

China's Hard Power versus Soft Power in Central Asia: An Analysis of the 'One Belt-One Road Initiative' as a Soft Power Instrument

Gülşen Aydın*, Müge Yüce**

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is a massive project involving more than 60 countries with an approximate cost of \$6 trillion. It is based on the legacy of the Silk Road, which historically connected China to many countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This article aims to examine the OBOR initiative from the perspective of soft power debates in International Relations (IR). This is done in five steps. First, the introduction introduces the subject and provides a brief discussion on its importance. The second section deals with the concept of soft power and the role of soft power in Chinese foreign policy. Then, the study introduces the One Belt One Road Project and its importance for Eurasian connectivity. The fourth section discusses how OBOR acts as an instrument of soft power. The conclusion argues that the OBOR initiative complies with the definition Joseph S. Nye provided for soft power as it is totally devoid of coercion and helps to improve the Chinese image in many senses.

Key-words: One Belt One Road, OBOR Initiative, Connectivity, Soft Power, China.



* Gülşen Aydın, Assistant Professor, Ataturk University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, Erzurum, gulsenaydin@atauni.edu.tr.

** Müge Yüce, Research Assistant, Ataturk University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, Erzurum, mugeyuce@atauni.edu.tr.

Introduction

Historically, the 2,000-year-old Silk Road was a great instrument of connectivity between China and Europe through Central Asia. It proved to be a true mechanism of globalization at that time. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping came up with a proposal to revitalize the ancient Silk Road by forming an economic belt to unfold a transportation channel “from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea.” He later detailed the plans for a “Maritime Silk Road” that would stretch from China to the Indian Ocean (and from there connect to South Asia and Southern Africa) through Southeast Asia.

President Xi’s scheme has come to be called the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, and has attracted significant attention from media, policy makers, and academia. Besides providing Eurasian connectivity, the OBOR project is viewed as a manifestation of China’s rise in the global arena in economic, political, and strategic senses.

This study aims to shed light on the OBOR project from the perspective of discussions on soft power in International Relations (IR). The theoretical framework provided by soft power debates is highly relevant for this study as there is a near consensus in the literature that China relies on soft rather than hard power to boost its standing in the global arena. Moreover, the issue of soft power has grown in importance in the post-Cold War period due to enhanced globalization.

The study is organized as follows. After the introduction, the first section deals with the concept of soft power and the role of soft power in Chinese foreign policy. Then, the study introduces the One Belt One Road Project and its importance for Eurasian connectivity. Before the conclusion, the third section discusses how OBOR acts as an instrument of soft power. The conclusion makes an overall assessment.

Hard Power–Soft Power Debate in Chinese Foreign Policy

It is beyond doubt that power is central to the theory and practice of international relations.¹ However, there is no consensus on the content and meaning of this central term. Still, in one of the most widely cited definitions in Political Science, Robert Dahl defines the term as the ability to get others do what they otherwise

1 Bilgin, P., & Eliş, B. (2008) ‘Hard power, Soft power: Toward a more realistic power analysis’, *Insight Turkey*, 10(2), pp. 5-20.

won't do.² In this context, the capacity to influence others means possessing resources such as population, land, natural resources, economy, armed forces, and political stability.³

While the debate on the content and meaning of power was still ongoing, Joseph S. Nye introduced the term soft power. While hard power is defined as the capacity to get others to do what they otherwise would not by the means threats or rewards, soft power is considered to be the ability to reach goals through attraction rather than use of coercion and threats.⁴ Soft power is built upon the attraction of one's ideas or culture or on the standards and institutions that shape the preferences of others.⁵ It is the ability to influence others via the co-optive activities of setting the agenda, convincing, and obtaining positive attraction in order to achieve desired outcomes.⁶

Soft power is not an alternative to hard power; rather, they complement each other.⁷ Hard power is still critical but, in the words of Melissen, "the wheels of hard power can only function smoothly with the lubricant of soft power."⁸ A country obtains its soft power mainly from three resources: its culture (in places that find it attractive), its political values (when it is proven to abide by them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).⁹

Hard power is still critical but, in the words of Melissen, "the wheels of hard power can only function smoothly with the lubricant of soft power."

Discussions on soft power are relevant for students of Chinese foreign policy because there is a near consensus in academia that Beijing opts for using soft power rather than hard power to reach its foreign policy goals. Even the inventor of the term soft power, Nye, argues that China has been struggling to strengthen its capability to influence other countries without force or coercion.¹⁰

2 Dahl R. (1957), 'The Concept of Power', Behavioral Science, Vol. 2, pp. 201–18.

3 Nye, J. S., & Welch, D. A. (2014) Understanding global conflict & cooperation: intro to theory & history. 9th edn. Essex: Pearson Education.

4 Keohane, R. O., & Nye Jr, J. S. (1998). Power and interdependence in the information age. Foreign Affairs, 77, pp. 81-94.

5 Ibid.

6 Nye, J. S. (2011) The Future of Power. New York: Public Affairs.

7 Bilgin, P., & Eliş, B. (2008) 'Hard power, Soft power: Toward a more realistic power analysis', Insight Turkey, 10(2), pp. 5-20.

8 Ham, P. V. (2005) 'Power, Public Diplomacy and the Pax Americana' in Melissen, J. (ed.) The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 47-66.

9 Nye Jr, J.S. (2015) 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power', Project Syndicate. Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-07?barrier=accesspaylog>. (Accessed: 3 March 2017).

10 Ibid.

China has demonstrated a unique utilization of soft power, and this is highly associated with its rise in the international community. In the 1990s, Chinese military power (hard power) was a hotly debated issue as it was seen as a threat to the balance of power. China resorted to “good neighbor” diplomacy to alleviate the fears of its neighbors and has become successful. In the face of interventionist and unilateral US foreign policies, Chinese soft power-oriented policies have become more appealing. As a result, the rhetoric of the “peaceful rise of China” has been used extensively to create consent for the changing status of China in global politics.¹¹

The conceptual background of Chinese efforts to enhance its soft power can be seen in the concepts of “peaceful development” and “harmonious world”, which underline international cooperation and the peaceful settlement of disputes, predominantly within multilateral principles.

The conceptual background of Chinese efforts to enhance its soft power can be seen in the concepts of “peaceful development” (heping fazhan) 和平发展和 “harmonious world” (hexie shijie) 和谐世界, which underline international cooperation and the peaceful settlement of disputes, predominantly within multilateral principles.¹² The concept of harmony has become the main tool to be utilized while following soft power policies all across the world since the former Chinese president Hu Jintao announced it as an official policy concept in 2004–2005.¹³ As its contemporary policy, the Communist Party of China avoids relying on its ideology to attract foreigners. It can be argued that China enjoyed much stronger opportunities to appeal to people by using its ideology when Mao was in power. Aware of this situation, the Party focuses on promoting Chinese culture and spreading the message that, despite being a global power, Chinese foreign policy is peaceful.¹⁴

Beston Husen Arif groups the instruments of Chinese soft power into five categories: investment, exchange programs, public diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and contributions to multilateral institutions.¹⁵ Several Chinese experts have also underlined the necessity of adding media to these instruments. These analysts rightly draw attention to

11 Suzuki, S. (2010) ‘The myth and reality of China’s soft power’, in Parmar, I. and Cox, M. (eds) *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 199–214.

12 Courmont, B. (2013) ‘What Implications for Chinese Soft Power: Charm Offensive or New Hegemony?’, *Pacific Focus*, 28 (3), pp. 343–364.

13 Nordin, A. H. M. (2016) ‘Futures beyond ‘the West’? Autoimmunity in China’s Harmonious World’, *Review of International Studies*, 42, pp.156–177.

14 The Economist, The subtleties of soft power: China is spending billions to make the world love it. Available at <https://www.economist.com/china/2017/03/23/china-is-spending-billions-to-make-the-world-love-it>. (Accessed: 26 September 2018).

15 Fazil, M. D. (2014) ‘China’s increasing soft power; Implications for the United States’, *The International Journal of Engineering and Science (IJES)*, 3 (6), pp.61–67.

the impressive role of Western media in the world. They argue that the dominance of Western media has brought about an important degree of soft power in the form of “cultural hegemony.”¹⁶

The importance that China attached to the role of media in improving soft power has become obvious during the presidency of Xi Jinping. In 2014, Xi declared that China’s soft power could be enhanced via the state’s role in worldwide media in addition to taking part in the construction of an efficient communication infrastructure. Xinhua, the official news bureau, introduced various editions (International, China, Africa, Europe, and Malaysia) several years ago. Moreover, it can now be reached online in a number of languages, including French, Arabic, Japanese, and Russian. Similarly, the television station CCTV has initiated a francophone version broadcast to several West African countries.¹⁷ The president also hopes that that new media can help his government’s efforts by presenting China as a reliable power with a glorious past and culture. During Xi’s reign, China has launched several new initiatives including “the Asia-Pacific Dream” and “the Chinese Dream.”¹⁸

In 2014, Xi declared that China’s soft power could be enhanced via the state’s role in worldwide media in addition to taking part in the construction of an efficient communication infrastructure.

One Belt One Road Project as a Great Boost to Connectivity

China’s emergence as a global actor has considerably changed not only the strategic orientation of Beijing, but also the political and economic setting of the world. After the President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, the country has formulated a set of diplomatic schemes in line with its new profile and changing balances of power in world politics and the global economy. One should view the OBOR project in this light. The project is a visible sign of China’s growing global desire to be a “norm/system shaper rather than a norm/system taker.”¹⁹

The Silk Road, a far-reaching system of sea and land lines for trade, communication, and cultural exchange that used to connect China to many countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe,

16 Mingjiang, L. (2008) ‘China Debates Soft Power’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2 (2), pp. 287-308.

17 Aude Jehan-Robert (2015) ‘Chinese Soft Power’, Johns Hopkins University, Center for Transatlantic Relations (CTR).

18 Arif B. H. (2017) ‘The Role of Soft Power in China’s Foreign Policy in the 21st Century’, *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 3 (3), pp. 94-101.

19 Zeng, J. (2017) ‘Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55 (5), pp. 1-15.

constitutes the main source of inspiration for OBOR. Having experienced an impressive past, the Silk Road fell out of favor from the 17th century.²⁰ Chinese President Xi Jinping suggested the revitalization of the Silk Road within the framework of OBOR during his visits to several Southeast Asian countries and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economic leaders' summit in October 2013.²¹

OBOR has two components: China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). As seen in Map 1, the "Belt" aims to construct a web of overland road and rail routes, oil and natural gas pipelines, and electricity networks that will provide connectivity between China and Europe (Baltic) via Central Asia and Russia; between China and the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean via Central Asia and West Asia; and between China and the Indian Ocean through South-East Asia and South Asia.²² The Maritime Silk Road aims to connect China's seaports to the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and Europe, besides connecting Chinese coastal ports to the South China Sea and the South Pacific Ocean.²³

Map 1: Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road Initiative



Source: Blanchard, J. F. & Flint, C (2017) 'The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, 22 (2), pp. 223-245.

20 Yu, H. (2016) 'Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26 (105), pp. 1-16.

21 Blanchard, J. F. & Flint, C (2017) 'The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, 22(2), pp. 223-245.

22 Wang, Y. (2016) 'Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China's new grand strategy', *The Pacific Review*, 29 (3), pp.455-463.

23 *Ibid.*

Connectivity projects, including those focusing on infrastructure, as in the case of OBOR, have long been seen both as drivers of widespread political and economic transformation as well as indicators of new political and economic circumstances. As far as the former is concerned, Halford Mackinder's pioneering study in the field of classic geopolitics focused on the transformative impacts of railway routes. MSRI and SREB are contemporary connectivity projects entailing massive infrastructure components.²⁴

Table.1 Cross-Border Projects of the Belt & Road Initiative

High-speed railroads	<p>Eurasian High-speed rail (It starts from London. Traversing Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and Kiev, it arrives at Moscow. At this point, it is divided into two sections, one toward Kazakhstan, and the other toward the far east of Russia and afterward toward the North Eastern Region of China)</p> <p>Central Asian High-speed Railway (It starts from Urumqi, China. Passing through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey, it ends in Germany)</p> <p>Pan-Asian High-speed Railway Network (It runs from Kunming into Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Then, it arrives in Singapore. There is also an additional route, which will pass through Thailand, in this network)</p>
Oil/gas Pipelines	<p>Central Asian natural gas pipeline (traversing China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and so on)</p> <p>China–Eastern Russia natural gas pipeline</p>
Telecom and power links	China–Myanmar, China–Tajikistan, China–Pakistan cross-border communication arteries, China–Russia electricity and communication arteries

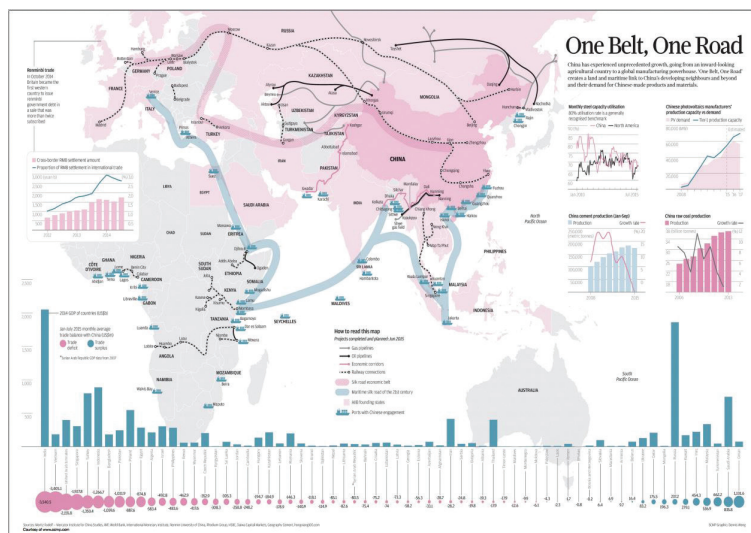
Source: Huang, Y (2016) 'Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, framework and assessment', *China Economic Review*, 40, pp.314–321.

More than 60 countries are covered in the OBOR initiative, reaching some 70 percent of the world's population at a likely cost of approximately \$6 trillion. China expresses the rationale of the OBOR Project largely from an economic viewpoint. In this sense, OBOR is portrayed as a regional integration scheme

²⁴ Blanchard, J. F. & Flint, C (2017) 'The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, 22(2), pp. 223-245.

to modernize trade roads in and out of China and to maximize the effectiveness of the channels for Chinese exports, in addition to stimulating the development of less developed Southeast and Central Asian partner countries. The ultimate objective is to improve and stabilize China's economic development worldwide.²⁵

Map.2 Network of Connectivity in the One Belt One Road Project



Source: South China Morning Post, 'One Belt One Road', <https://www.scmp.com/sites/default/files/2015/11/03/obor.png>.

Many China observers and analysts argue that the OBOR strategy is China's version of the Marshall Plan, whereby United States (US) loans and investment helped to rebuild Europe after World War II. In fact, China's ambition far exceeds that of the Marshall Plan. Whilst the Marshall Plan was restricted in scope to the region of Europe, China's new Silk Road strategy is globally-oriented: from a geographical perspective it stretches across 60 countries along envisioned routes extending through Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and even Africa, and could potentially generate an even greater international impact.²⁶

25 Cau, E. (2018) 'Geopolitical Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative: The Backbone for a New World Order?', *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, 4 (1), pp. 39-105.

26 Yu, H. (2016) 'Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26 (105), pp. 1-16.

One Belt One Road as an Invaluable Instrument of Soft Power

As discussed in the introduction, OBOR is based on the legacy of the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road was invaluable in terms of its contributions to human civilization. It relied on notions such as peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit, and universal gain. It is no coincidence that President Xi regularly stresses the importance of the legacy of the Silk Road for OBOR as it is based on all of the above principles.²⁷ As far as peace and cooperation are concerned, the countries covered in OBOR are supposed to recognize sovereign rights, territorial integrity, and the most important interests of each other. Instead of confrontation and alliances, dialogue and partnership are favored. Development is regarded as the key to overcoming all hurdles and intensified cooperation is required for development. Openness is another theme emphasized by Xi. For him, openness brings progress. For that reason, Xi stresses that his country aims to build an open platform for cooperation by facilitating investment and trade. At the end of the day, this will bring about an inclusive, balanced, win-win globalization.²⁸ Such an initiative has become even more important for the global system at a time when global economic order and growth are challenged by increasing protectionism.²⁹

The legacy of the Silk Road is also critical for the purposes of this study, as all these principles imply soft power. All of the principles are based on persuasion and attraction rather than coercion and threats. By emphasizing these principles, China sets the agenda and tries to convince partner countries to act together to reach the goals defined by Beijing in a way devoid of coercion, as clearly defined by the soft power framework of Nye.

China plans to devote approximately \$1 trillion to huge new road and rail infrastructure and energy projects and other required infrastructure across Eurasia, Europe, and even Africa. This amount of spending makes the project the biggest spending

...Xi stresses that his country aims to build an open platform for cooperation by facilitating investment and trade. At the end of the day, this will bring about an inclusive, balanced, win-win globalization.

27 Wang, H., Zhekenov, D., & Kurmangali, M. (2018). 'Chinese Global Project: One Belt and One Road'. *International Relations and International Law Journal*, 81 (1), pp. 28-35.

28 *Ibid.*

29 China Daily (2018) 'Belt and Road Initiative more significant amid threat in global economy by rising protectionism: experts'. Available at <http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/21/WS-5ba467c6a310c4cc775e78a2.html>. (Accessed: 27 September 2018).

project in the world. The establishment of infrastructure, along with financial assistance and the creation of jobs, can boost development and, in turn, improve China's image in the places covered by the project. Since China is engaging in such a large expenditure at a time when the US is putting emphasis on the "America First" motto, this could result in growth in Beijing's soft power at the expense of Washington.³⁰

The primary instrument for financing OBOR is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB intends to assist and speed up infrastructure development in the partner countries

...the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) appears as a good starting point to set the agenda and strengthen the appeal of the Chinese model of development.

by offering loans and know-how assistance. In fact, it will serve as the main driving force of OBOR. The AIIB and OBOR instruments have elevated the position of China in the global political and economic system. By using these instruments, China aims to forge new ties and strengthen existing ones. Twenty-one Asian countries joined the bank as founding members in 2014 and, as of August 2016, the bank had 48 members. The bank opened in

January 2016 (AIIB, 2016).³¹ Institutions are critical for building soft power, as stressed by Nye. Viewed from this perspective, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) appears as a good starting point to set the agenda and strengthen the appeal of the Chinese model of development. In time, Beijing may come up with new plans to establish new institutions to function within the framework of OBOR.

The New Silk Road schemes also create opportunities for Chinese firms and capital to invest in other countries by utilizing their country's superiority in infrastructure development, financial power, and production capacity. The OBOR initiatives and the AIIB may transform the economic and political setting of Asia, the most dynamic and economically energetic region of the 21st century.³²

Last but not least, as stated above, OBOR is exporting the Chinese model of state-led development. In fact, this signifies a significant change in Chinese foreign policy. Chinese companies have been, of course, eager to invest in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa

30 Kurlantzick J. (2017) 'China's Soft Power Offensive, One Belt One Road, and the Limitations of Beijing's Soft Power'. Asia Unbound, 16 May. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-soft-power-offensive-one-belt-one-road-and-limitations-beijings-soft-power>. (Accessed: 25 September 2018).

31 Toops, S. (2016), 'Reflections on China's Belt and Road Initiative', Area Development and Policy, 1(3), pp. 352-360.

32 Yu, H. (2016) 'Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank', Journal of Contemporary China, 26 (105), pp. 1-16.

in various sectors. However, OBOR is different in the sense that it aims to develop industrial capacity and consumer demand abroad. Instead of extracting raw materials, China is trying to move its heavy industry to less developed countries in an attempt to make them wealthier and increase demand for Chinese products.³³ Based on vast state-led investments in infrastructure (roads, ports, electricity, railways, and airports), the Chinese development model is quite different from that of the West. By contrast, the Western development strategy is lukewarm at best towards heavy state involvement due to concerns about corruption. Moreover, the West's strategy centers upon public health, improving women's position in society, supporting civil society, and anti-corruption steps. Viewed in this light, the Chinese development model is a rival to the Western one and Beijing is exporting it to the countries participating in the OBOR project in the form of large investments in infrastructure.³⁴ China has engaged in soft power-centered economic projects before, but OBOR is different in the sense that Beijing is now considerably more powerful than previously as it enjoys unprecedented foreign exchange reserves. As a result, it possesses sufficient economic and financial capacity to carry out various OBOR-related tasks in more than 60 partner countries.³⁵ Material capabilities are not considered soft power instruments in Nye's conceptualization. However, the current, improved Chinese economic capacity in the form of infrastructural competence and credit capacity serves to increase the attraction of China to a great extent. This is highly in line with Nye's view on the relation between hard power and soft power. As discussed above, he argues that hard power and soft power complement each other. In the case of OBOR, it can be seen that Chinese hard power in terms of material capacities contributes to its power to carry out OBOR, which is expected to improve its soft power significantly. Increased attractiveness of Beijing thanks to the OBOR is expected to provide the country with opportunities to increase overseas investments in addition to finding new markets to which to export its products. These two factors will be instrumental in the further strengthening of the material capacity, the hard power, of China.

Instead of extracting raw materials, China is trying to move its heavy industry to less developed countries in an attempt to make them wealthier and increase demand for Chinese products.

33 Fukuyama, F. (2016) 'One belt, one road: exporting the Chinese model to Eurasia', The Australian. Available at <https://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/news/one-belt-one-road-exporting-chinese-model-eurasia> (Accessed 28 September 2018).

34 *Ibid.*

35 Yağcı, M. (2018). Rethinking Soft Power in Light of China's Belt and Road Initiative. International Relations/Uluslararası İlişkiler, 15 (57), pp. 67-78.

Cultural exchange and Chinese language programs constitute another dimension of the soft power used by China across the OBOR countries. As of 2017, 525 Confucius Institutes and 1,113 Confucius Classrooms had been founded in 146 countries (regions), with 118 Confucius Institutes in 33 Asian countries and 101 Confucius Classrooms in 21 Asian countries.³⁶ Furthermore, there are currently 245 testing centers in countries along the “Belt and Road.” In addition to the language programs, Beijing is using 11 pilot Confucius Institutes around the world to organize 23 professional cultural projects such as film festivals, film shows, concerts, drama performance, art exhibitions, and publications to assess the level of the cultural activities of Confucius Institutes. As a result of these schemes, more than 7,500 cultural exchange activities have been carried out, with the participation of over three million people. Moreover, the number of people participating in these activities has doubled compared with the figures for the previous year.³⁷

Before concluding this section, it is necessary to emphasize that two features of OBOR distinguish it from other Chinese soft power instruments. First, its immense scope, in terms of both the amount of financial resources planned to spend to realize the project and its geographical comprehensiveness, makes it different. Second, it has perfect timing, which makes it both effective and distinct. As an element of China’s soft power, its model of development has become more attractive in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. The 2008 Crisis was interpreted as a failure of the Neo-Liberal development agenda pursued and imposed by the industrialized states of the West and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. As a result, a Beijing Consensus, which is mainly based on state-led infrastructure building and economic development alongside state-controlled economic and political liberalism, has shown greater appeal to less-developed countries.³⁸ China’s alternative appears quite favorable to these less-developed countries as Beijing offers unconditional loans, whereas Washington Consensus institutions are interested in structural reforms. Moreover, China does not criticize or intend to

36 Hanban (2017). Confucius Institute, Annual Development Report. Available at: <http://www.hanban.org/report/2017.pdf>. (Accessed: 24 October 2018).

37 Hanban (2017). Available at: http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm. (Accessed: 24 October 2018).

38 Shen, S., & Chan, W. (2018) ‘A Comparative Study of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Marshall Plan’. Palgrave Communications, 4(1), pp. 32-41.

interfere with the authoritarian political systems of the countries involved in the project. This is another advantage of the Beijing Consensus.³⁹ What is striking for the aims of this study is the fact that, in providing credit and investment, Beijing does not lay down conditions. This means that China does not resort to coercion and threats. This makes Beijing's strategies in this field true soft power instruments.

Conclusion

This study has examined the One Belt One Road initiative through the perspective of debates on soft power in IR. It has discussed how soft power is defined as the ability to reach goals through attraction and persuasion. A country enjoying soft power has the ability to set the agenda and coordinate others to attain the goals defined by itself without the use, or threat, of force.

Defined in this sense, China's OBOR project fully meets the criteria specified by Nye. Within the framework of OBOR, China pledges to provide an important amount of unconditional credit and investment. This means that China does not resort to coercion and threats to realize OBOR. Moreover, based on the legacy of the Silk Road, the OBOR initiative relies on peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, instead of confrontation and protectionism. These principles are based on persuasion and attraction rather than coercion and threats. All these make OBOR a genuine soft power instrument.

OBOR is different from other Chinese soft power instruments due to its geographical comprehensiveness and the high amount of financial resources devoted to the project. Another distinguishing feature of the project is its perfect timing. China is exporting its state-led development model, which is different from the Neo-Liberal development model of the West, through OBOR. China's model has attracted many less-developed countries especially after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, which is widely regarded as an indicator of the failure of the Neo-Liberal development model. OBOR will serve to improve the image of China abroad significantly once it delivers development and the creation of new jobs.

Within the framework of OBOR, China pledges to provide an important amount of unconditional credit and investment. This means that China does not resort to coercion and threats to realize OBOR.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Therefore, it can be argued that OBOR has, so far, performed well as a soft power instrument and it can prove to be more successful once the project is fully realized and delivers its goals. However, a country cannot only rely on its soft power to become a hegemon in the international system. Hard power, not only in the form of economic but also military capabilities, is also required to achieve hegemony. Whether China will resort to military power and challenge the current hegemon, the United States, is a question that the students of International Relations will focus on increasingly in the days ahead.