



China's Public Diplomacy Strategy towards the BRI Countries

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Abstract

In 2013, China introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to enhance economic cooperation, connectivity, and development among participating nations. While extensive research has examined the economic and political dimensions of the BRI, its public diplomacy efforts have received comparatively less attention. This article explores the strategic objectives, functions, and challenges of China's public diplomacy within the BRI framework, emphasizing its influence on international relations, mutual understanding, and cultural exchange. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study analyzes policy documents, official statements, and cultural initiatives to understand how China uses public diplomacy to shape its international image and support its economic and cultural goals in collaboration with BRI nations. The findings demonstrate that public diplomacy is an essential tool for China to expand its soft power. Initiatives within the scope of BRI such as cultural outreach programs, educational exchanges, and infrastructure collaborations aim to strengthen people-to-people connections and promote trust with partner countries. However, these efforts face significant challenges, including geopolitical rivalries, concerns over economic feasibility, and insufficient transparency in engaging local communities. Such issues risk undermining China's public diplomacy effectiveness and its ability to sustain long-term partnerships under the BRI framework. To address these challenges, the article proposes actionable recommendations. These include developing a cohesive and consistent public diplomacy narrative, improving public relations strategies, and expanding efforts to facilitate cultural and interpersonal connections. By addressing these weaknesses, China can enhance the BRI's potential for long-term success, fostering a global environment of sustainable development, mutual cooperation, and greater international understanding. Ultimately, effective public diplomacy can serve as a cornerstone for achieving the BRI's ambitious goals.

Anahtar Kelimeler: China, BRI, Public Diplomacy, Belt and Road, Soft Power

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Çin'in BRI Ülkelerine Yönelik Kamu Diplomasisi Stratejisi

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Öz

Çin 2013 yılında, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ni (BRI) katılımcı ülkeler arasında ekonomik iş birliği ve kalkınmayı teşvik etmek amacıyla başlattı. Şimdiye kadar, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'nin ekonomik ve siyasi boyutları üzerine geniş çapta araştırmalar yapılmış olsa da kamu diplomasisi boyutuna görece daha az dikkat çekilmiştir. Bu makale, BRI çerçevesinde Çin'in kamu diplomasisinin stratejik hedeflerini, işlevlerini ve karşılaştığı zorlukları inceleyerek, bunun uluslararası ilişkiler ve kültürel etkileşim üzerindeki etkilerini vurgulamaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışma nitel bir yaklaşım benimseyerek, politika belgelerini, resmî açıklamaları ve kültürel girişimleri analiz etmiş; Çin'in kamu diplomasisini uluslararası imajını şekillendirmede ve BRI ülkeleriyle ekonomik ve kültürel politikalarını desteklemede nasıl kullandığını incelemiştir. Bulgular, kamu diplomasisinin Çin'in yumuşak gücünü genişletmek için baş vurduğu temel araçlardan biri olduğunu göstermektedir. BRI kapsamında düzenlenen kültürel etkileşim programları, eğitim ve altyapı iş birlikleri gibi girişimler, insanlar arası bağları güçlendirmeyi ve BRI kapsamındaki ülkelerle güven inşa etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ancak bu çabalar, jeopolitik rekabetler, ekonomik sürdürülebilirlik endişeleri ve yerel toplulukların katılımında yetersiz şeffaflık gibi önemli zorluklarla karşı karşıyadır. Bu sorunlar, Çin'in kamu diplomasisinin etkinliğini ve BRI çerçevesinde uzun vadeli ortaklıkları sürdürme yeteneğini tehlikeye atma riski taşımaktadır. Makale, bu zorlukları ele almak için uygulanabilir öneriler sunmaktadır. Öneriler arasında tutarlı bir kamu diplomasisi söyleminin geliştirilmesi, halkla ilişkiler stratejilerinin iyileştirilmesi ve kültürel ve insanlar arası bağları kolaylaştırmaya yönelik çabaların genişletilmesi yer almaktadır. Bu eksikliklerin giderilmesiyle, Çin, BRI'nin uzun vadeli başarısını artırabilir, sürdürülebilir kalkınmayı teşvik edebilir ve küresel ölçekte karşılıklı iş birliği ve anlayışı güçlendirebilir. Etkili kamu diplomasisi, BRI'nin iddialı hedeflerine ulaşmasında temel bir yapı taşı olabilir.

Keywords: Çin, BRI, Kamu Diplomasisi, Kuşak ve Yol, Yumuşak Güç

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I.Introduction

China's rise in the global arena has introduced complex and multifaceted challenges to its foreign policy, necessitating a strategic shift towards promoting more open, fair, and stable regional cooperation. Scholars have long debated how this rise reshapes international dynamics, with Yin Zhang (2018, p.72) emphasizing that the announcement of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" in 2013 marked a foundational shift in China's approach to international engagement. Through this initiative, China aims to create a structured framework for regional connectivity, offering partner countries opportunities to bolster infrastructure and integrate into a shared economic and developmental network. According to Hong Yu (2024, p.7), the BRI's core agenda lies in strengthening the infrastructure foundations of participating countries, which in turn supports broader regional integration and economic resilience. By 2024, the BRI had evolved into a comprehensive model of cooperation encompassing industrial collaboration, trade exchanges, and economic partnerships, positioned as mutually beneficial pathways for both China and its partners. Joel Wuthnow (2017, p.7) underscores that the BRI presents substantial potential gains for partner nations, including economic opportunities, infrastructure development, poverty alleviation, and improved international standing.

However, the initiative is not solely driven by economic objectives. Recognizing the necessity of ideological and cultural alignment, China has concurrently invested in extensive public diplomacy efforts to enhance global understanding and acceptance of the BRI. Yin Zhang and other scholars argue that these efforts are intended not only to clarify the initiative's objectives but also to mitigate potential geopolitical skepticism among partner nations. This aspect of the BRI aligns with Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," as China seeks to enhance its international image and forge lasting partnerships beyond purely economic transactions. China's investment in public diplomacy highlights the initiative's role as a cornerstone of its broader foreign policy strategy. As Wuthnow (2017, p.8) notes, China's commitment of billions of dollars into this initiative reflects not only a bid for economic influence but also an attempt to position itself as a central player in regional stability and development. By creating a narrative that intertwines economic growth with mutual respect and cultural exchange, China positions the BRI as both a development tool and a diplomatic bridge.

In this context, this paper seeks to examine how China's strategic use of public diplomacy and infrastructural development through the BRI aligns with its foreign policy objectives, ultimately framing the initiative as a mechanism for long-term influence and cooperative relations. By analyzing the BRI's structural components and diplomatic outreach, the study aims to shed light on the broader implications of China's approach to multilateral regional cooperation and its efforts to reshape international power dynamics. The central research question guiding this study is to what extent can China's public diplomacy under the BRI build long-term trust and legitimacy in partner countries, despite limitations such as limited civil society engagement, weak transparency, and tensions with democratic norms? The study uses a qualitative document analysis to examine China's public diplomacy strategy within the BRI. The methodology combines three complementary techniques: targeted literature review, qualitative content analysis, and comparative case analysis. Sources were chosen based on two main criteria: their direct relevance to China's public diplomacy practices and their ability to reflect the strategic, narrative, and practical aspects of the BRI. The analysis draws on academic studies by

both Chinese and international scholars which offer theoretical perspectives and critical interpretations of China's evolving diplomatic efforts. In addition, the study includes country-specific reports and third-party evaluations, including think tank publications, journal articles, and international media coverage from BRI countries such as Kenya, Kazakhstan, Greece, and Serbia. These materials were selected to provide local viewpoints, reveal public reactions, and identify differences between official narratives and on-the-ground realities. Rather than concentrating on a single case, the study adopts a multi-country approach to reflect variation in how China's public diplomacy is received. The chosen examples—Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Greece, Kenya, and Serbia—represent different regional contexts and were selected based on their strategic importance within the BRI and the availability of reliable data on China's activities in each country.

The article begins by introducing the main theoretical concepts and approaches related to public diplomacy and soft power. It then examines China's practices in selected BRI countries to explore how public diplomacy is implemented on the ground. Next, the strategic objectives behind these efforts are discussed, followed by an analysis of the key challenges they face. The final section offers a comparative evaluation and presents several policy recommendations.

II. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI is a significant national development strategy proposed by China, also referred to as the "Belt and Road Initiative" or "Belt and Road Construction". According to China, project's primary purpose is to stimulate economic cooperation, connectivity, and mutual development between countries along its route and to propel regional economic integration (Tian and Gao, 2017, p.58). This idea is inspired by the ancient Silk Road, aiming to re-establish and promote exchanges and collaborations between countries along the route. The initiative has expanded the original concept, now including both the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". China's official narrative explain the goal of the initiative is to drive economic integration and cooperative development between participating countries through bolstering infrastructure construction, economic and trade cooperation, and cultural exchanges (Jiang, 2022, p.2-3). It aspires to achieve shared prosperity and sustainable growth, promoting mutual benefits among nations. It primarily involves infrastructure construction, economic and trade cooperation, financial collaboration, and cultural exchanges. By developing transnational highways, railways, ports, energy, and communication networks, it reinforces connectivity; promotes economic development through trade and investment; provides financial support through financial cooperation; and deepens mutual understanding and people-to-people ties through exchanges in education, culture, and technology. The initiative encompasses a wide range of countries, spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and Latin America (Shahriar, 2022, p.3-5). So, China claims that it offers cooperation opportunities and development potential for participating nations, spurring regional economic growth.

Public Diplomacy

Public Diplomacy refers to diplomatic activities in which a country or government engages directly with the international public through communication, interaction, and

collaboration to promote mutual understanding, friendship, and cooperation (Jing, 2017, p.15). It emphasizes shaping the national image, promoting values, and enhancing people-to-people relations internationally through cultural exchanges, educational cooperation, and media outreach. The objectives of public diplomacy include upholding international understanding, establishing amicable relationships, promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation, securing collaborative partners, and molding or improving a country's image (Kelechi, 2024, p.43; Simonin, 2008, p.24). It is an indispensable part of modern diplomacy, aiding in fostering global peace, stability, and prosperity by directly communicating and interacting with the international public.

China aims to emphasize multi-level, multi-domain cooperation with BRI countries, encompassing intergovernmental cooperation, business collaborations, and people-to-people exchanges through the public diplomacy methods (Burcu and Boni, 2023, p.81-83). Through such multifaceted collaborations, China seeks to establish a close bond of mutual trust with BRI countries. Simultaneously, by promoting tourism, cultural exchanges, and educational collaborations, China desires to enhance mutual understanding and friendship among people, thereby deepening their trust and willingness to cooperate with one another.

Soft Power Theory

Soft Power Theory is a concept in international relations introduced by American political scientist Joseph Nye in the 1990s. Unlike hard power, which involves military force and economic strength, soft power is about a country's ability to attract support and cooperation through its appeal and values. According to this theory, a nation's soft power hinges on factors like its culture, political values, and diplomatic tactics. Specifically, these elements include cultural appeal, political systems, values, and diplomatic methods (Nye, 2008, p.95). The Soft Power Theory suggests that by effectively using soft power, a country can shape its international image and persuade other nations to accept its values and policy goals. Compared to hard power, soft power emphasizes influence generated through non-coercive means, aiming to realize a nation's long-term interests (Nye, 2002, p.8-12)

China, as the initiator of the Belt and Road Initiative, has established profound ties of interest with countries along the route through economic collaboration. Additionally, China has provided support in the forms of investments, loans, technology, and market access to spur the economic growth of these countries and share in their developmental achievements. China also carries out assistance projects that support infrastructure development, economic growth, and the well-being of the populace in these countries. This helps to earn the support and favor of local citizens, fostering an image of a responsible major power. Through public diplomacy tactics and soft power tools, such as high-level visits, cultural exchange events, and media tools, China aims to bolster communication and collaboration with countries along the route (Li, 2019, p.145).

III. The Role and Significance of Public Diplomacy for China's BRI

Shaping International Image and Reputation

Public diplomacy strategy can assist China in sculpting a positive international image and reputation within the framework of the BRI. By conducting public diplomacy activities, including summits, high-level visits, and cultural exchanges, China can

showcase its image as a responsible major power to the world. This not only enhances trust and recognition from countries along the route but also from the broader international community. By engaging in these activities, China conveys its commitment to peaceful cooperation, sustainable development, and mutual growth (d'Hooghe, 2007, p.18). It can dispel misconceptions and build bridges of understanding, ensuring that its intentions and contributions in the initiative are accurately perceived and appreciated (Hartig, 2016, p.6). Furthermore, the transparent and proactive approach in public diplomacy enhances an environment of open dialogue, which can preemptively address concerns, reduce misunderstandings, and ultimately strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties with partner countries. In a world where perception often drives political and economic decisions, establishing and maintaining a positive reputation becomes paramount. For China, the "Belt and Road Initiative" is not merely an economic project but also a manifestation of its approach to international relations (Wang, 2021, p.1-4). Through effective public diplomacy, China ensures that its international image aligns with its aspirations and objectives in the initiative.

A relevant example is Indonesia, where China has combined large-scale infrastructure investment—most notably the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway—with intensive public diplomacy efforts. Through frequent leadership visits, Mandarin language programs, Confucius Institutes, and bilateral cultural festivals, China has positioned itself not only as a development partner but also as a nation engaged in mutual respect and cultural understanding. These activities have contributed to softening skepticism in the Indonesian public and promoted a more favorable view of Chinese involvement in the region. (Ma, 2024, p.42)

Promoting Political Trust and Collaboration

Public diplomacy strategy plays a crucial role in promoting political trust and collaboration between China and the countries along the "Belt and Road" route. Through diplomatic dialogues and the establishment and development of multilateral cooperation mechanisms, China wants to enhance intergovernmental exchanges and collaborations. This deepens mutual understanding, consensus, and trust, creating a favorable political climate for the successful implementation of the BRI. A notable example of this is Kazakhstan, where the BRI was first announced by President Xi Jinping during a state visit in 2013. Since then, China and Kazakhstan have engaged in high-level strategic dialogues, established bilateral cooperation mechanisms such as the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee, and initiated regular intergovernmental consultations. These efforts have not only facilitated major infrastructure projects like oil pipelines and transportation corridors but also fostered a high level of political trust between the two governments. Public diplomacy efforts—such as Chinese media content in Kazakh, youth exchange programs, and joint think tank forums—have complemented official diplomacy, creating a politically favorable and cooperative atmosphere for long-term bilateral engagement. (Slamgazhy, Liu, Zhappassov, & Tassilova, 2024, p.374)

Expanding Economic Cooperation and Investment Opportunities

Public diplomacy is instrumental in bolstering economic cooperation and investment within the "Belt and Road Initiative." High-level visits, business negotiations, and investment cooperation forums enable China to attract a wider range of international investments and economic collaboration opportunities. It facilitates seamless trade and

investment convenience between nations along the route, spurring economic growth and shared prosperity. In Greece, China's active engagement through public diplomacy has been closely tied to major economic investments, particularly in the case of the Piraeus Port. Following numerous official visits and the organization of joint economic forums, Chinese state-owned enterprise COSCO acquired a majority stake in the port. This investment was accompanied by narratives of mutual benefit and partnership, circulated through both official discourse and local media cooperation. (Zacharias, 2021, p.85) The initiative not only boosted port operations but also positioned Greece as a critical gateway for Chinese goods entering Europe, thereby reinforcing the economic dimension of the BRI through sustained public diplomacy efforts.

Enhancing Cultural Exchanges and People-to-People Diplomacy

The strategy of public diplomacy aids in strengthening cultural exchanges and grassroots diplomacy between countries aligned with the BRI. Exchanges and collaborations in education, culture, technology, and tourism sectors enhance understanding and friendships amongst the people, solidifying the social foundation of the initiative. It promotes closer ties amongst the populace and enhances mutual appreciation of cultures. In Kenya, for example, China has actively promoted cultural diplomacy alongside infrastructure investments by expanding Confucius Institutes, offering scholarships for Kenyan students to study in Chinese universities, and organizing cultural festivals and media exchange programs. These initiatives have increased Mandarin language learning and Chinese cultural awareness among Kenyan youth. Additionally, Chinese cultural centers in Nairobi serve as platforms for local engagement through art exhibitions, music performances, and joint heritage projects. These people-to-people exchanges contribute significantly to promoting goodwill and intercultural dialogue, strengthening the BRI's social legitimacy at the grassroots level. (Wu, 2024, p.15-16)

Disseminating Shared Values and Ideals

The public diplomacy strategy is also pivotal in communicating the shared values and ideals promoted by the "Belt and Road Initiative," such as openness, inclusivity, collaboration, and mutual benefit. Through promotional reporting and international exchange activities, China wants to assist countries along the route better comprehend and identify with the principles and goals of the initiative, thus driving collective participation and collaboration. One illustrative example is Serbia, where China has employed a robust public diplomacy approach to frame the BRI as a platform for inclusive development and mutual respect. Chinese media outlets have collaborated with Serbian news agencies to disseminate stories highlighting the "win-win" nature of cooperation, while official state visits have been accompanied by cultural exhibitions and joint press conferences that emphasize shared values. Educational partnerships and think-tank dialogues between Chinese and Serbian institutions have further contributed to shaping a narrative of common purpose. (Trailović, 2024, p.290-296.) These activities have helped foster local support for Chinese-funded projects and have cultivated a perception of China as a trustworthy and value-driven partner in Serbia's development trajectory.

To further clarify the alignment between tools and strategic functions in China's public diplomacy, Table 1 provides a structured overview of the main instruments used within the BRI framework, their primary functions, target audiences, and contextual examples.

Table 1. Strategic Functions of China's Public Diplomacy Tools

Public Diplomacy Tool	Primary Function	Target Audience	Intended Outcome	Example Country
Confucius Institutes	Cultural outreach, language promotion	Students, educators	Enhance cultural affinity and soft power	Kenya, Serbia
Scholarship programs	Educational cooperation	University students, young elites	Build long-term elite alignment	Indonesia, Kazakhstan
Media cooperation	Strategic narrative shaping	General public, opinion leaders	Increase legitimacy and control discourse	Greece, Serbia
High-level bilateral visits	Political signaling and elite engagement	Government, policymakers	Promote diplomatic trust and bilateral alignment	Kazakhstan, Indonesia
Infrastructure-linked branding (e.g. COSCO, HSR)	Link hard power to soft image	Public, business sector	Frame investment as mutual development	Greece, Indonesia
Cultural festivals & exhibitions	People-to-people connectivity	Local communities, families	Increase familiarity and reduce suspicion	Kenya, Serbia

IV. The Essence and Objectives of China's Public Diplomacy Strategy for the BRI Countries

The concept of the Silk Road was first introduced in 1877 by the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. This designation vividly represented the foreign trade strategy that China commenced in 114 BCE (Chin, 2013, p.196). As the Silk Road flourished, trade and cultural exchanges between the East and West have experienced unprecedented prosperity and so the Silk Road has become a prominent symbol of China's foreign trade. China's public diplomacy strategy in the construction of the Belt and Road aims to serve as a new cultural catalyst, dedicated to disseminating the culture of the Silk Road to countries along its path (Xiaoyu, 2021, p.49). One of the primary objectives of China's public diplomacy strategy is to convey the friendship will be formed by the Silk Road. Through diplomatic interactions, people-to-people exchanges, and personal connections, China's strategy aims to enhance mutual understanding and friendship among the peoples of different nations, improve trust and closeness between the countries along the route (Hu, 2019, p.6), and provide a solid humanistic foundation for deeper cooperation

China's public diplomacy strategy also aims to promote the spirit of the Silk Road (Chunyan, 2024, p.392). This spirit emphasizes mutual benefit, openness, inclusiveness, civilizational exchange, and shared development. It advocates for equality, respect, and understanding between different cultures and ethnicities (Hu, 2019, p.3). By strengthening exchanges and cooperation among countries along the BRI, the initiative targets for mutual benefits in political, economic, and cultural fields.

Through proactive publicity and image-building efforts, China enhances its reputation among the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to increase their recognition and understanding of China. Within the framework of the BRI, China strengthens intergovernmental exchanges and cooperation, fostering political mutual trust among the countries along the route, thus laying a solid foundation for subsequent cooperation (Chen and Xi, 2017, p.44). Additionally, promoting bilateral and multilateral economic and trade cooperation, increasing trade investments and capacity cooperation, and promoting mutual economic benefits and win-win situations among the countries involved in the BRI are among the short-term objectives.

China's government has pursued actions such as encouraging exchanges and cooperation in education, culture, tourism, and other domains. These efforts aim to facilitate mutual understanding and friendship among the populations of all countries, thereby bolstering the social underpinnings for the Belt and Road initiative (Li and Yu, 2020, p.75). Additionally, the government has prioritized initiatives to improve infrastructure interconnectivity and enhance logistics and transportation conditions along the Belt and Road countries. These measures are intended to stimulate regional integrated development. Through the BRI, China seeks to facilitate the utilization of complementary resource advantages, promote technology transfer, and create increased employment opportunities, thus enhancing the quality of life and well-being of the people in the countries along the route.

V. Challenges Faced by the "Belt and Road" Public Diplomacy Strategy

An analysis of China's current public diplomacy efforts towards countries along the Belt and Road indicates that the progress of the Belt and Road construction is positive, optimal, and consistent with the initiative's principles and strategic objectives. However, in a rapidly changing international environment, with the combined effects of various factors, unforeseen issues can arise at any moment. This brings new challenges to the formulation and implementation of the "Belt and Road" public diplomacy strategy. An overview of China's public diplomacy along the Belt and Road highlights the key challenges currently faced in its strategy, which include the following:

Misunderstandings and Geopolitical Tensions

Due to cultural differences, historical issues, or geopolitical considerations, certain countries or their populations might have misconceptions or misunderstandings about China's intentions and objectives behind the BRI. In India, despite geographic proximity and shared regional interests, skepticism toward the BRI has been significant. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through the disputed Kashmir region, has been viewed by Indian policymakers as a violation of territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, historical tensions, such as past border conflicts and strategic rivalry in South Asia, have fueled public suspicion regarding China's geopolitical motives. As a result, Indian public discourse has often framed the BRI as a tool for expanding Chinese influence rather than as a platform for mutual development. (Jacob, 2017, p.80.) These perceptions illustrate the challenges China faces in conveying its intentions clearly and building trust in regions where historical and strategic concerns dominate the narrative.

Since the reform and opening-up, China, often referred to as the "Awakened Dragon", has caught the world's attention with its rapid economic growth and rise in comprehensive national strength rankings. As a result, China has been perceived by some

Western powers as a potential adversary, leading them to employ various measures to counteract its growth (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023, p.6). Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative primarily advocated by China, major powers both inside and outside the region not only hold differing views on the initiative but also use means such as propaganda, economic sanctions, and political pressure to interfere with and influence China's public diplomacy. This restricts the effectiveness of China's voice and image on the international stage. For instance, in 2015, the US collaborated with its allies to establish the "TPP-Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement", from which China was excluded. In 2021, EU announced "Global Gateway" as an alternative to China's BRI (Kuo, 2021). During the G20 summit in New Delhi in 2023, world leaders unveiled plans for a India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a counter to the Chinese BRI (Khan, 2023). The purpose of all these initiatives were to counterbalance the "Belt and Road" initiative. Such actions undoubtedly affect, and may even weaken, China's credibility and discourse power in public diplomacy, subsequently impacting the construction of the "Belt and Road".

Economic Viability and Debt Concerns

There are concerns among some nations regarding the economic viability of the projects under the "Belt and Road" initiative. The fear of falling into a "debt trap" and the subsequent potential loss of sovereignty over critical infrastructure has also been a concern for some countries (Brautigam, 2020, p.4). In Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Port project has become one of the most cited examples of these concerns. After struggling to repay the Chinese loans used for the construction of the port, the Sri Lankan government agreed to lease the port to a Chinese state-owned company for 99 years. This development sparked both domestic and international criticism, with opponents arguing that it symbolized the risks of excessive dependence on Chinese financing (Carrai, 2021). While Beijing denied any strategic motives, the situation intensified global debates around the "debt trap diplomacy" narrative and raised questions about the long-term sustainability and transparency of BRI-funded infrastructure projects.

Governance, Social, and Security Challenges

Questions about transparency, project standards, labor practices, and environmental concerns might have been raised, with calls for more open and transparent decision-making processes (Russel and Berger, 2019, p.9). In Ethiopia, the construction of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway with Chinese financing and contractors brought significant infrastructure improvements but also raised several concerns. Critics pointed to the limited involvement of local firms in the planning and construction phases, a lack of transparency in contractual agreements, and the predominance of Chinese labor over local workforce integration (Chen, 2021, p.6). Additionally, environmental assessments were perceived as insufficient or inadequately disclosed to the public. These issues prompted civil society organizations and international observers to call for greater transparency, local participation, and adherence to environmental and labor standards in BRI projects, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and accountable decision-making frameworks.

In certain countries, local communities have raised concerns about the social and environmental impacts of the projects (Russel and Berger, 2019, p.13). Such concerns, if not addressed adequately, can lead to local opposition or backlash against the initiative.

In Myanmar, the proposed Kyaukpyu deep-sea port and associated special economic zone under the BRI framework sparked significant resistance from local communities. Residents and civil society groups expressed fears over forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, inadequate compensation, and long-term environmental degradation, particularly regarding marine ecosystems and farmland. The lack of community consultation and transparency in project planning intensified these concerns (Bain, 2016). In response to mounting criticism, the Myanmar government renegotiated the project's terms, significantly reducing its initial scale. This case illustrates how insufficient attention to local socio-environmental impacts can provoke backlash, delay implementation, and undermine China's soft power objectives in host countries.

As China invests in infrastructure projects in various regions, the security of these projects and Chinese personnel becomes a concern, especially in areas with political instability or extremist activities (Wuthnow, 2017, p.16). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced communication, greater transparency, respecting local norms and customs, and ensuring that projects are both economically viable and socially beneficial. In Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has faced repeated security challenges, particularly in the Balochistan region, where separatist groups have targeted Chinese workers and infrastructure. Several attacks on Chinese engineers and consular facilities have raised alarms about the safety of Chinese nationals involved in BRI projects. In response, Pakistan established a dedicated security force to protect Chinese interests, and both governments have engaged in security cooperation and dialogue. (Ahmad, 2024) However, long-term solutions have also involved increasing local engagement, investing in community development, and addressing socio-economic grievances to reduce hostility. This case underscores the need for China to adopt a comprehensive approach that balances physical security with socio-political sensitivity in high-risk environments.

Limited Participation of Civil Forces in Public Diplomacy

Traditionally, in the realm of public diplomacy, the Chinese government has always been the predominant participant. Funds for diplomacy, operational affairs, and management related to public diplomacy have all relied heavily on the government. Over time, there's a possibility that the government might have inadvertently overlooked the need to encourage the participation of civil forces in public diplomatic affairs. The number of China's civilian entities involved in public diplomacy is relatively limited. Their participation mainly concentrates in the cultural and educational sectors. Compared to governmental bodies, the proportion of civilian involvement is considerably small (d'Hooghe, 2007, p.25). Such limited participation is evidently not conducive to the comprehensiveness of the public diplomacy strategy.

In countries like Germany, where civil society and non-governmental organizations play a central role in international engagement, the limited visibility of Chinese NGOs and independent cultural actors has weakened China's soft power efforts (Dams, Martin, & Kranenburg, 2021, p.105-106.). While official Chinese cultural events and state-sponsored exhibitions are present, the absence of grassroots-level dialogue and sustained civil engagement has limited their reach and resonance with the broader public. This gap becomes more apparent when compared to the activities of other countries' cultural institutes, such as Germany's Goethe-Institut or France's Alliance Française, which operate with relative autonomy and long-term local integration. China's public

diplomacy efforts, being overly state-centric, have struggled to foster the kind of organic people-to-people connections that are often essential for lasting influence in societies with vibrant civic cultures.

The comparative analysis in Table 2 presents a synthesis of China’s public diplomacy practices in five key BRI partner countries. This table highlights the tools deployed, the nature of local responses, observable gaps between discourse and practice, and each country’s strategic value within the BRI framework.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of China’s Public Diplomacy Practices in Selected BRI Countries

Country	Public Diplomacy Tools Used	Local Response	Discourse-Practice Gap	Strategic Relevance
Kenya	Scholarships, Confucius Institutes, cultural festivals	Youth engagement positive; civil society critical	Medium	High (East Africa hub)
Kazakhstan	High-level visits, media in Kazakh, youth programs	Government supportive, public neutral to positive	Low	High (symbolic origin of BRI)
Greece	COSCO port investment, economic forums, media messaging	Mixed: public concern over sovereignty and labor	High	Medium (EU gateway)
Serbia	Confucius Institutes, scholarships, strategic media cooperation	Strong political elite support, moderate public trust	Medium	High (EU periphery partner)
Indonesia	Mandarin programs, bilateral cultural initiatives, HSR project	Scepticism reduced over time, youth positive	Low to medium	High (ASEAN anchor)

VI. Strategic Considerations for the "Belt and Road" Public Diplomacy

Building a Public Diplomacy Discourse System

The essence of a public diplomacy strategy is to vie for international discourse power. In international interactions, the party that holds the initiative in discourse enjoys an absolute advantage. To effectively eliminate the competitive factors from major countries within the "Belt and Road" initiative, there's a need to establish a comprehensive, coherent, and influential public diplomacy discourse system. China’s President Xi Jinping, while presiding over the 18th Central Political Bureau meeting, specifically pointed out: "We should strive to enhance our international discourse power and meticulously construct an external discourse system." (Li, 2018, p.146). This emphasizes China's core values and policy stances and aligns them with the interests and needs of the countries along the Belt and Road. To develop a public diplomacy discourse system, the first step is to devise a strategy to contest international discourse power. Next, innovations in international discourse are needed, which include innovation in content, phrasing, expression, and rules. Efforts should also be amplified to enhance the reach of international discourse: improving the means of communication, bolstering the communication agenda, timely updating of communication tools, and implementing a localized communication strategy. All these measures serve to strengthen external

propaganda and explanations, cultivate a positive image, and enhance public identification and acceptance.

Optimizing the Public Diplomacy Public Relations Model

From the perspective of China's public diplomacy and public relations model for countries along the "Belt and Road", most have adopted government-led PR (d'Hooghe, 2007, p.21-24). This enhances the credibility and stability of China's public diplomacy strategy, fostering trust and friendship between countries. However, with the intensifying cooperation between nations, the functions, energy, and resources of government personnel are limited. A singular PR model is not conducive to in-depth and innovative bilateral cooperation. Therefore, there's a need to optimize public diplomacy strategies. Under government leadership, the involvement of non-governmental forces should be encouraged as primary participants in public relations activities. This can increase the proportion of lobbying diplomacy, entrusted diplomacy, and strategic communication, thereby enriching public diplomacy options. Establishing a flexible and efficient public diplomacy PR model will strengthen cooperation with the media and non-governmental organizations. Making full use of new media tools to promptly respond to various public sentiments and actively disseminate positive information is also crucial. Furthermore, guiding and managing foreign media is essential to safeguard China's reputation and image. Integrating diverse forces can create a holistic public relations model that caters to the multifaceted needs of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Broadening the Scope of Public Diplomacy Exchanges

Currently, China's public diplomacy strategy towards the BRI countries mainly focuses on areas such as politics, economy, and education. However, to establish stable, long-term, and high-quality international relationships, cultural exchanges are the real game-changer in winning the hearts of the people. Therefore, in public diplomacy activities, it's crucial to expand the areas of exchange. Beyond politics and economics, there should be emphasis on education, culture, science and technology, sports tourism, medical care, and humanities exchanges. Promoting academic exchanges, cultural interactions, and youth engagement will enhance mutual understanding and friendship among the citizens of participating countries, thereby solidifying public support for the "Belt and Road" initiative.

VII. Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative represents more than a framework for infrastructure development; it represents China's broader strategy to reshape global narratives and promote enduring partnerships through public diplomacy. This study has examined the strategic deployment of public diplomacy tools—ranging from cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges to media cooperation and high-level dialogue—as essential mechanisms in advancing China's soft power within the BRI framework. The findings demonstrate that China's public diplomacy has adopted a multi-layered approach that aligns closely with its political, economic, and cultural objectives. For instance, initiatives such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes in Africa, China's scholarship programs to BRI countries, and the state-led media partnerships with local outlets in Serbia and Kazakhstan exemplify how China embeds cultural and political messaging alongside infrastructure projects. These initiatives aim to create a perception of mutual benefit and shared development, reflecting Joseph Nye's concept of attraction-based influence.

However, the study also reveals that these efforts face several challenges. Limited participation of civil society actors, as seen in contrast with institutions like Germany's Goethe-Institute or France's Alliance Française, has constrained China's ability to establish local credibility and foster participatory support. Moreover, cases like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port or the Kyaukpyu project in Myanmar highlight how insufficient transparency and lack of community engagement have triggered local opposition and skepticism, threatening the BRI's social sustainability. Importantly, the analysis confirms that China's public diplomacy, though centrally organized, lacks adaptive flexibility in regions where media freedom, civic activism, and democratic norms demand more inclusive communication strategies. The article also reveals critical gaps between China's official discourse and its actual practices. While Beijing promotes values such as openness, inclusivity, and mutual benefit, in practice, many BRI projects are characterized by limited transparency, minimal local engagement, and weak alignment with democratic norms such as civic participation and freedom of expression.

The centralized and state-dominated nature of China's public diplomacy limits its adaptability in open societies where bottom-up communication and civil society participation are essential. For example, while Confucius Institutes aim to promote cultural understanding, they have faced accusations of political censorship in some host countries. Similarly, media partnerships often lack editorial independence, raising concerns about propaganda and image management. These tensions reveal a fundamental contradiction: the BRI's soft power ambitions are constrained by the hard realities of China's political model and governance style. Thus, effective public diplomacy within the BRI context must go beyond state-led promotion and incorporate diversified actors and interactive narratives.

This research contributes to public diplomacy theory by illustrating how economic-statecraft tools are intertwined with symbolic power instruments in shaping long-term geopolitical influence. It underscores the need to conceptualize public diplomacy not merely as messaging, but as a practice of structured relationship-building that is sensitive to local contexts and evolving global norms. Future studies may benefit from deeper empirical fieldwork, including interviews with local stakeholders, policy officials, and civil society representatives in BRI countries, to provide a more nuanced assessment of public diplomacy outcomes.

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