to the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war. Since then, China has become Afghanistan's largest potential market, with projections indicating it will become the country's second-largest trade partner by 2023 (Devonshire-Ellis & Bonesh, 2023). This economic leverage, derived from China's status as the world's most populous market, underscores Afghanistan's strategic interest in accessing it.

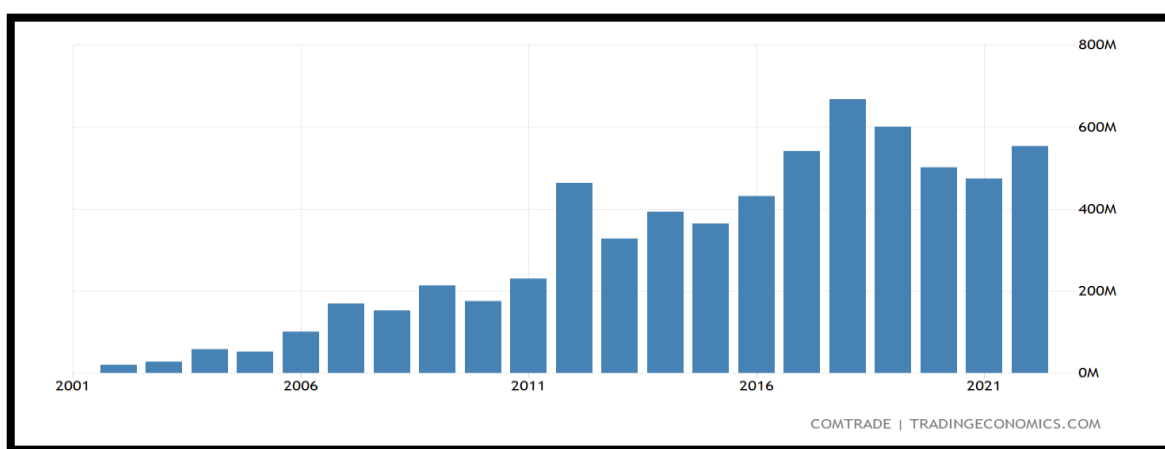


Figure 1: China's Export to Afghanistan: 2001-2022

China's trade policies serve as instruments of soft power, aligning with the preferences of other states (Morgan, 2019). Notably, China opened its market to Afghan goods by establishing an air corridor and reducing trade duties, exemplified by a 2009 agreement in which China waived 95% of full duties (R1, personal communication, 9 May 2023). This approach mirrors China's soft power tactics in Southeast Asia, where it incentivized trade through tariff waivers and import tax reductions (Kurlantzick, 2007).

The trend of Chinese exports to Afghanistan surged following the establishment of diplomatic relations, with major exports including electrical and electronic equipment, vehicles, machinery, and various consumer goods. Despite interruptions during the Taliban regime, trade resumed and continued to expand, culminating in expectations of China becoming Afghanistan's second-largest trade partner (Devonshire-Ellis & Bonesh, 2023).

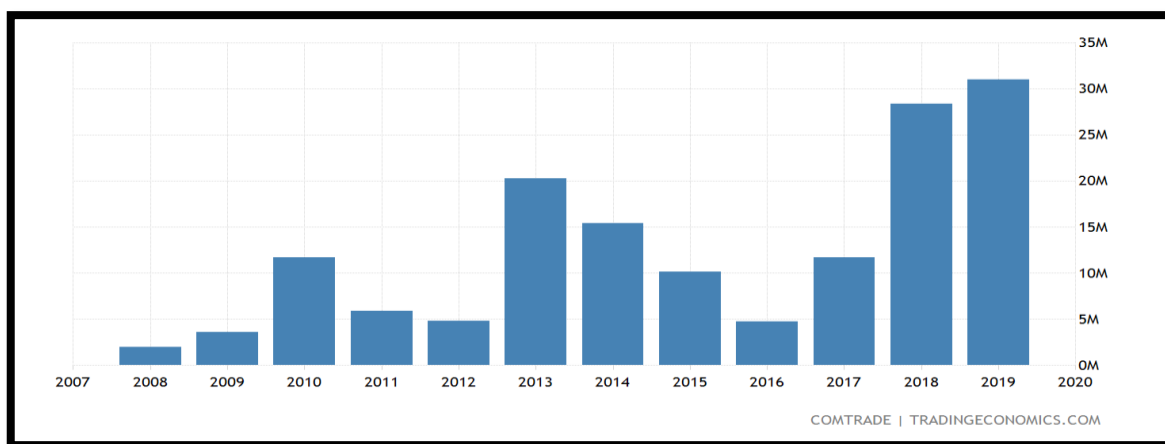


Figure 2: Afghanistan's Exports to China from 2007-2020

Afghanistan reciprocated by exporting products like fruits, nuts, wool, and textiles to China. This mutual trade benefited from Chinese initiatives to streamline visa processes for Afghan traders and waive trade duties on Afghan goods. These efforts aimed not only to boost economic engagement but also to counter security challenges stemming from Afghanistan, such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (R8, personal communication, 8 June 2023).

China's trade policies in Afghanistan serve multiple strategic objectives. Beyond economic gains, they aim to cultivate a positive image, counter negative perceptions, and mitigate security risks. By demonstrating commitment to Afghan prosperity and security, China seeks to establish itself as a key partner in Afghanistan's development trajectory.

Major Economic Initiatives

Chinese soft power initiatives, particularly those embedded within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), wield significant influence in global economics. Tahir (2022) emphasizes the BRI's role in promoting connectivity, highlighting its soft power implications. Despite China's substantial economic engagements with Afghanistan over the past two decades, investment efforts have

not yielded as successfully as other ventures. An Afghan expert, R2, acknowledges China's economic endeavors in Afghanistan, recognizing its attempts to bolster soft power through investments (R2, personal communication, 14 April 2023).

Comparatively, China's investments in Afghanistan lag behind those of other regional powers, such as India, despite its aspirations for increased influence (R1, personal communication, 9 May 2023). However, Chinese projects like Mes-e-Aynak and Amu Basin oil extraction, though initially won, faced challenges and were halted (R13, personal communication, 10 May 2023). Security concerns, compounded by US presence and warnings, hindered China's investment progress (R13, personal communication, 10 May 2023).

While Chinese investment projects in Afghanistan have faced obstacles, Rahimi (2018) suggests that broader Chinese regional objectives may see these initiatives revived in the future. Limitations on China's investments, including infrastructure deficiencies and security risks, further hamper progress (Ng, 2010).

China's development model, exemplified by its rapid economic growth, underpins its efforts to export similar strategies through initiatives like the BRI (Albert, 2018). This narrative, aimed at showcasing China's development success, is evident in its engagements with Afghanistan (R6, personal communication, 29 April 2023). Despite challenges, China continues to emphasize investment and infrastructure development in Afghanistan, signaling a commitment to long-term economic ties (R2, personal communication, 14 April 2023).

China's approach to Afghanistan post-Taliban rule underscores its intent to fill the void left by the US through economic partnerships rather than political interventions. The signing of deals like the Amu Darya oil production agreement reflects China's commitment to economic engagement in Afghanistan (Najafizada, 2023).

Overall, while China's economic initiatives in Afghanistan have faced setbacks, its persistence in fostering economic ties demonstrates a commitment to leveraging soft power for long-term influence and economic cooperation.

Humanitarian Aids

China strategically employs humanitarian aid as a soft power tool, as argued by Ramazan (2021), citing instances such as China's assistance during the Myanmar storm in 2008 and the Asian crisis in Indonesia in 1997. In Myanmar, China was uniquely allowed full access for aid distribution during a devastating storm, while in Indonesia, it provided significant financial support to mitigate currency depreciation. These actions exemplify China's use of humanitarian aid to extend soft power influence in needy countries.

Table 1: China's Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan

From	To	Aided	Date
Foreign Ministry of China	Afghanistan	30 million urgent aid for the basic needs	January 23, 2002
Chinese Government	Afghanistan	150 million dollars which were used for the rebuilding of the Jamhoryat hospital and uniforms for the national police	15 May 2002
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kabul	The Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan	30 computers	15 May 2002
Chinese aid agency	Red Crescent of Afghanistan	50,000 US dollar assistance for the earthquake-affected area of Baghlan province.	4 April 2002
Chinese women foundation	Ministry of Women Affairs of Afghanistan	600 sewing machines. 1300 meters of cloth.	2 October 2002
The Government of China	Kabul Zoo	In total, ten animals, including lions, deer, and pigs.	10 June 2002
The Government of China	The Government of Afghanistan	Waved 10-million-pound dues.	27 March 2004
The Government	The Foreign	Fifteen	30 April 2004

of China	Ministry of Afghanistan	diplomats were sponsored for training in Beijing.	
The Embassy of the People's Republic of China	The Ministry of Interior Affairs of Afghanistan	22 Jeeps and communication system.	29 June 2004
The Government of China	The Ministry of Education of Afghanistan	145 US dollars for the building of Abdul RaheemGhafori School	18 July 2004
The Embassy of the People's Republic of China	The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Higher Education, Interior and Directorate of Olympics	1 million US dollars	2004

Note: Reprinted from Afghanistan and China: The Bilateral Relations (1955-2015)

In Afghanistan, R₄ contends that China's increased humanitarian aid is shaping a positive image among the Afghan populace (R₄, personal communication, 25 May 2023). However, R₁₀ notes that China's aid to Afghanistan, though contributing to soft power, pales in comparison to Western assistance (Qazizada, 2023). Despite this, China's direct aid to the Afghan government is seen as a strategic move to foster goodwill (R₈, personal communication, 12 May 2023).

Table 2: Aid Delivered to Afghanistan since 15 August 2021 until to Date

Aid Delivered to Afghanistan since 15 August 2021 until to date

Supporting Institution	Total Amount (in USD)	Type of Aid	Receiving Institution	Date
Chinese Government	200,000,000 (150M to be delivered)	9600MT food 3M Covid19 vaccines 600MT Tents, blankets, clothes and other winter supplies Medical and development Supplies	Relevant departments of Afghanistan Interim Government	September, 2021 to September, 2022
	800,000	Donation	UNHCR	December, 2021
Government of Xinjiang, China	1,250,000	Food, winter supplies and cash	Relevant departments of Afghanistan Interim Government	December, 2021 to June, 2022
Red Cross Society of China	2,000,000	Food, medical supplies and cash	Afghan Red Crescent Society	December, 2021 to September, 2022
	350,000	Donation	IFRC	December, 2021

Note: Achieved from the Embassy of the People Republic of China in Kabul during the Interview for this Research.

China's decision to bypass international organizations and directly aid the Afghan government is strategic, aiming to maintain leverage and control over aid distribution (Li X., 2018). This approach underscores China's intent to influence Afghan perceptions directly through humanitarian assistance.

Data indicates China's substantial aid contributions to Afghanistan, totaling millions of dollars over several years (Huasheng, 2012; China, 2013; Blanchard, 2012). According to R₁, China provided humanitarian assistance of 611.9 million US dollars from 2001 to 2015 (R₁, personal communication, 9 May 2023). Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic, China swiftly resumed aid provision to Afghanistan, offering essential supplies like food, vaccines, and winter gear (R₆, personal communication, 6 April 2023).

During both the Republic and Taliban rule, China's humanitarian aid aimed to portray China as a benevolent actor in Afghanistan's development (Figure 3). Despite challenges and comparisons to Western aid, China continues to use humanitarian assistance as a tool to bolster its positive image in Afghanistan. However, given its economic stature, expectations from the Afghan public remain high for more substantial contributions from China in humanitarian aid.

Developmental Aids

The international financial structure encompasses various monetary flows, including official development assistance (ODA) (Golley & Song, 2011). ODA, as defined by the DAC in 1972, refers to financial support provided to developing countries or multilateral organizations with the aim of fostering welfare and economic prosperity in the recipient nation (OECD, 2008). However,

Pringle and Hunt (2015) distinguish humanitarian aid as relief offered in response to disasters or emergencies to mitigate suffering and save lives, contrasting it with development aid, which entails long-term, project-based assistance for state advancement.

Palit (2010) highlights China's contributions to Afghanistan's development, particularly in irrigation and healthcare infrastructure, such as the Parwan province irrigation project and hospital construction in Kabul and Kandahar. These efforts, serving as soft power tools, reflect China's engagement in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Notably, China's assistance extends to projects like affordable housing and medical care for Afghan children with heart conditions (R15, personal communication, 21 June 2023).

Ng (2010) suggests China's cautious approach to providing development aid in Afghanistan, attributing it partly to concerns over limited influence on political decisions during the Islamic Republic era. Additionally, Kley (2014) posits that China prioritized infrastructure development due to security challenges affecting larger-scale projects.

With the government of the IEA lacking international recognition, including from China, there is a lack of visible development aid initiatives from China's end. While there have been interactions between the IEA and Chinese state-owned enterprises, formal announcements regarding development aid remain absent (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022).

Despite this, Zhou, Su, and Yuan (2022) note China's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan post-Republic era. This aid, spanning medical assistance, housing projects, and provisions of essential supplies, aimed to support Afghan families and government sectors, bolstering China's soft power image in the region.

Palit (2010) underscores China's multifaceted support for Afghanistan's reconstruction, including debt relief and investments in sectors like telecommunications. Through economic soft power tools such as infrastructure development and trade policies, China aims to foster positive relations and contribute to Afghanistan's economic recovery.

In light of Afghanistan's prolonged crises, China's economic engagement in the country seeks to convey a message of reconstruction and mutual benefit. By prioritizing initiatives like investment projects and facilitating Afghan exports to China, China aims to establish a constructive image in Afghanistan and prepare for a substantial role in its economic development (Byrd, 2023).

Diplomatic Tools of Chinese Soft-power

In Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power, one of its three pillars is foreign policy (Nye J. S., 2004). However, the Chinese perspective on soft power encompasses activities beyond physical military and security involvement, incorporating elements such as economic influence and participation in multilateral diplomacy as sources of soft power (Zhu & Yang, 2022).

The 2008 treaty of friendship, cooperation, and good neighborly relations between China and Afghanistan, as highlighted by Palit (2010), underscores mutual commitments to uphold Afghanistan's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful conflict resolution. The treaty also outlines China's support for Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts.

In navigating the Afghan issue, China pursued a diplomatic engagement strategy, refraining from direct involvement in the US-led "War on Terror." Despite the significant role of diplomacy and political support on the global stage during this period, China opted for a stance of non-intervention in Afghan affairs. Through interviews with 15 respondents, diplomatic tools utilized by China between 2002 and 2022 were identified, including the rhetoric of non-intervention, support in international forums, cultivation of a peacemaker image, capacity-building initiatives for Afghan officials, and exchanges in academia and think tanks. These diplomatic strategies will be further elucidated in subsequent sections.

The Diplomatic Rhetoric of No Intervention

For four decades, China has maintained a policy of non-intervention in foreign conflicts, abstaining from military involvement in other nations' affairs (Mahbubani, 2021; Li J., 2019). This principle extends to its stance in Afghanistan, where China refrains from military engagement, setting itself apart from historical imperial powers.

Expert analysis categorizes China's soft power tools into three domains: people-to-people, business-to-business, and government-to-government relations. Notably, China's non-interventionist policy enhances its legitimacy in engaging with Afghan issues, contributing positively to its soft power in the region (R₁, personal communication, 9 May 2023).

China's approach in Afghanistan emphasizes peace and prosperity over military occupation, fostering continuous dialogue with various Afghan stakeholders (R₁, personal communication, 9 May 2023). Despite criticism from the United States and its allies during their presence in Afghanistan, China remained neutral, providing diplomatic and economic support to the Afghan government (R₁, personal communication, 9 May 2023).

China's policy of non-intervention is perceived as a soft power tool, aligning with Afghan sentiments against foreign interference (Sigar, 2021; R₁₀, personal communication, 16 April 2023). Even the Taliban government acknowledges China's non-intrusive stance, welcoming its consultative approach (R₁₁, personal communication, 8 April 2023).

While China's policy on non-intervention in Afghanistan has been consistent, recent shifts suggest heightened interest post-2014, potentially driven by strategic concerns and the One Belt One Road initiative (Umarov, 2017). With the recent Afghan developments, China reaffirmed its commitment to non-interference, outlined in its "Three Respects" and "Three Nevers" policy (Fmprc, 2023; R₇, personal communication, 3 April 2023).

China's non-intervention policy serves multiple soft power objectives, including maintaining a distinct global image, respecting Afghan sovereignty, promoting regional peace for economic engagement, and mitigating potential destabilization (Fmprc, 2023). This cautious approach aligns with Afghan desires for independence and stability, safeguarding broader Chinese interests in the region.

China's Diplomatic Support in International Organizations

China's diplomatic support in international organizations has remained integral to its foreign policy approach towards Afghanistan. A Chinese diplomat (R6) underscores Afghanistan's significance in China's neighborhood diplomacy, emphasizing the enduring importance of neighborly relations (R6, personal communication, 3 April 2023).

Experts highlight the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a key platform for China's soft power projection in Afghanistan, particularly during the Islamic Republic era (R4, personal communication, 25 May 2023). China's support in multilateral forums like the SCO aimed to provide Afghanistan with international space while reinforcing its independent status (R4, personal communication, 25 May 2023).

China's engagement on the government-to-government level in Afghanistan includes support for peace negotiations and diplomatic backing on the international stage (R1). Despite the influence of the United States during the Republic period, China persisted in its diplomatic support, echoing Afghan concerns globally (R1).

Recent policy documents highlight China's commitment to strengthening international and regional cooperation on Afghanistan, advocating for a cooperative platform rather than political rivalry (Fmprc, 2023). China actively engages in multilateral coordination through various mechanisms, emphasizing consensus-building for stability and assistance in Afghanistan (Fmprc, 2023).

China's diplomatic strategy towards Afghanistan has evolved over time. During the Islamic Republic era, China sought to limit US intervention by leveraging international organizations like the United Nations (UN). In the Taliban's governance, China continues to support Afghanistan on the international stage, rallying regional support and advocating for multilateral diplomacy (UN, 2022).

Overall, China utilizes its diplomatic engagement in international forums to advocate for Afghanistan's interests, criticize past failures, and promote regional cooperation for stability in the region.

China's Peacemaker Image

The theory of complex interdependence highlights the potential for peaceful coexistence between nations through connectivity and institutionalism (Isikal, 2004). China employs various soft power tools, including regional connectivity and conflict resolution, to foster a positive image internationally (Akash, 2018).

China's peacebuilding efforts, exemplified by its mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, bolster its soft power in the Middle East (Siyech & Khan, 2023). Similarly, its involvement in the Afghan peace process underscores its commitment to regional stability (R₁).

Chinese diplomats' active role in facilitating peace talks between Afghan factions demonstrates its willingness to contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict (R₁). This engagement aligns with China's broader strategy of projecting itself as a responsible global actor (R₁₃).

China's interest in the Afghan peace process stems from multiple factors, including the desire to establish itself as a mediator and enhance its soft power (R₁₃). By positioning itself as a key player in conflict resolution, China aims to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan and the wider region (R₁).

Overall, China's involvement in peace efforts in Afghanistan enhances its soft power and solidifies its reputation as a proactive and constructive international actor.

Capacity Building Programs for Afghan Civil Servants

In the past two decades of war in Afghanistan, China abstained from direct military involvement, opting instead for soft power strategies. One such tool was its capacity-building programs aimed at Afghan civil servants, which served as a form of soft power projection. These programs involved short-term training courses conducted in China, focusing on various aspects of development and prosperity. China's investment in training Afghan officials aimed to familiarize them with Chinese approaches and foster positive perceptions of China's role in Afghanistan (R₈, R₁₅). Even amid changing political dynamics, China continued these programs, recently resuming training courses for Afghan diplomats and officials. This ongoing commitment underscores China's efforts to maintain and expand its influence in Afghanistan through capacity-building initiatives (R₃, R₁₂). Additionally, China's involvement in joint training programs with the United States further demonstrated its commitment to enhancing Afghan institutional capacity (China E. o., 2015). These capacity-building efforts align with China's broader soft power strategy, aiming to shape perceptions and establish goodwill among Afghan officials and society (China M. o., 2022). By investing in technical training and cultural exchanges, China seeks to bolster its soft power presence in Afghanistan, leveraging its peacemaking image and commitment to non-intervention as key diplomatic tools in navigating the complex Afghan landscape.

Academic and Think-Tank Exchanges

Academic exchanges and think-tank collaborations have been instrumental in China's political strategy in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2022. China facilitated visits of Afghan institutions to Beijing for discussions on enhancing bilateral relations, demonstrating its commitment to fostering intellectual dialogue (R8; R15). These exchanges aimed to influence Afghan academia and professionals positively, showcasing China's development model (R2; R13; R1).

However, since the Taliban's takeover, these exchanges have halted due to China's cautious approach to the new regime (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022). Despite this, China recognizes the importance of academic engagement for future influence in Afghanistan, as Afghan stakeholders gain more influence post-US withdrawal (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022). Academic collaborations have allowed China to shape narratives positively and expand its soft power through scholarships, capacity-building programs, and think-tank partnerships (R1; R2; R13).

This emphasis on academic soft power aligns with China's long-term approach to international relations and its recognition of academia's influence on policymaking. The addition of academic and think-tank exchanges to China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan reflects its commitment to cultural influence and strategic interests in the region (Zhu & Yang, 2022; Rahman, 2019). This expansion of cultural tools underscores China's nuanced approach to soft power projection and its efforts to shape perceptions in Afghanistan.

Conclusion & Discussion

Conclusion

In summary, China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan employs a multifaceted approach, incorporating cultural, economic, and diplomatic tools to foster bilateral relations and influence perceptions positively.

Culturally, initiatives like Confucius Institutes, language departments, and media collaborations promote Chinese language and culture, facilitating cultural exchange and understanding. While these efforts aim to bridge divides and enhance China's image, challenges persist, particularly regarding cultural sensitivity and navigating Afghanistan's evolving political landscape.

Economically, China utilizes preferential trade policies, major economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, and humanitarian aid to foster economic development and mutual benefit. Despite obstacles, China persists in its commitment to economic engagement, aiming to establish itself as a key partner in Afghanistan's economic recovery and regional stability.

Diplomatically, China emphasizes non-intervention, active engagement in international organizations, and mediation in peace talks to promote peace, stability, and positive bilateral relations. Through capacity-building programs and academic exchanges, China fosters cultural understanding and goodwill, projecting an image of responsibility and constructive engagement.

These efforts underscore China's nuanced approach to soft power projection in Afghanistan. However, challenges remain, emphasizing the need for continued adaptation and engagement to navigate complex dynamics and contribute positively to Afghanistan's development and stability.

China's multifaceted approach to soft power in Afghanistan reflects its strategic interests in the region and its desire to establish itself as a key player in shaping Afghanistan's future trajectory. By leveraging cultural, economic, and diplomatic tools, China aims to not only enhance its influence but also contribute to Afghanistan's development and stability.

The emphasis on cultural exchange and language promotion underscores China's long-term vision of fostering cultural understanding and deepening bilateral relations. However, navigating cultural sensitivities and evolving political landscapes poses significant challenges, requiring China to adapt its approach continuously.

Economically, China's investment in Afghanistan's development and infrastructure reflects its ambition to export its development model and secure economic interests in the region. Despite setbacks, China's persistence signals its commitment to long-term economic ties and regional stability.

Diplomatically, China's non-interventionist stance and active engagement in international forums highlight its commitment to advocating for Afghanistan's interests and promoting peace and stability. By positioning itself as a mediator and peacemaker, China aims to enhance its soft power and solidify its reputation as a responsible global actor.

Discussion

China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan, incorporating cultural, economic, and diplomatic tools, is reflective of the nuanced approach advocated by scholars like Mingjiang Li and Joseph Nye, who emphasize the multifaceted nature of soft power.

Scholars like Mingjiang Li highlight the importance of cultural diplomacy in China's soft power strategy, noting initiatives like Confucius Institutes and cultural exchange programs. These efforts aim to promote Chinese language and culture, fostering mutual understanding and enhancing China's image abroad (Li, 2008). However, cultural sensitivity remains a challenge, as noted by scholars such as Joshua Kurlantzick, who point out that cultural

promotion can sometimes lead to backlash if not handled delicately, particularly in regions with complex political and cultural landscapes like Afghanistan (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Economically, China's use of preferential trade policies, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and humanitarian aid aligns with the views of experts like David Shambaugh, who argue that China's economic engagement is a core component of its soft power strategy (Shambaugh, 2015). By investing in infrastructure and economic development, China not only promotes mutual benefit but also seeks to export its development model. This approach aims to secure economic interests and establish long-term ties, despite facing challenges such as political instability and infrastructure development hurdles in Afghanistan.

Diplomatically, China's emphasis on non-intervention and active participation in international organizations is a key strategy discussed by scholars such as Yizhou Wang. This approach aims to build a reputation as a responsible global actor, committed to peace and stability (Wang, 2011). By engaging in mediation efforts and peace talks, China projects an image of a peacemaker, enhancing its soft power and fostering positive bilateral relations.

Despite these efforts, scholars like Edward Carr highlight the ongoing challenges China faces in its soft power projection, particularly in adapting to the rapidly changing political dynamics and cultural sensitivities in regions like Afghanistan (Carr, 2013). The need for continuous adaptation and strategic engagement is crucial to overcoming these challenges and ensuring that China's soft power efforts contribute positively to Afghanistan's development and stability.

Overall, China's multifaceted approach to soft power in Afghanistan reflects its strategic interests and desire to shape the region's future trajectory. Experts like Niall Ferguson note that by leveraging cultural, economic, and diplomatic tools, China aims not only to enhance its influence but also to contribute to regional stability and development (Ferguson, 2011). The emphasis on cultural exchange and language promotion underscores China's long-term vision of deepening bilateral relations and fostering mutual understanding, while economic investments and diplomatic engagement signal its commitment to being a key player in Afghanistan's reconstruction and peace efforts.

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