

Environmental Diplomacy as a Soft Power Instrument: China and the Belt and Road Initiative

This project is concerned with the notion of ‘soft power’, which is a concept in the field of International Relations. The essence of soft power comes from its innate difference to traditional forms of ‘hard power’ which emphasise force, coercion and ultimately, the use of military power in relations amongst states. In contrast, soft power is about a state’s attributes that make it attractive to other countries and the subsequent policies that extend from this, which aim to co-opt and persuade other states to ‘want what you want’, without the use or the threat of the use of force. Since its inception in 1990 by the US academic and practitioner Joseph S. Nye, scholarship has grown with ever more case studies being developed on a larger variety of states around the world. As well as its academic resonance, soft power is also politically relevant. There are a number of indexes and rankings, which assess and compare the strength of states’ soft power. Despite such developments there remains considerable space for further research on soft power to advance scholarship in both conceptual and empirical spheres.

One of the novelties of this research is that we will examine China. This is significant because one of the pervading assumptions behind soft power is that it is the preserve of liberal democratic states and not the business of autocratic regimes, such as China. Nonetheless, international soft power indexes have interpreted rises in Chinese soft power, and the Chinese government itself continues to proclaim its desire to develop and implement its own forms of soft power policies and instruments across the world. Our project seizes upon this fascinating issue and sees an opportunity to discover new findings to bolster soft power research in an innovative way by looking at China.

Soft power can come in many shapes and forms. Our project chooses to look at the theme of the environment and more specifically, China’s use of ‘environmental diplomacy’ towards other countries. In a fairly short space of time, China went from resistance to becoming an agenda-setter in global climate change policies and an apparent beacon of carbon emission reductions. At the same time, China is rolling out its massive Belt Road Initiative (BRI), which will extend China’s reach via large scale infrastructure projects to facilitate Chinese trade and investment outreach literally across the globe.

Our project will explore how far the notion of China as a soft power is valid by looking at the substance, practice of its environmental diplomacy. We hypothesise that although there is a ‘green’ element to BRI in that China has declared the objective of promoting environmentally sound investments, such as renewable energy plants and road building in line with high environmental standards, in reality, this green agenda is being only patchily applied and ample evidence suggests that green standards are being sometimes undercut in favour of economic costs.

To meet this hypothesis, we look at five countries that are parts of China’s BRI. Our research sees Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan as ‘receiving states’ of China’s foreign environmental policies, since each of them has seen considerable amounts of Chinese investment into their infrastructures, with new roads, railways, virtual highways, knowledge hubs, ports and energy plants of various types. Our five country case studies will allow us to assess the extent to which China really is a soft power on the basis of its environmental diplomacy and to assess how far China’s newfound green agenda-setter label is actually relevant when it comes to implementation on the ground.

Our project strives to deliver fresh findings and will, therefore, be characterised by a significant amount of field-work. Research missions will be carried out to China and all five states in order to identify how China is perceived through the prism of its environmental diplomacy ‘on the ground’. The research will culminate in a number of publications, which will stress both conceptual and empirical findings towards the enrichment of soft power research and the Polish research community.