

China as a “Green Soft Power” and the Belt and Road Initiative: Evidence From Pakistan

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Abstract

By taking a proactive role in international negotiations on climate change and extending the ecological dimension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been strengthening its position as a leader in global environmental governance. This article examines the effects of China’s efforts regarding its soft power. Specifically, it argues that prioritising environmental protection in foreign policies can enhance a state’s status as a “green soft power.” To test this argument, this article examines the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of the BRI and a multibillion-dollar, 3,000-km energy, road and railway infrastructure network, accompanied by geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic initiatives promoted as a “game-changer” and a “win-win” situation. More specifically, the article aims to assess this project’s influence on China’s green soft power “reserves,” and it sheds light on the role of the bilateral relationship in shaping China’s international status. This article asks the following: What is the impact of the CPEC on China’s green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and globally, especially given that it encompasses numerous coal-based energy projects? To address this question, it draws on selected academic literature, triangulated with primary sources such as policy documents and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders in Pakistan.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative; China; climate; environmental leadership; Global South; green soft power; international status; Pakistan; renewable energy

1. Introduction

By taking a proactive role in international negotiations on climate change and extending the ecological dimension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been strengthening its position as a leader in global

environmental governance. In particular, to bolster environmental cooperation under the BRI and to better mitigate the impacts of this grand infrastructure project on local ecosystems, in 2017, Beijing announced the Green BRI. This designation reflects China's ambitions for the BRI to become climate-neutral, resource-efficient, nature-positive, and protective of biodiversity (Ministry of Environmental Protection et al., 2017). This article argues that prioritising environmental protection in foreign policies can enhance a state's status as a "green soft power," a type of soft power rooted in the environmental and climate aspects of a state's foreign policy and behaviour. China's stance on these issues is an essential component of its assertion of great power status in global politics (Vogler, 2016). The concept of "status" in this article follows Duque's (2018) relational approach, which emphasises that status is contingent on social recognition. Hence, this approach posits that status emerges from the dynamics of state relations rather than from direct attributes such as wealth or military strength. By examining how status specifically arises from cooperation, this study diverges from much of the literature on international status, which often focuses on conflicts under the assumption that the "dynamics associated with status seeking and status attribution have been forwarded as plausible motivations for a variety of state behaviors, particularly interstate conflicts" (Miller et al., 2015).

To illustrate how China's green soft power status emerges through relational dynamics, this article examines the BRI—focusing specifically on its pilot project, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—aims to assess the impact of the CPEC on China's "green soft power reserves," and it highlights the role of the China–Pakistan relationship in shaping China's international status. Announced in 2013, the CPEC is a massive infrastructure project accompanied by geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic initiatives promoted as a "game-changer" and a "win-win" situation. The CPEC has multifaceted impacts on China and Pakistan, their relationship, and regional dynamics (Kuszevska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). While the messaging of Beijing and Islamabad is almost exclusively about the economic and geopolitical gains being brought by the CPEC, this project also involves various other impacts and risks, including several with relevance to the natural environment and climate. This article focuses on these less-researched implications of the CPEC, and it asks the following: What is the impact of this project on China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and globally, especially given that it encompasses numerous coal-based energy projects? What are the evidence and barriers for the CPEC to elevate China's status as a green soft power?

To address these questions, this article draws on academic literature triangulated with primary sources such as policy documents and semi-structured anonymised interviews with local stakeholders in Pakistan, including journalists, academics, politicians, public servants, lawyers, and infrastructure constructors working with the Chinese on the CPEC. Furthermore, this study designates these stakeholders as green soft power transmitters and receivers. This research involved 11 individuals and was conducted in May 2024 in Islamabad and Lahore, Pakistan. They are referred to as interviewees and enumerated below.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it reviews the literature on international status and green soft power. Second, it identifies and contextualises this power's resources, instruments, transmitters, and receivers to demonstrate how China's green soft power works under the CPEC. Third, this article seeks to distinguish the evidence and barriers for the CPEC to strengthen China's green soft power status vis-à-vis Pakistan and beyond.

2. What Does It Mean to Be a Green Soft Power?

The term green soft power has appeared in a few academic and media publications, often in the context of the BRI. These publications identify China as a wielder of this form of power, linking it to Beijing's environmentally focused efforts to establish the Green BRI. Mobilising the term green soft power in the Chinese context, publications recognise that Beijing projects itself as a leader in environmental governance and desires to achieve green soft power status. Kerui and Khan (2022, p. 99) argue that by "utilising...green soft power, by advocating for green development and ecological civilisation...[China] provides an alternative to the traditional approach of prioritising development without considering environmental and climate concerns." This article seeks to clarify what it means to be a green soft power by reviewing the modest literature on the concept and connecting it with the more extensively researched concept of international status. Specifically, this study employs Duque's relational approach to demonstrate how China's green soft power status emerges through its interactions with other states.

Recent studies by Rodenbiker (2023) and Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) attempt to conceptualise green soft power rather than using this term only intuitively or in relation to a particular behaviour. The conceptualisation of the two articles is derived from Nye's (1990, p. 166) definition of soft power, which occurs when "one country gets other countries to want what it wants" without using force and only through the sheer power of attraction. Rodenbiker (2023) highlights the power of attraction, specifically of environmental discourses and practices. He defines green soft power as "expressions constituted in relation to [these] discourses and practices that influence actors to adopt shared values, goals, and positive associations to a given country" (Rodenbiker, 2023, p. 324). Such a definition aligns with how Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024, p. 20) view this power. They argue that green soft power is part of a state's soft power, that it derives from the extent of its "greenness" and by being outwardly pro-environment or motivated by environment-related concerns and that it gives rise to positive perceptions and reputational benefits. This article employs this definition and further contextualises it to fit the case study of China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Duque's relational approach helps to better understand China's rise as a green soft power. Duque (2018) draws on Weber's (1978, p. 305) classic definition of status as "an effective claim to social esteem in terms of privileges." She argues that "status depends on recognition: it concerns identification processes through which an actor gains admission into a club once deemed to follow its membership rules" (Duque, 2018, p. 578). Therefore, status emerges from systematic social processes—specifically, relational processes that cannot be reduced to a state's inherent attributes (Duque, 2018). This approach moves beyond "traditional" perspectives that prioritise these attributes, whether material—such as military, economic, and technological capabilities—or ideational—such as norms that actors follow (Clunan, 2014, p. 274; Miller et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Duque's approach acknowledges that these attributes still play a role in status recognition; however, they "matter because of their symbolic—rather than intrinsic—value" (Duque, 2018, p. 578).

Viewing green soft power status through the lens of the relational approach leads to the following assumptions: (a) recognition is essential for a state to achieve green soft power status, (b) such recognition arises from the state's relations with others, and (c) to attain green soft power status, a state must become a member of a "club" by adhering to environmental and climate-related rules. Each of these points is discussed below regarding China:

1. Recognition is essential for China to become a green soft power. Although the scholarship on this topic primarily examines what China does or should do to expand its green soft power, only a few publications highlight how China's environmental actions are perceived by foreign governments and the public—the intended soft power receivers, as outlined in Nye's original concept. Nedopil (2023a) underscores the importance of international recognition of China's pro-environmental behaviours. He links China's green soft power not only to Beijing's decision to exit overseas coal projects but also to the fact that it announced this move at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021. This announcement and subsequent actions require international attention to strengthen China's green soft power status. Importantly for the sustainability of this status, following this statement, China's BRI-related coal investments decreased from 45% in 2015 to 0% by early 2023. Meanwhile, China's investments in solar, wind, and hydropower energy rose from 33% in 2018 to 77% in 2022 (Nedopil, 2023b). While Nedopil (2023a) highlights the importance of international recognition in general, Rodenbiker (2023) refers to particular receivers. Specifically, he provides two cases of China's green soft power operating through bilateral cooperation on marine spatial planning and community-based mangrove conservation with Thailand and Indonesia, respectively. He concludes that "the capacity of China's environmental exchanges to influence [these] Global South actors to adopt shared values and positive associations toward China are limited. Therefore, China's green soft power...is relatively weak" (Rodenbiker, 2023, p. 344). China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan has been mentioned only briefly by Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024, p. 28). In particular, this publication focuses on green soft power generation by reviewing the limited available bilateral documents on the CPEC and identifying China's intentions to be perceived as a green soft power by its "all-weather friend," as China and Pakistan often refer to each other. However, Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) do not elaborate on how these behaviours are recognised in Pakistan. Therefore, this article aims to expand on this aspect.

2. China's green soft power status emerges from its relations with others, though attributes matter. In the view of Min and Montero (2019), green soft power occurs when China provides "financial and technical support to its BRI partners by sharing experiences and lessons-learned in clean energy, environment, and climate policies." Accordingly, Harlan and Lu (2022) recognise that the "soft" approach to greening the BRI is emerging. Furthermore, they tie this approach to the "environmentally-focused activities that forge people-to-people connections with host countries [including] training, dialogues, research, and development projects." They highlight the role of "green cooperation" (Harlan & Lu, 2022, p. 476) that, first, "offers a means to position China as an alternative environmental leader—a kind of green soft power—while also facilitating the transfer of Chinese green technology and expertise to the Global South" and, second, "has become a primary venue through which China projects influence over global environmental governance—a kind of green soft power" (Harlan & Lu, 2022, p. 478). These two studies highlight China's technological and economic attributes, which have elevated it to a leadership position in renewable energy. While essential, these attributes alone do not make China a green soft power unless Beijing uses them to engage with other countries—for example, by assisting BRI states in increasing the share of renewable energy in their energy mix, as suggested in key policy documents and guidelines addressing the environmental aspects of this connectivity project (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2017; Ministry of Environmental Protection et al., 2017). Referring to China's attributes, Rodenbiker (2023) and Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) question whether this state's poor environmental record can

significantly harm its green soft power status. These studies refer to the “Panda–Dragon” dichotomy (Nedopil, 2023a), that is, the distinction between China’s ambitious environmental diplomacy abroad and its poor but improving domestic environmental profile, as indicated by its ranking of 154th in the Environmental Performance Index (EPI; Block et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite this poor profile, China has managed to gain recognition as one of the leaders in the environmental and climate regime mainly due to its “international environmental cooperation...[which] is conducive to the elevation of China’s international image and soft power in the long run” (Gang, 2009, pp. 53–54). This confirms the basic assumption underlying the relational approach to status. That is, status cannot be reduced to a state’s attributes.

3. China can join the green soft power “club” because of the distinct nature of environmental and climate cooperation. The assumption that joining a club of states that share similar norms will elevate a country’s status is problematic for China due to its ideational attributes—or, more specifically, its lack of those attributes that are typical in liberal democracies. In this context, Duque (2018, p. 578) argues that “states do not necessarily recognize those with the most resources but rather those with similar values and resources.” Similarly, Miller et al. (2015, p. 788) hypothesise that “behavior consistent with relatively uncontested norms will be associated with significant additional status attribution from the global community of states.” However, as Larson and Shevchenko (2010, p. 84) note in their study on China’s status:

Although China might appear to be following the prescriptions of liberal institutionalism, Beijing does not subscribe to the prevailing Western norms of individualism, human rights, transparency, democracy promotion, or humanitarian intervention. Instead, Beijing adheres to traditional norms of sovereignty and nonintervention in other states’ internal affairs.

Thus, despite China’s authoritarianism, it still shares some ideational attributes that contribute to its international recognition.

For China’s status as a green soft power specifically, scholars raise similar doubts regarding its interactions with other states on environmental and climate issues. For example, Wang-Kaeding (2018) observes that “President Xi has never openly endorsed the norm of ‘liberal environmentalism,’” which has underpinned several institutional achievements since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Liberal environmentalism, as defined by Bernstein (2020, p. 146), “describes the normative compromise in global governance that predicates international environmental protection on promoting and maintaining a liberal economic order.” Nonetheless, China’s authoritarianism fails to significantly hinder its potential to elevate its international status in the environmental and climate cooperation domain. As Chan et al. (2008, p. 292) note: “China can be expected to cooperate more fully with international environmental regimes than with other types of global regimes, as it has come to realize, albeit belatedly, that proper environmental protection is a crucial component of its overall development.”

Beijing does not typically challenge international environmental and climate norms outright, as it sometimes does in other arenas. Instead, having joined major frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, China negotiates within the system—for instance, by arguing for differentiated responsibilities between the Global North and the Global South and

championing national sovereignty (Qi & Dauvergne, 2022). Through this stance of “selective compliance” with international norms, China aligns itself with global environmental and climate goals—securing diplomatic advantages and bolstering its green soft power status—whilst retaining tight control over domestic implementation following its authoritarian governance (Li & Shapiro, 2020). However, the strict oversight of civil society organisations curtails the transparency and accountability typically associated with liberal environmental governance, underscoring how China’s alignment with global norms does not necessarily translate into liberal democratic practices at home (Ho, 2008; Li & Shapiro, 2020).

Due to the distinct nature of cooperation on environmental and climate issues, this area exemplifies what is termed a “different” or “new” domain in the social creativity strategy of status-seeking. Larson and Shevchenko (2010) argue that, for China, this social creativity strategy involves striving for recognition in a new domain, particularly as a responsible great power. While Larson and Shevchenko (2010) primarily focus on responsibilities in the security and economic realms, the concept of responsible power status can—and arguably should—extend to addressing the pressing climate and environmental challenges we face today (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024).

Moreover, while the literature on status in international relations emphasises ideational attributes such as norms of individualism, human rights, and democracy, this assumption has limited relevance in the context of this case study, which involves an authoritarian state as a green soft power producer and Pakistan, a hybrid regime, as the receiver of this power.

3. The CPEC and China’s Green Soft Power: How Does It Work?

To illustrate how China’s green soft power status can emerge through its relations with Pakistan under the CPEC, this article draws on Nye’s (2008, p. 107) three-resource model of soft power, which emphasises culture, political values, and foreign policies. Specifically, it identifies China’s foreign environmental policy under the CPEC as a key resource of China’s green soft power in Pakistan.

To use this resource, China needs environmental diplomacy, which is recognised as the main instrument of green soft power. Environmental diplomacy, i.e., “diplomacy for the environment” (Benedick, 1999), is understood to consist of efforts between two or more states—here, China and Pakistan—to jointly address ecological problems through negotiation and collaboration (Susskind, 1994) or to avoid possible negative impacts of their cooperation on local ecosystems (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024, p. 20). Examining China’s environmental diplomacy as a key instrument for achieving green soft power status aligns with the relational approach, which emphasises the role of interstate relations in the emergence of status. CPEC-related bilateral environmental diplomacy is most critical in affecting how Pakistan’s government and public—here, the intended green soft power receivers—perceive China, but Beijing’s multilateral environmental diplomacy performed under the BRI is also relevant.

As status depends on recognition, green soft power needs transmitters and receivers. Green soft power transmitters carry China’s environmental diplomacy and inform receivers about it. These transmitters include stakeholders operating within Pakistani society, such as relevant ministries, NGOs, think tanks, academia, media, and their equivalents in China or elsewhere, who discuss environmental aspects of the CPEC. Local transmitters, such as Pakistan’s media, think tanks, and academia, including the interviewees for

Table 1. China’s green soft power in action and the CPEC.

Green soft power resource	Instruments	Key transmitters	Receivers
Environmental foreign policies under the CPEC	Bilateral and BRI-related multilateral environmental diplomacy	<p>Relevant ministries in Pakistan and China and other state institutions—e.g., China’s embassy in Islamabad;</p> <p>NGOs and think tanks (Pakistani, Chinese, and others)—e.g., the Pakistan-China Institute (PCI) and China–Pakistan Study Centre Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad (SDPI);</p> <p>Media (Pakistani, Chinese, and others);</p> <p>Academia—e.g., Pakistani and Chinese universities;</p> <p>Centres for collaborative research on the CPEC—e.g., the China Pakistan Management Initiative at Lahore University of Management Sciences and CPEC Integrated Centre for Research at the University of the Punjab in Lahore;</p> <p>International organisations (e.g., relevant UN agencies and programmes) if discussing environmental aspects of the CPEC;</p> <p>Business actors involved in developing the CPEC and messaging about the project.</p>	Pakistan’s government and public

this study, can also be receivers of this power when their narratives reflect the public perception of China and the environmental aspects of the CPEC.

Crucially, while this article addresses an authoritarian regime and a hybrid regime—which China and Pakistan, respectively, are recognised as (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024)—the independence of the green soft power transmitters and receivers operating in these states must be considered. In this context, Afzal (2020) observes that “the Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, aggressively stamping out criticism.” Interviewee 11 in this study confirms this point:

Positive or constructive criticism [of the CPEC] is a national security matter....You cannot talk against China. This is considered like you’re talking against Pakistan....It’s really difficult in Pakistan to speak about the project because our national security institutions are very much involved, and they do not appreciate public opinion.

4. Green Changer?

For numerous reasons, the CPEC makes a relevant case for investigating green soft power through China’s environmental diplomacy. First, the CPEC is a pilot and the most expensive part of the BRI. Second, it involves

massive energy infrastructure, including facilities running on coal that have profound impacts on the natural environment and climate. Third, the CPEC's rollout aligns with China's soft power push towards its all-weather friend. These reasons are further explained to identify evidence and barriers for China's status as a green soft power to emerge from its environmental diplomacy practised under the CPEC.

4.1. Green Shift in Environmental Diplomacy

The CPEC is an unprecedented investment (amounting to over \$60 billion) of one Asian state in the infrastructure of another. This infrastructure involves energy projects and economic zones linked by a 3,000-km network of pipelines, roads, and railways stretching from Baluchistan in Pakistan to Xinjiang in China. While scholarship most often highlights the various economic, geopolitical, and security aspects of the CPEC (Ahmed, 2024; Wolf, 2020), this project also profoundly affects the natural environment and climate. Khan and Chang (2020, p. 388) confirm that the CPEC "brings great expectations to the economy of Pakistan, however, the adverse effects on the environment can never be ignored." Specifically:

Roads and railroads, thermal, hydro, and nuclear power plants, electricity transmission networks, oil and natural gas pipelines, mining initiatives, and heavy industries are among the infrastructure projects most likely to have a negative environmental impact. Increased air and water pollution, habitat loss and fragmentation, deforestation, higher wildlife mortality, the threat of invasive species, and increased greenhouse gas emissions that undercut global efforts to combat climate change are just a few of the risks connected to these infrastructure projects. (Anwar et al., 2024, p. 7)

Particularly in light of the 2022 floods that killed over 1,730 people in Pakistan and caused economic losses reaching approximately \$15.2 billion (World Bank, 2022), scholarship identifies a link between natural disasters in the future and the CPEC. Ali and Askari (2023, p. 653) argue that: "The newly emerged projects of CPEC cause climate change which further creates an alarming situation for glaciers melting. Glaciers are the main source of river water. Heavy floods are direct results of melting glaciers." Therefore, the environmental impacts of the CPEC can outweigh its economic benefits (Kouser et al., 2020; Sultan et al., 2021). The CPEC is viewed as a project that is "detrimental to the natural environment of Pakistan" (Munir & Khayyam, 2020) and "unpredictable" (Khan & Chang, 2020).

When discussing the implications of the CPEC for the natural environment and climate, scholars focus on risks and challenges. In this context, the scholarship centres on the following three themes: (a) energy infrastructure, (b) transport infrastructure, and (c) Pakistan's environmental situation and governance.

Among all infrastructure developments, in the environmental context, most attention is paid to energy projects, specifically coal-fired power plants. Located in Sindh, Punjab, and Baluchistan, these facilities generate nearly three-quarters of all energy under the CPEC (Kouser et al., 2020; Sultan et al., 2021). Despite Pakistan's potential to generate renewable energy (Anwar et al., 2024; Duan et al., 2022) the CPEC involves only a few such projects: "Most of them generate insignificant power, except the Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park in Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan, which has a 1,000 MW power generation capacity" (Rashid et al., 2023, p. 3685). In contrast, the CPEC includes 10 coal-based power plants with a power generation capacity of 8,880 MW (Rashid et al., 2023). Scholars and experts highlight the fact that the ruling Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz dictated a focus on coal energy projects, viewing them as a means to "end the country's

electricity shortages in order to secure a 2018 re-election bid” (Adeney & Boni, 2021, p. 2), and they recognise “Pakistan’s quest for the coal’s utilisation to meet its energy demand” as “natural and obvious” (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 389). Indeed, the CPEC can eliminate Pakistan’s energy shortage of approximately 5,000–7,000 MW (Kugelman, 2019) specifically “through low-cost energy from Pakistan’s abundant indigenous energy resources like coal” (Rashid et al., 2023, p. 3685). However, scholarship also emphasises the urgency of “shifting from coal-based energy projects to renewables and building climate-resilient infrastructure in order to avoid various environmental harms” (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 387). As Faisal and Askari (2024) observe, such a shift aligns not only with Pakistan’s environmental needs but also with China’s announcement to exit overseas coal. Moreover, this shift can transform the CPEC into an “environmental corridor having capability to initiate renewable energy trade between Pakistan and China” (Farooq et al., 2023, p. 12386).

Other critical environmental concerns are linked to the transport infrastructure of the CPEC, specifically the upgrading and expansion of the road network in Pakistan. Massive tree cutting “leads to enormous concentration of CO₂ emissions along [these] roads “ (Kouser et al., 2020, p. 4661), stretching from Kashgar in China to Gwadar in Pakistan. Moreover, the Karakoram Highway, the world’s highest paved road connecting China and Pakistan, which is being upgraded under the CPEC umbrella, is expected to transport 7,000 trucks per day that will release up to 36.5 million tons of CO₂, significantly worsening air quality (Sultan et al., 2021).

CPEC infrastructure is being constructed in a “crucial time when Pakistan is already facing extreme weather patterns and seasonal shifts and suffering from the global warming, and climate change issues as nearly 5,000 of its glaciers are melting, which have potential impacts on agroecology of the State” (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 395). Indeed, Pakistan’s fragile environment and climate situation are a theme often referred to in literature discussing CPEC’s impacts on the environment. Pakistan is one of the top 10 countries most endangered by climate change (Ali & Askari, 2023). Despite such climate vulnerability and the profound environmental effects of the CPEC, most studies claim that no transparent and reliable environmental impact assessments were conducted in relation to the CPEC (Shaikh & Sultan, 2023).

Whether and how Beijing assists Pakistan in mitigating the environmental risks of the CPEC can affect China’s green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and beyond. Although Pakistan’s all-weather friendship with China is a distinct type of relationship, the BRI includes numerous states that share some characteristics with Pakistan. Noteworthy, almost half of the 149 BRI states are found in the Global South, and they are typically mid to low-income countries (Nedopil, 2025) with rather poor environmental profiles. Effectively overcoming the environmental challenges posed by the CPEC would demonstrate China’s adherence to pro-environmental norms and standards that, as the literature suggests, seem to have been ignored when the CPEC was designed, and it would strengthen China’s recognition as a green soft power in Pakistan, and, in particular, in those states that wish to obtain similar assistance.

Nevertheless, the limited transparency surrounding China’s inroads into Pakistan hinders research on CPEC-related environmental diplomacy. While media, relevant miniseries, and embassies regularly signal that China and Pakistan have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on the CPEC, the full texts of most of these agreements are unavailable. Only selected bilateral documents on the project are accessible, including the Long-Term Plan for the CPEC (LTP; 2017–2030; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning,

Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017), a few joint statements and some MoUs. Most of these documents only briefly refer to environmental issues by pointing to (a) the environment as one of many areas of cooperation strengthened under the CPEC and, more specifically, (b) climate change and renewable energy as the main themes of project-related environmental diplomacy.

The LTP, which is a roadmap for CPEC developments, briefly refers to the project's environmental aspects. In particular, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 17) assumes that the two states will promote "energy-saving and environmentally friendly processes and equipment" in their industrial cooperation. Additionally, it ensures that while developing the CPEC, the possible effects of climate change will be considered to realise sustainable development (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 12). Signed in 2013, the Common Vision for Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013) points to the environment (including maritime environmental protection) and climate change as areas of cooperation, in addition to trade, energy, agriculture, food security, and other fields. The joint statement of 2022 mentions the term "green corridor" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a) as an umbrella for China–Pakistan environmental cooperation. Issued later in November 2022, another joint statement mentions the floods that killed over 1,730 people in Pakistan and caused economic losses reaching approximately \$15.2 billion (World Bank, 2022). China and Pakistan highlight their commitments to improve the situation in the latter: "Appreciating Pakistan's initiative to combat human-induced climate change and China's initiative to promote green cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, the two sides agreed to step up cooperation in such areas as ecosystem restoration and water resource management" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). The recent joint statement of June 2024 recalls:

[The] green corridor [as part of an] upgraded version of the CPEC...aligning with Pakistan's 5Es Framework [a roadmap for achieving a \$1 trillion economy by 2035] based on Exports, E-Pakistan, Environment, Energy, and Equity & Empowerment to better benefit the two countries and their peoples, working together to build CPEC. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024)

Additionally, the 2024 statement reiterates China's "commitment to continue providing support and assistance to Pakistan and other developing countries in addressing climate change and mitigating the adverse impacts of extreme weather events" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

Local stakeholders within Pakistan's government barely notice the exercise of environmental diplomacy under the CPEC. Importantly for China's green soft power, they refuse to identify any influence of the exercise of this diplomacy on Pakistan's policies and performance, as the state's key policy strategies demonstrate. Initiated in 2014 by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Pakistan Vision 2025, which is an optimistic long-term strategy designed to position Pakistan among the top 25 global economies by 2025, points to the environment as only one of several areas of cooperation of the CPEC. The 5Es Framework mentioned above links the CPEC with Pakistan's improved economic performance between 2013 and 2018 (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2014, p. 12). Focusing on climate and environmental issues, the National

Adaptation Plan (Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, 2023) and National Climate Change Policy (Ministry of Climate Change, 2021) refuse to mention China and the CPEC.

The asymmetry between the profound impacts of the CPEC on local ecosystems and the attention paid to these impacts by the actors involved in green soft power generation, transmission, and reception is evident, especially in the early stages of the CPEC. Interviewee 3 rightly observes that “When the CPEC was launched in 2013, the environment was not a topic.” Interviewee 5 points to the traffic emissions resulting from the CPEC and says that the infrastructure does not constitute climate resilience. Additionally, this interviewee argues that neglecting the environmental damage brought by the CPEC is “depressing for the society.” According to interviewee 5, in Gilgit-Baltistan, where, among others, the Karakorum Highway is being upgraded and hydropower projects are being established under the CPEC, “society is concerned about the environment. We must not compromise on the environment.”

The green shift in China’s environmental diplomacy towards a green corridor as part of the CPEC was triggered by the 2022 floods mentioned above. Interviewee 2 claims that China’s aid to Pakistan, amounting to ¥400 million (China International Development Cooperation Agency, 2022), to mitigate the consequences of this natural disaster was a “good soft power strategy.” If followed by cooperation on environmental and climate issues, including practice and technology sharing, the green shift has the potential to influence environmental policies and behaviours in Pakistan, thus elevating China’s status as a green soft power in the country. Beyond Pakistan, the green shift in China’s environmental diplomacy under the CPEC can strengthen its green soft power in the Global South among developing states along the BRI with an economic and climate situation similar to Pakistan’s. Nevertheless, the limited transparency surrounding China’s bilateral environmental diplomacy and still low priority given to the environmental aspects of the CPEC suggest barriers for the project to act as an effective resource for China’s green soft power.

4.2. “Bad” Coal and the Shift to Renewables

Under the BRI, Pakistan is the largest receiver of investments in energy infrastructure. This infrastructure encompasses most CPEC projects, including its first early harvest phase (2015–2020). In this phase, most investments in the energy sector went to coal power plants. The path of further bilateral energy cooperation may affect China’s status as a green soft power by testing its announcement that it is exiting overseas coal on the ground, in Pakistan.

As explained in the Section 4.1, Beijing’s investments in Pakistan’s energy sector under the CPEC umbrella followed local priorities. Accordingly, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People’s Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 16) emphasises the “utilisation of Pakistan’s own coal for power plant and developing technologies for surface coal gasification, expansion and augmentation of coal mining sector.” Nevertheless, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People’s Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 16) also mentions the aims of developing hydropower, wind, and solar energy and establishing diversified energy supply channels.

The 2018 joint statement between China and Pakistan recognises the early harvest energy projects, mostly coal-based facilities, as being satisfactory for both sides, and it fails to include the context of renewable energy

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Interestingly, the statement issued in 2022 emphasises Beijing's support for Islamabad in developing renewable energy projects, explicitly mentioning solar projects. This statement also promises to attract Chinese companies to become engaged in renewable energy projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). The 2023 joint press statement between China and Pakistan states:

The Chinese side appreciated the efforts of the Pakistani side to vigorously develop Photovoltaic and other renewable energy projects, which are in alignment with the green, low carbon and environmentally friendly development of the energy sector. Both sides encourage Chinese companies to further participate in the development of such projects. (Belt and Road Forum, 2023)

Similarly, the 2023 MoU titled Provision of Goods Under South–South Cooperation for Addressing Climate Change emphasises China's support for Pakistan's "efforts to promote renewable energy" (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in Beijing, 2023).

The "renewable" shift from coal energy projects in bilateral environmental diplomacy under the CPEC is evident. The reasons underlying this shift include Pakistan's poor environmental and climate situation (resulting in natural disasters, such as the 2022 floods), the stage of the CPEC and precisely the fact that the early harvest phase with the coal-related projects has been completed, in addition to China's attempts to green the BRI. Nevertheless, the limited scholarship on the topic and the individuals interviewed in this study suggest that Beijing's energy engagements under the CPEC follow local priorities and policies, not vice versa. For instance, Interviewees 3 and 4 confirm that the CPEC's build-up of energy infrastructure follows local demands. In particular, Interviewee 3 calls the installation of coal-based power plants along with deforestation an "unimagined disaster for the natural environment." Ironically, as highlighted by Interviewee 6, "Islamabad decided on these plants when the world was shutting them down." On the one hand, the association of the CPEC with "bad" coal, as Interviewee 3 coins it, can tarnish China's green soft power in Pakistan and beyond; on the other hand, the renewable shift in Beijing's environmental diplomacy can polish it.

Moreover, the renewable shift in bilateral environmental diplomacy under the BRI can leverage China's status as a green soft power in Pakistan and beyond by appealing to the public's preferences for renewable energy in some BRI countries. A 2019 survey conducted in Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Turkey, and Vietnam reveals that:

[In] all six countries, citizens have a strong preference for clean energy rather than coal. When asked which type of energy they felt their country should invest in to best support its long-term development, the majority selected renewable energy sources, ranging from 61% in Pakistan to 89% in Vietnam. (Littlecott & Hawkins, 2023)

Local stakeholders within Pakistan's government recognise the CPEC's potential to increase the share of renewables in Pakistan's energy mix and the alignment of this potential with local priorities, but they refuse to identify China's impact in this particular context. Pakistan Vision 2025 mentions the CPEC in the context of Pakistan's aim to "increase in power generation from alternative energy sources" (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2014). Pakistan's Voluntary National Review of 2019 assumes that all "CPEC

energy projects—centring on coal, solar, wind and hydropower—are helping to bridge critical energy shortages, benefitting industries and businesses” (Government of Pakistan, 2019, p. 43). The Voluntary National Review 2022 mentions CPEC hydropower projects, including the Neelum Jhelum Hydroelectric Power Project, a 102 MW plant at Gulpur Project on River Poonch, two projects in Karot of 720 MW, Azad Pattan, Kohala, and Mahal with 640 MW, 1124 MW, and 590 MW, respectively, and their role in facilitating access to clean energy research and technology in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (Government of Pakistan, 2022, p. 35).

Following local priorities to focus on coal when designing and launching the CPEC, Beijing demonstrated that it had no ambition to act as a green soft power in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the renewable shift in China’s environmental diplomacy, even if triggered by the 2022 floods, can improve China’s standing as a green soft power in Pakistan and beyond the BRI, especially given the international attention to China’s decision to exit overseas coal. Scholarship and the interviewees arguably confirm that China’s energy engagements under the CPEC follow local demands, but doubts remain regarding whether Beijing will consider these demands if they do not align with its own priorities. These doubts are strengthened by the uneven nature of the China–Pakistan relationship based on the two countries’ highly asymmetrical capabilities and, relatedly, Pakistan’s poor position to negotiate. Interviewee 4 argues: “We are not in a position to bargain with a superpower.” Interviewees 2 and 6 confirm that Islamabad does not negotiate with Beijing. According to Interviewee 6: “If China offers, we take, we pay in 10 years.”

4.3. Greening Soft Power

Under the CPEC, Beijing has bolstered its portfolio of soft power instruments vis-à-vis its all-weather friend to an unprecedented extent. Although China initially ignored the environmental dimension of this bilateral cooperation, since 2022, it has become a rising new domain. Consequently, China’s environmental diplomacy has begun to enrich its soft power portfolio. Its instruments include (a) a game-changer narrative, which views the CPEC as a project with the potential to transform Pakistan’s state and society, bringing win-win outcomes to the parties involved; (b) the Chinese language, aimed at bridging the communication gap between the two nations under the CPEC and intensifying their mutual interactions; and (c) higher education initiatives, which involve launching Confucius Institutes, hosting Pakistani students in China, providing Pakistan’s universities with funds and equipment, establishing centres for collaborative research on the CPEC and related themes, and building international academic networks (Nitza-Makowska, 2022, pp. 4–7). To some degree, the soft power push under the CPEC paves the way for environmental diplomacy to win Pakistani hearts and minds—i.e., to be positively associated with and to influence behaviours and policies on the ground.

Pakistan’s poor environmental and climate situation, as reflected by its ranking of 179th out of 180 in the EPI, calls for improvements, not risks and damages. This situation reveals the urgent need for a green transition and thus suggests a window of opportunity for China to contribute and strengthen its status as a green soft power. Interviewee 7 observes that “Pakistan needs a green revolution. If China leads it, we will gain.” Nevertheless, doubts remain regarding whether China can transform its game-changer into a green changer. Interviewee 1 rejects the notion that environmental diplomacy and higher education are effective instruments of China’s soft power in Pakistan: “The economy is a top priority. Education and ecology are not our case in South Asia.” While the priority given to the environmental impacts of the CPEC is still low in relation to its geopolitical and economic implications, the slight shifts in China’s environmental diplomacy discussed above,

in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, reveal China's capabilities to act as a green soft power. The public's reception of the CPEC is another barrier to the inclusion of environmental diplomacy among soft power instruments under the CPEC. The lack of public consultations on CPEC projects, including their environmental impacts, acknowledged by all interviewees, suggests limits in winning the hearts and minds of Pakistani society.

4.4. *The Green BRI and the Green CPEC*

China created an environmental governance architecture to transform the BRI into a climate-neutral and nature-positive Green BRI. In the context of status-seeking, this signals China's aim to join the "green club" of states that respect internationally recognized norms on climate and environmental issues. Green BRI architecture encompasses Chinese domestic governance entities, international governance structures (including new and existing cooperation networks, platforms, and mechanisms), soft laws—e.g., policies and guidelines (Coenen et al., 2020, pp. 3–17)—and it aids Beijing in exercising its multilateral environmental diplomacy along the BRI.

The BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) is one of the components of this architecture. It is an initiative that brings together various local stakeholders to collaborate on sustainable development policies and practices, and it includes two Pakistani think tanks, the PCI and the SDPI. Mustafa Hyder Sayed, the executive director of the PCI, regularly comments on the BRI green reviews issued by the BRIGC. He emphasises the CPEC's significant role in Pakistan's "green energy transition" (BRI Green Development Coalition, 2023, p. 8) but without providing details. The Alliance of International Science Organizations (ANSO), established to promote and implement cooperation in science, technology, and innovation among BRI countries, includes the Pakistan Academy of Sciences (PAS). The PAS has been involved in ANSO conferences on various environmental themes.

Moreover, in 2022, the SDPI and PCI established the Green CPEC Alliance, which can be viewed as an extension of the Green BRI. The Alliance gathers "members from both countries' governments, investors, and developers, as well as civil society" (SDPI, 2022). The launch of this initiative was motivated by the importance of the CPEC in the context of China's status as a green soft power along the BRI:

The CPEC is a particularly important case study, as it is considered a role-model for China's overseas engagement. Supporting a successful greening of CPEC would provide an important role model for greening other BRI countries to green their overseas Chinese investments in the BRI. (SDPI, 2022)

China's multilateral environmental diplomacy was effective in influencing selected Pakistani stakeholders to join the Green BRI architecture and in launching initiatives aligned with its priorities on a local scale. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency surrounding the performance of selected elements of the BRI environmental architecture or their inactivity suggests barriers to China's multilateral environmental diplomacy to influence pro-environmental behaviours and policies in BRI states.

5. Conclusion

This article explored China's status as a green soft power through its environmental diplomacy under the BRI, explicitly focusing on the CPEC. Declaring its ambitions to green its grand infrastructure project, Beijing

aims to enhance its status as a leader in environmental governance and to leverage this status to become a green soft power. This case study demonstrated China's transition to strengthen its green soft power status in Pakistan and it shed light on the implications beyond the BRI.

China's environmental diplomacy has experienced a green shift, marked by increased attention to environmental cooperation under the CPEC, and a renewable shift, referring to a change in priorities in China's energy engagements in Pakistan. To a great extent, the two shifts were motivated by the 2022 floods in Pakistan. Importantly for China's green soft power, the shift in energy engagements aligns with the public's preferences for renewable energy in various BRI countries, including Pakistan. Given the massive attention that international audiences have paid to China's announcement that it is exiting overseas coal, this shift, which signals China's aims to align with globally desired norms on the environment and climate, has the potential to enhance China's status as a green soft power beyond the BRI.

Another piece of evidence suggesting that China can elevate its green soft power status through the CPEC is linked to Beijing's soft power push accompanying the project's developments. Environmental diplomacy can enrich China's soft power portfolio and interplay with its other instruments that have already, at least to some extent, paved the way to winning Pakistani hearts and minds. Additionally, China's multilateral environmental diplomacy contributes to China's green soft power status in Pakistan. This diplomacy attracted selected Pakistani stakeholders to join the BRI's environmental governance architecture.

However, significant barriers remain. The early harvest phase of the CPEC focused on coal-based energy projects. While the prioritisation of coal was determined by local demands, the association with "bad" coal tarnishes China's green soft power in Pakistan and beyond, as it perpetuates the recognition of China as a state leaving a heavy carbon footprint overseas. There are additional challenges related to the limited transparency of China's environmental diplomacy.

While local stakeholders within Pakistan's government notice China's potential contribution to the state's green transition in their policies and strategies, they fail to identify China's influence on Pakistan's pro-environmental decisions and behaviours. Additionally, as recognition drives the status, the public's perception of the CPEC's environmental impacts can limit China's green soft power, mainly because of Pakistan's lack of public consultations on this matter.

The evidence and barriers suggest that especially since 2022, China has strengthened its projection of itself as a green soft power in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the recognition of this power, as manifested by the impacts on policies and behaviours in Pakistan, has not yet been identified. The gains or losses brought by green soft power through environmental diplomacy under the CPEC have some but limited potential to affect the related global status of China. Especially in the Global South, developing states along the BRI that to some degree associate themselves with Pakistan can view China's green soft power through its environmental diplomacy exercised under the CPEC.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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