doi.org/10.65826/JSAI.1.3.2026.99
Vol. 01, Issue 03, pp. 349-366, 2026 *Journal of South Asian Issues (JSAI)*

RESEARCH ARTICLE **Open Access**

Analysing China's Soft Power Influence in South Asia: Bangladesh's Perspective

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Received: 27.01.2026
Accepted: 21.07.2026

Publication Date: **09.09.2026**

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ISSN: 3108-6144

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Abstract

The paper aims to study China's soft power influence and trace the foreign policy landscape of Bangladesh's development between 1975 and 2023. China uses culture, education, trade, media, and development assistance to strengthen its influence in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh. The relationship has been sustained through trade, collaborations in infrastructure, and technology. In recent years, there are active projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, which extends the economic cooperation between countries. Though most studies on China's regional engagement tend to focus on economic statecraft and security issues, the soft power factors influencing Bangladesh's perceptions, preferences, and policy inclinations seem to have been undermined. Based on Joseph Nye's soft power theory the study aims to analyse how China utilizes the means of cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, development discourse, and political communication to enhance its influence. The study uses the qualitative multiple-case study methodology to analyse this relationship, drawing secondary information from diverse literature, including academic journals, government documents, and media. The findings show that China's soft power in Bangladesh is most visible and institutionalized at the political and economic elite level, particularly through infrastructure, trade, development finance, and strategic cooperation. At the societal level, China enjoys positive visibility, but its cultural and people-to-people influence remains less deeply embedded than its economic and state-centered presence. This study adds to the literature on South Asian international relations by demonstrating that China's soft power operates more like an instrumental legitimacy instead of a cultural attraction.

Keywords: *China's Soft Power, South Asia, Economic Influence, Trade Relations, Bangladesh China relations, Bangladesh and China*

Cite this article: Nasrin, F., & Ahmad, S. M. (2026). Analysing China's Soft Power Influence in South Asia: Bangladesh's Perspective. *Journal of South Asian Issues (JSAI)*, 1(3), 349–366. https://doi.org/10.65826/JSAI.1.3.2026.99

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1. INTRODUCTION

China has been growing its influence in the South Asian region not only through economic and military means but also through the soft power to project its influence. Joseph Nye, an American political scientist coined the term soft power and defined it as an instrument that focuses on making others attracted to one's culture instead forcing them through coercive measures. Through development narrative, education and cultural exchanges and various infrastructure ties particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China gradually is shaping the foreign policy landscape in South Asia through its soft power diplomacy. These efforts play a crucial role in altering how South Asia perceives China, fostering positive relationships and enhancing its regional influence. While much of the literature assessing China's influence in South Asia focuses on its great power competition with India and the West, little attention has been paid on how regional actors experience, react and adapt to its influence (Qureshi, 2022). Bangladesh is an important case because of the country's strategic positioning, dynamic economic growth and balancing foreign policy approach. Assessing China's soft power in Bangladesh will therefore provide important insights to understanding how the regional and domestic political context influences the power of influence in South Asia, filling in a significant gap in the scholarly literature on international relations (Nye, 2004; Kurlantzick, 2007; Acharya, 2014)

Bangladesh's foreign policy identity primarily originated from the famous theory of "Friendship to all, malice to none". This research seeks to contribute towards developing a specific niche about China's rising influence in South Asia particularly, in Bangladesh. It emphasizes the concept of soft power in specific spheres such as construction and development, education, media, etc. This study will develop an understanding of how the Chinese efforts are shaping Bangladesh's foreign policy agenda and regional position. Bangladesh is a unique country that avoids joining radical alliances and exclusive security pacts, especially in the context of competition between China and India in the Indo-Pacific region, while managing its interests as geopolitical conditions change. Bangladesh's foreign policy, especially with India and China, reflects a pragmatic and autonomous stance, guided by neutrality and the principle of "malice to none," without aligning with western powers (Islam & Molla, 2022). Keeping all these factors into consideration this study attempts to address the corresponding question which states that in what specific ways has China's soft power has been used in influencing Bangladesh's, foreign policy. and what are the major reasons behind the changing foreign policy trends and their impact on the domestic political history of Bangladesh under different rules and leadership from 1975-2023?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most studies on the literature reviewed on the soft power of China in South Asia are mainly hinged on Nye's soft power theory. Nye's definition of soft power is to persuade other nations to influence your positions rather than coercing them (Nye, 2004, 2011). After establishing Nye's argument, scholars discussed China's soft power diplomacy on a global scale, its soft power growth, and the power's constraints, especially in balancing its strategic goals and attracting influence (Shambaugh, 2013). For regional analysis, South Asia is considered as a significant site for China's soft power diplomacy initiatives because of its strategic importance, proximity to India, and development potential (Jain, 2017; Acharya, 2014). In a broader context, scholars have narrowed down to Bangladesh as a case study due to balancing foreign policy, rapid economic growth, and significant geographical location with South Asia countries (Sahoo, 2013). The findings affirm to projection of China's soft power through economic engagements such as trade, investment in infrastructure, and the Belt and Road initiative that have

affected elite perceptions and foreign policy influences (Alam et al.,2020; Sahoo, 2013; Rahman,2020). In addition, the article recognizes soft cultural power such as scholarships and establishing institutions like Confucius Institute as critical instruments of influence. However, their impact is limited to certain societal levels, as presented in various studies (Chakrovorty, 2020; Yildirim & Aslan, 2020). On the other hand, there is also critical scholarship that questions the trend of events as related to China's growing influence in Bangladesh regarding dependency, debt sustainability, and policy independence (Reza et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Existing scholarship argues that China's soft power, particularly its economic influence, is driven by pragmatic strategies. The literature also highlights the necessity for more inquiries into the influence of regional geopolitics and influences of domestic politics in shaping the soft power aspirations of Beijing in Bangladesh. It suggests that soft power attractions of China in Bangladesh are real, though attention is contested, with a combination of the development agreement and development cooperation along with desires and ambitions to propel the image and influence of China in Bangladesh and the region (Petry, 2022).

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for analysing China's soft power influence in Bangladesh examines two approaches: Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, focusing on attraction through culture, values, and diplomacy, and China's state-led model, which emphasizes economic, cultural, and political initiatives, especially through infrastructure projects. This research explores how both approaches have shaped Bangladesh's foreign policy and domestic affairs from 1975 to the present, analysing their impact on bilateral relations, regional cooperation, and governance. In contrast to coercion, soft power is defined by its ability to persuade another's preferences through attractiveness and charm (Nye, 2004a; 2011). It focuses broadly on culture, political values, and foreign policy. Nye argues that a country's appeal, rather than its military or economic might, can significantly influence international relations (Ullah et al., 2018: 236). In the context of China's soft power in South Asia, including Bangladesh, this concept helps understand how China seeks to build positive perceptions through cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and diplomatic outreach, influencing regional attitudes without resorting to force.

The Chinese concept of soft power extends beyond Nye's framework by emphasizing state-led initiatives, such as economic partnerships, infrastructure projects, and cultural diplomacy. Central to China's soft power is the Belt and Road Initiative, which promotes economic growth through investment in infrastructure across South Asia, including Bangladesh. This model combines political, economic, and cultural strategies to enhance China's influence, focusing on long-term partnerships and strengthening bilateral ties. It aims to shape perceptions through pragmatic cooperation, thereby fostering a positive image of China as a development partner in the region.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study examines the impact of Chinese soft power on Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions. A qualitative and descriptive approach is used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, drawing insights from a range of secondary sources such as books, newspaper articles, government reports, and scholarly journals. This method enables an in-depth analysis of the factors influencing Bangladesh's foreign policy shifts and their consequences on domestic politics. The research also aims to identify the causal factors behind these changes and analyze their effects on Bangladesh's political landscape. This study considers four political regimes as analytical cases (Zia, Ershad, Khaleda, Hasina).

Table 1: Evolution of Bangladesh–China Relations across Regime Periods

Regime Case	Governance Type	Primary Foreign Policy Anchor	Core Vector of Chinese Soft Power Explored
Ziaur Rahman	Military/Transitional	Sovereign Recognition & Identity Framing	Diplomatic validation, early state goodwill, and regional balancing.
H.M. Ershad	Military Dictatorship	Regime Legitimacy & Modernization	Infrastructural statecraft (Friendship bridges) and cultural exchanges.
Khaleda Zia	Center-Right Democracy	"Look East" Doctrine & Economic Alignment	Educational institutionalization, localized scholarships, and 2005 Friendship Year.
Sheikh Hasina	Dominant-Party/Civilian	Hyper-Development & Mega-Infrastructure	BRI integration, massive economic statecraft, and navigating the China-India paradox.

Source: Authors own derivation for the study.

4. CHINA'S SOFT POWER TOOLS: AN OVERVIEW

China's soft power approach plays a significant role in the country's global outreach. The strategy uses cultural, political, economic, and diplomatic instruments to improve China's international image and possibly its strategic influence across the globe. China's soft power is based on attraction and persuasion through cultural interaction and exchanges, educational cooperation, extensive media outreach, and considerable economic investments, primarily via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Establishing Confucius Institutes, educational scholarships, and opening Chinese study programs abroad are significant steps toward exporting Chinese culture, culturally influencing their respective societies, and ensuring long-term benefit in the form of loyalty to Beijing (Alom, Hosen, & Salam, 2024). Chinese digital media and how China perceives itself globally can be controlled through its channels such as CGTN and China Daily. Infrastructure investments provided by the BRI to developing countries is a soft power strategy focused on economic influence. The backlash is that the BRI leaves these countries in debt and beholden to China, benefitting China strategically. China could build ties and establishing confidence in foreign countries through people-to-people diplomacy, highlighted by its efforts in organizing cultural festivals, and supporting youth exchanges (Liu & Tsai, 2014).

Domestic issues like censorship limit the free flow of ideas and soft power influence. As an active participator in the United Nations and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), at times it appears that China is pushing a political agenda, and it is suspected of using its influence in these organizations to impact key decisions and undermine international consensus. While Chinese humanitarian aid, specifically during the pandemic, and associated vaccine diplomacy seem to be elevating the value of soft power, critics accuse China of using the efforts as an instrument to draw the world's attention away from Beijing's human rights record. China's soft power approach has resulted in its power and influence spread across the globe. The introduction of its policies has highlighted an element of hard power. This characteristic brings suspicion to the motives behind its Chinese influence (Jasmin, Sakib, & Shishir, 2023).

4.1. China's Soft Power Strategy in South Asia

China's soft power policy manifests in South Asia through a combination of economic statecraft, cultural engagement, elite capture, and strategic messaging. Rather than following one fixed model, China adjusts its approach (Bhuiyan et al., 2026) according to each country's political situation,

economic needs, and level of openness to Chinese influence. A major part of China's influence in South Asia comes through the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013. Through infrastructure financing in ports, roads, railways, and energy projects, China has expanded its presence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives, and Bangladesh. Many South Asian states find China attractive because it offers fast project delivery and fewer political conditions compared to Western or multilateral financing. However, Chinese influence through BRI is perceived as transactional, as opposed to traditional soft power, and viewed as material, as opposed to value based (Yasmin, 2023).

China has also strengthened its cultural and educational diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, scholarship programs, Mandarin-language education, and Chinese media outlets such as Xinhua, CGTN, and China Radio International. These efforts have had some influence, especially among young urban groups and business communities. Still, China's cultural appeal remains weaker than its economic attractiveness in most South Asian countries. Another important part of China's strategy is elite engagement and party-to-party diplomacy. The Chinese Communist Party maintains relationships with both ruling and opposition parties across the region through training programs, study visits, and political exchanges. In Bangladesh, for example, China has engaged with both the Awami League and the BNP, showing its pragmatic effort to maintain influence regardless of political changes (Jain, 2018).

The Chinese soft power project therefore has led to different degrees of success across South Asian countries. In the case of Pakistan, the long-standing strategic partnership with China, together with the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) provides the right atmosphere for leveraging genuflection to Chinese influence. In the case of Sri Lanka, Chinese loans and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects provided opportunities for civil society action following the leasing of the Hambantota port. There is ongoing debate among scholars whether this should be primarily attributed to Chinese policy or the poor financial management by Sri Lankan authorities. China presence in Maldives and Nepal is impacted by domestic political rifts and India-Chinese competition. Bangladesh stands apart because it has maintained more careful debt management and a balanced foreign policy, reducing the risk of deep dependency on China (Islam, Rahman, & Khan, 2025).

5. CHINA'S SOFT POWER INFLUENCE: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

China as a global power today has effectively employed its soft power in terms of impacts in international relations in various formats, such as economic and trade ties, cultural exchanges, collaborations through media, and more. While soft power theorists normally differentiate between the assets and resources used in exerting influence, a prominent Chinese scholar Li Mingjiang (2009) explains his view in what theorists classify as delineations. In the opinion, the manner of power engagement has much heftier implications than the resource employed. Even military resource, when used in a "soft" manner (like doing peacekeeping operations rather than waging wars) is considered of soft power nature. In terms of power resources- soft or otherwise, China's influence played a critical role in shaping the foreign policy of Bangladesh during the bilateral and multilayer engagements. The segments walk-through the elements of soft power of China in terms of the Bangladesh context – economic and political assistance, cultural power, media power, and resurgence of Confucius Institute in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2022).

5.1. Diplomatic Soft Power

Bangladesh-China relations developed from nominal diplomatic recognition and engagement in 1975 into Strategic Partnership of Cooperation by 2023. After the initial setback of opposing the membership

of Bangladesh in the UN, China recognised Bangladesh in 1975, after the political orientation of Bangladesh reverted from the Indo-Soviet camp. Bangladesh-China relations were given momentum following an official visit to China in 1977 by President Ziaur Rahman, and subsequent visits by General Ershad in the 1980s to institutionalize the bilateral relationship through trade-cultural agreements- aid, and military cooperation. From 1990 to 2015, Bangladesh-China collaboration advanced through 'Friendship Year' celebratory activities, economic partnership, regional cooperation visions and joint commitments through series of bilateral agreements (Hossain, 2022). In 2016, Bangladesh-China relations took a new turn when President Xi Jinping made a state visit to Dhaka, which culminated in signing of MoUs that elevated Bangladesh-China ties into a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation. By 2023, China emerged as a key development, diplomatic-military, and economic partner of Bangladesh, with Chinese cooperation anchored on a non-interference approach to domestic politics of Bangladesh, and maintaining bilateral relations across the various regimes of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2021).

5.2. Economic Soft Power: Trade, Investment & BRI

China's economic softpower in Bangladesh primarily developed through trade, investments and BRI-backed infrastructures. China became Bangladesh's biggest trading partner by 2006, despite having no land boundary it was able to establish itself as a leading trading influence in the country. The Belt and Road Initiative became the primary platform for Chinese softpower in Bangladesh as it backed large-scale projects such as the development of the Padma Bridge Rail Link, Karnaphuli Tunnel, upgrade of Cox's Bazar Airport, ICT infrastructures, power grid, multiple bridges and power projects. Chinese contractors won the majority of the construction contracts and increased investments in the country. Furthermore, China's duty-free provisions for 97% of Bangladeshi export products has strengthened the economic ties between the two and encouraged Bangladesh to remain friendly to China (Yasmin, 2023).

China's economic soft power in Bangladesh is manifested through trade, infrastructure and foreign direct investment, concessional loans, grants and preferential market access. China has been Bangladesh's largest trading partner since 2006. China replaced India as the largest trading partner of Bangladesh although there is no direct border between China and Bangladesh. China has become one of the major development partners of Bangladesh since Sheikh Hasina took over the office of the Prime Minister after the 2009 elections. This has particularly deepened after the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016. Under the Belt and Road, China announced to fund around $4.45 billion in 35 projects in Bangladesh (Obaidullah, 2026). Among some of the key projects announced were the Padma Bridge Rail Link project at $3.3 billion, Karnaphuli Tunnel at around $1.1 billion, Payra 1,320 MW coal-fired power plant at nearly $2.48 billion, National ICT Infra-Network project at around $1 billion, power grid improvement project at $1.32 billion, Payra 320 MW Thermal Power Plant at $1.56 billion, Upgradation of Cox's Bazar Airport among others.

The Chinese companies are also involved in construction of 21 bridges and implementation of 27 power projects in Bangladesh. Bekutia Bridge construction funded by China was completed in 2022 at a cost of about Tk 6.54 billion at close to $63 million through grant. There are about 670 Chinese companies operating in Bangladesh (Shahriar, Kea, & Qian, 2019). Around $22.94 billion worth of contracts have been awarded to Chinese companies for construction work. Total Chinese investment is estimated at around $7.07 billion. Contractual commitment of investment is about $7.07 billion. In 2020, China granted duty free market access to Bangladeshi products for 97% of the items covering 8,256

items. Through the economic assistance in the form of investment, loans, grants and trade preferences, the economic and energy infrastructre of Bangladesh is developing along with the deepening economic ties with Beijing (Islam, 2021).

5.3 Military Soft Power: Defence Cooperation

China's soft power in defense related matters in Bangladesh has come through arms supply, military training and institutional linkages since 1975. From 1975 to 1990, Bangladesh depended heavily on Chinese weapons, with about 78% of its arms coming from China. From the technical assistance, China was able to help Bangladeshi forces in operation and handling of the equipment. During the period of 2000-2010, under the Defense Cooperation Agreement formalized in 2002, the spectrum of Bangladeshi trading in Chinese arms increased. These included artillery systems, aircraft and missiles. Bangladesh became one of the most major beneficıary states for Chinese arms trade globally (Saimum, 2025). Between 2009 and 2014, about 82 percent of the arms imports by Bangladesh were derived from financial assistance such as Chinese credit and soft loans. China also helped set up strategic military infrastructure of Bangladesh such as missile facilities along its South eastern coast near Chittagong. From 2010-2023, Chinese supplied goods included tanks, frigates, missile boats, fighter jets, submarine-related infrastructure (BNS Sheikh Hasina naval base port facilities), and regular trainee of Bangladeshi officers to China. China's long term defense relationships with Bangladesh have made it the emerging key military supplier and strategic partner for Bangladesh with strong levels of interdependence at elite levels. The Golden Friendship-2024 joint exercise between both countries shows that the cooperation continues even in the years post 2023 (Mahmud, 2025).

5.4 Development Aid and Humanitarian Soft Power

China's humanitarian soft power in Bangladesh started with its generous donation of $4 million for flood relief even before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1974. Since then, China has consistently provided disaster relief and economic aid to Bangladesh, amounting to approximately $300 million by 2000. During the Rohingya refugee crisis (2017-2023), China extended humanitarian assistance by supplying tents, food, and medical support. China provided limited humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh, particularly through emergency shelter materials and food aid. In 2017, Chinese relief supplies for Rohingya refugees included 2,000 tents and 3,000 blankets, while in 2019 China distributed 2,500 tons of rice in southern Bangladesh. Therefore, China's humanitarian role can be understood as selective and supplementary rather than as a sustained large-scale humanitarian intervention (Ahmad & Naeem, 2020). Moreover, it acted as a mediator through its trilateral initiative with Myanmar and Bangladesh that sought to resolve the refugee crisis (2019). Further, China donated an approximate $1.5 million in 2023 to refugee camp sanitation and hygiene assistance. Similarly, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (2021), China supplied its free vaccines, emphasizing its growing health assistance image to Bangladesh (Kitano, 2018).

5.5. Cultural Soft Power: Language, Education & Exchange

China has promoted cultural diplomacy through festivals, exchange programs, research collaborations, and professional partnerships that encourage shared experiences and strengthen cultural ties. Through scholarships, higher education opportunities, and institutions such as Confucius Institutes, it attracts international students and supports knowledge sharing and academic cooperation. In addition,

collaborative media projects, access to cultural content, and broader infrastructure development further enhance connectivity and long-term engagement, reflecting the key mechanisms of soft power theory. The soft power of China's culture and education in Bangladesh has been developed through Confucius Institutes (CIs), academic partnerships, training programs and scholarships. Promoting Chinese language and culture became possible through the CI at North South University from 2006, as well as due to other Confucius Classroom initiatives, such as Shanto Mariam–Honghe Confucius Classroom (2023).

Academic collaboration in Bangladeshi and Chinese institutions became easier due to the establishment of research centers, including the Centre for China Studies at the University of Dhaka, and the China–South Asia Center for Socio-cultural Studies at NSU, which promote sectoral search on China in Bangladesh. Bilateral training programs also helped to develop people skills and establish institution-to-institution linkages through the Skills and Training Enhancement Project (STEP), as well as the Culture and Tourism Exchange Programme (2023–2027). China's scholarship schemes also feature big number of scholarship opportunities, such as the Chinese Government Scholarship (about 162 full scholarships annually since 2013, and further yearly quotas), Confucius Institute Scholarships, Silk Road Scholarships, and many others, offered by the Chinese Government to Bangladeshi students for studying in Chinese universities in the sectors including medicine, engineering, economy, and business (Yildirim & Aslan, 2020; Cho & Jeong, 2008; Amin & Nion, 2023).

China has expanded its soft-power influence in Bangladesh through cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, scholarships, media engagement, development assistance, and people-to-people cooperation. These initiatives have helped China build a positive image and strengthen its long-term relationship with Bangladesh. However, Chinese soft power is closely connected to trade, infrastructure investment, and defence cooperation, making it difficult to separate cultural attraction from economic and strategic influence. Bangladesh has responded pragmatically by maintaining close relations with China while balancing its traditional partnerships with India and Western countries.

Table 2: Summary of China's Soft Power Tools in Bangladesh (1975-2023)

Soft Power Tool	1975-1990	1991-2005	2006-2015	2016-2023
Diplomatic	Formal ties (1975); Zia's Beijing visit	Friendship Year; SAARC observer	Strategic partnership of cooperation	Xi's 2016 state visit; Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
Military	78% arms from China (1975-80)	Defense Cooperation Agreement (2002)	Submarine base; 82% arms loans	Joint exercises; jets, tanks, frigates
Economic/BRI	Early trade & $300M aid	China top trade partner (2006)	BRI signed (2013); BCIM corridor	$4.45B / 35 projects; Padma, Karnaphuli
Cultural/Education	Cultural agreements; delegations	Cultural events; tourism programs	Confucius Inst. NSU (2006); CGS	CCS at U. Dhaka; STEP; Silk Road scholarship
Media/Info	State visits coverage	Xinhua bureau; media agreements	UNB-Xinhua pact; CGTN content	Embedded editorials; influencer campaigns
Humanitarian Aid	$4M flood aid (1974); disaster relief	Recurring flood & disaster aid	Rohingya aid; COVID vaccines	$1.5M Rohingya hygiene project (2023)
Multilateral	Blocked UN seat until 1974	ASEAN Forum; SAARC observer	AIIB membership; BCIM forum	Silk Road Chamber; CIPS payments

Source: Authors own derivation for the study

China has utilized various aspects of soft power to expand its influence in Bangladesh from 1975 to the present date in 2023. In the early years from diplomatic recognition in 1975, China has focused on sending and receiving, establishing formal diplomatic relations, sending and receiving high diplomatic visits, early trade, providing development assistance, signing cultural documents, and offering disaster relief assistance. From 1991 to 2005, the Chinese influence in Bangladesh has expanded through friendship diplomacy, defence cooperation, growth in trade, cultural events, tourism programs, media agreements, and continued humanitarian assistance. The period from 2006 to 2015 was characterized by more institutionalized aspects of Chinese influence, with the establishment of strategic partnership, setting up of Confucius Institutes, extension of scholarships, media cooperation, establishing the BCIM corridor, membership in the AIIB, and increased engagement under the BRI. From 2016 to the present, the phase of Chinese influence is the most profound, particularly with the delivery of Xi Jinping's state visit to Bangladesh, where the relationship had now shifted to comprehensive strategic partnership.

Between the years of 2016 to date in 2023, through sending high diplomatic visits, large infrastructure projects, BRI investments, educational scholarships, expansion of Chinese language programs, placement of media narratives, technology cooperation, Rohingya-related assistance, COVID-19 vaccines, and engagement in various multilateral platforms, China has sought to entrench its image as a major development partner of Bangladesh modern-day. In short, the soft power of China in Bangladesh has now expanded from its original form, which was characteristic of diplomatic friendship and aid-related dedication, to a much wider coverage composed of infrastructure development assistance, educational programs, cultural exchanges, media activities, technology-related assistance, humanitarian help, and elite-level cooperation. Some elements such as arms supply and military-based interference are more strategic or elite instruments, not pure soft power. Certain elements are more strategic and elite cooperation than soft power in nature. Ultimately, the most successful soft power tool employed by

China in Bangladesh is development diplomacy. Overall, the most successful tool of soft power that China was able to use in Bangladesh is development diplomacy, particularly through infrastructure and economic projects under the BRI framework.

6. DISCUSSION: SHIFTING FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS IN BANGLADESH (1975-2023)

The foreign policy of Bangladesh from 1975 to 2023 illustrates how the country responded to the changes in foreign policy over time. A study of the foreign policy of the Zia regime, the Ershad regime, the Khaleda Zia regime, and the Hasina regime reveal how the relationship of the country changed with the rest of the world. Similarly, a discussion about which regime maintained a closer relationship with China and why uncovers the intricacies of the policy of Bangladesh in this regard**.** Across In Bangladesh's major political eras, its foreign policy has sought to balance the competing interests of China, India, and the West. However, the emphasis on each of these powers has varied over time. During the Zia era (1975-1981), Bangladesh's foreign policy emphasized ties with China and the West, particularly the United States, India was engaged cautiously and the economic relationship with China was limited (Thamim, 2020). The Ershad era (1982-1990) continued the alignment with China and Western countries, with India relations improving only slightly, marred by distrust, while China was expanding its role in infrastructural and military cooperation. During the first and second periods of Khaleda Zia (1991-1996, 2001-2006), Bangladesh maintained close relationships with both China (including economic investment) and the West, while relations with India were strained due to longstanding border and water-sharing disputes. During the Hasina years (1996-2001, 2009-2023), Bangladesh's foreign policy maneuvers showed an increasing balancing approach, with deep normalization of relations with India, a heavy economic relationship with China through infrastructural developments, and increased balancing with the West and multilateral institutions (Yasmin, 2023).

China–Bangladesh relations are shaped by strong trade, infrastructure, and defence ties, but the relationship also contains important limits and concerns. China remains Bangladesh's largest import source, supplying machinery, electronics, textile inputs, and industrial materials essential for Bangladesh's export-oriented economy, although the trade balance is highly unequal, and Bangladesh continues to face a large trade deficit. Since joining the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016, Bangladesh has received Chinese financing and support for major infrastructure projects, including power plants, the Karnaphuli tunnel, and transport and energy networks (Rolland, 2019). These projects have helped the Bangladeshi government present visible signs of development, but they have also raised questions about loan transparency, environmental effects, project quality, and reliance on Chinese contractors and labor. China is also a major defence partner, supplying military equipment such as naval vessels, submarines, and aircraft, which has occasionally created concern for India due to regional strategic competition. Although Bangladesh has so far managed Chinese financing more cautiously than some South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, concerns about external debt sustainability, strategic dependency, and rising debt-servicing costs have become more significant in recent years (Hossain, 2022).

Bangladesh's foreign policy from 1975 to 2023 shifted from ideological alignment to pragmatic balancing. In the China context, Dhaka gradually used Beijing as a counterweight to India, a source of military equipment, and later a major development and infrastructure partner. This shift fits Bangladesh's broader foreign policy principle of sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement, and

international cooperation under Article 25 of the Constitution.

Table 3: Changing Foreign Policy Dynamics and China's Soft Power Influence in Bangladesh

Ruling era	Foreign policy dynamics	China's soft power influence
Ziaur Rahman era, 1975–1981	Bangladesh moved away from strong dependence on the Indo-Soviet bloc and looked for new partners, especially China, Pakistan, the Muslim world, and the West. Formal China-Bangladesh diplomatic relations were established in October 1975.	China's influence began through diplomatic recognition, military support, aid, and elite-level political contact. For Bangladesh, China became useful as a balancing power against India.
H. M. Ershad era, 1982–1990	Ershad followed a pragmatic foreign policy to gain regime legitimacy and external support. Bangladesh maintained ties with India but deepened relations with China for strategic and military reasons.	China's tools were mainly defence cooperation, high-level visits, trade, aid, and cultural diplomacy. During this period, China became a reliable partner for Bangladesh's military and ruling elite.
Khaleda Zia era, 1991–1996 and 2001–2006	BNP governments generally maintained a stronger China-friendly position as part of balancing India's regional influence. The relationship became more institutionalized after Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy.	China expanded influence through arms supply, trade growth, diplomatic support, training, and formal defence cooperation. The 2002 defence cooperation agreement was a major step in formalizing military ties.
Sheikh Hasina era, 1996–2001 and 2009–2023	Hasina's governments were usually closer to India, but they also followed a pragmatic "development-first" approach with China. This shows Bangladesh's balancing strategy: good relations with India, but deep economic cooperation with China.	China's influence shifted from military-centered cooperation to development-led soft power. The biggest turning point was Xi Jinping's 2016 visit, when relations were upgraded to a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation and BRI cooperation expanded.

Source: Author's own Derivation for the Study

From 1975 to 2023, Bangladesh's foreign policy toward China evolved from strategic recognition and military dependence into a broader development-oriented partnership. Successive governments used China differently: Ziaur Rahman opened the relationship to balance India, H. M. Ershad institutionalized military and political cooperation, Khaleda Zia deepened defence and trade ties, and Sheikh Hasina transformed China into a major infrastructure and BRI-linked development partner. From Bangladesh's perspective, China's soft power worked because it offered practical benefits: aid, arms, infrastructure, trade, scholarships, diplomatic support, and a non-interference approach. Thus, China's influence in Bangladesh grew not through ideology, but through pragmatic economic and strategic utility.

Era 1: Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981): The Founding Pivot

Zia-ur-Rahman opened a new chapter for Bangladesh where the country had more opportunities to walk away from its known foreign policy trends specially with India. While determining the foreign policy Zia-ur-Rahman's ultimate priority was to lessen the dependence on one power particularly India but rather secure Bangladesh with friends from across the globe (Hossain, 1981). Three principles dominated his policy: (i) to minimize dependence on India and develop a diversified approach to diplomatic and economic relations (the country was still recovering from the recent war); (ii) to reintegrate into the Muslim community and develop ties with China as well as the West; (iii) to take an active part in regional

and international organizations (Maniruzzaman, 1977). It was a strategic reorientation. Ziaur Rahman broke with India and the Soviet bloc his predecessors had been dealing with; he cultivated relations with the United States and Western Europe, Africa and the Middle East instead. He set out to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, and the People's Republic of China-Pakistan's ally, which opposed Bangladesh's establishment and didn't recognize it until 1975. The ties with China should be seen then in this geopolitical context. The Chinese government had backed the Pakistan position and was opposed to the establishment of the new country (Fazil & Ahmad, 2022).

The People's Republic of China did not recognize it until 1975. It was in January 1977, when the military ruler visited China as chief martial law administrator, that initiatives to forge ties with China started. The Chinese government entered the game because actions were directed in this period to develop relations with them. As the Zia regime set out to cultivate China, it was decided by the Soviet Union that it was fitting to establish relations with the new government in Bangladesh and attempt to prevent it from going too far in its contacts with China. In hard terms, the most visible aspect of the shift was military spending. From 1975 to 1980, we see that 78% of the importation of weapons was done with China. With China defense assistance was at the heart of the relationship these years (Garver, 1992).

Era 2: H.M. Ershad (1982–1990): Institutionalising Without Innovating

During General Hussain Muhammad Ershad's rule (1982–1990), Bangladesh's foreign policy was shaped by domestic instability and international challenges. Hence, there was a need to maintain a compromise on both domestic and foreign fronts. During this era, there was also a change in the Bangladesh's foreign policy shift in terms of relations with India and China. The successive regime of Ershad had to deal with complex emergencies and demands that defined the region's security, economics, and alignments in South Asia (Bertocci, 1985). He was the one who embedded the process of making the private ownership and liberalisation in the Bangladeshi economy. He travelled to China five times in his nine years of rule. He publicly supported the "One China policy" and never attempted to make a friend out of Taiwan. H.M. Ershad (1982–1990), was also 'pro-China' due to an immediate purpose of having special relation with the USA, China, Pakistan, Japan and Muslim countries to counter the Indo-Soviet influence in the South Asian region. At that time, China was the main weapons supplier to Bangladesh Armed Forces but the maintenance of the MiG-21 fighter aircrafts were assigned to the Soviet Union. Ershad sought more cooperation with the wealthy Muslim countries. The Ershad Era was more like a consolidation chapter. Although economic engagement was not so much, China's soft power expanded on the military level and high-level visits continued to be crucial (Sarker, 2014).

Era 3: Khaleda Zia (1991–1996 & 2001–2006): "Look East" and Structural Deepening

The political transition in Bangladesh characterized by the democratic election in 1991 led to the country's foreign policy under the leadership of Khaleda Zia. Compared to the earlier military governments, the new democratic regime of Bangladesh had a different perspective on foreign policy in line with its domestic and development agenda (Baxter & Rahman, 1991). The period between 1991-1996 when Begum Khaleda Zia was prime minister saw normal and tense relations with India, specially over the Ganges water treaty and support for insurgents in India (Habibullah, 2020). The policy of the Zia government was east look translated into policy on the ground, forming a strategic alliance with China and the Islamic countries, verging on hostility with India. The trade of China with Bangladesh

now grew to replace India. The relationship with China which grew during the late President Ziaur Rahman, took roots in the years 1991-1996 during the "look east" policy of Begum Khaleda Zia.

A major achievement of her government was the Defence Cooperation Agreement, Bangladesh's first such agreement, which strengthened military training and arms cooperation.. The 2002 defence cooperation agreement was particularly significant. It strengthened military training, defence contacts and Bangladesh's procurement of relatively affordable Chinese military equipment. During the same visit, agreements were also reached on economic assistance, concessional finance economic and the construction of the Sixth Bangladesh–China Friendship Bridge (Chakrovorty, 2020). Despite the complications, the government recognized the growing Chinese economic influence and the importance of maintaining regional security in cooperation with India. Bangladesh had demonstrated the ability to follow a sophisticated foreign policy and pursue its national interest in this changed context. The Khaleda Zia era shifted Bangladesh from a narrowly South Asian diplomatic orientation toward a more diversified Asian strategy. The Look East policy laid the institutional and strategic foundation for the much deeper Bangladesh–China partnership that developed under subsequent governments.

Era 4: Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001, 2009-2023): The Great Balancing Act

Sheikh Hasina's periods in office marked Bangladesh's transition from a largely South Asia-focused foreign policy toward a more pragmatic, development-oriented, and multi-aligned strategy. Her government maintained particularly close political and security relations with India while expanding economic, infrastructure, defence, and trade cooperation with China. At the same time, Bangladesh sought productive relations with the United States, Russia, Japan, the European Union, and Muslim-majority countries. This approach can be described as a "great balancing act": Bangladesh avoided formally joining any major-power bloc and attempted to obtain development benefits from competing partners. Bangladesh Foreign Policy has been a complex mix under Hasina's reign. It shifted from prioritizing strong bilateral ties with India to a more complex policy which favors economic wellbeing of Bangladesh rooted in strong FCA with the Chinese. The Chinese influence on Bangladesh through soft power during the Hasina rule has been great, and is tied largely to economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and strategic alignment (Chakma, 2015). Hasina followed a balancing act with the three big powers, which allowed Bangladesh to obtain the best for itself while minimizing dependencies and interferences in its domestic issues. China has profited a lot during Hasina's tenure.

However, because it has always claimed to be politically neutral, there is less anti-Chinese feeling than one would expect in Bangladesh (Ahmad & Nasrin, 2026). On the military level, from 2010 to 2020, 73.6% of the arms acquisitions of Bangladesh were supplied by China. Beijing sent two refurbished submarines to Dhaka, and it built the base of the submarine BNS Sheikh Hasina in Cox's Bazar. The primary conflict of the Hasina years was the fight between India and China for the strategic heart of Bangladesh (Xin & Worm, 2010). It is a poorly concealed secret that Hasina returned to the power in 2008 under the support of India. Thus, Delhi persuaded its Bangladesh counterpart in 2016 to abandon the Sonadia project, a deep water port that would be built by China. At the same time, at the end of 2023, there are already 700 Chinese companies working in Bangladesh. By maintaining close ties with China, India, and the West, Bangladesh pursued a balanced foreign policy to protect its national interests, promote economic growth, and strengthen regional cooperation. This is also influenced by global issues such as climate change, pushing countries like Bangladesh to seek cooperation with

developed nations for trade, aid and environmental cooperation (Saimum, 2020).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

According to the analytical study, there are some significant limitations in deriving conclusions on soft power of China in Bangladesh. Firstly, soft power is very difficult to measure and quantify as it is exercised through indirect means i.e. culture, soft diplomacy, media perception, favorable or unfavorable perception instead of explicit data and numbers, making accurate estimation difficult. Secondly, it mainly relies on secondary sources, including academic articles, government documents, media reports, and policy analyses. These sources may contain political or institutional bias. Similarly, continuous and comparable data on Chinese soft-power activities in Bangladesh are limited. Information about scholarships, cultural programmes, media engagement, development assistance, and public attitudes is often incomplete. The study is also limited by the lack of continuous data and frequent changes in public opinion. These factors make it difficult to identify a consistent pattern in Bangladesh's balancing of major powers. Separating cause and effect is also challenging because domestic politics strongly influence foreign relations. At the same time, concerns have been raised that Chinese loans and infrastructure financing often linked with repayment through Chinese goods or contractors may create debt sustainability risks rather than ensuring long-term economic growth. Finally, establishing a clear causal relationship is difficult. Bangladesh's foreign policy is influenced not only by Chinese activities but also by domestic politics, leadership preferences, economic needs, public opinion, and changing regional conditions. Future research should collect primary data through surveys, interviews, and focus-group discussions involving students, academics, government officials, journalists, military experts, and civil-society representatives. This would provide a clearer understanding of how different groups perceive China. Future studies could also compare China's soft-power strategies with those of India, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. Such comparisons would help explain which country has the greatest influence.

8. FINDINGS and CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the soft power of China has grown vastly in Bangladesh from 1975 to 2023 as defined through the economic, diplomatic, cultural, and strategic channels with development diplomacy proving to be the most successful. As the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh since 2006, China's influence over the development of the country's infrastructure as contributor in the production and financing of rail, sea, and road networks as well as several other public work projects such as power plants, bridges, and tunnels facilities to trade are significant to its development. The findings suggest that Chinese soft power is strongest at the elite and state level primarily because it was able to infiltrate the local policy preferences based on narratives around development, tied aid, and strategic cooperation. Its impact on the level of culture and society, however, is relatively weak. Militarily, China has been a dominant supplier of defence materials to Bangladesh, impacting their long-term institutional dependence on Chinese military hardware, arms procurement as well as military training. Culturally, China's soft power has been present in Bangladesh through the establishment of schools for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese language, scholarship programs, a Chinese presence in the Bangladeshi media and other educational institutions through partnerships, collaborations, and exchange programs. The impact of these on the scope of Bangladesh's culture is marginal versus dominant power

Chinese economic influence. Politically, the findings suggest that the emphasis on cultural and ideological integration has shifted over time and poised Bangladesh to move from one of ideological harmony with China in the early years of independence Towards that of a pragmatic policy of balancing among China, India, and the West. As such, Bangladesh is primarily using China as a development partner, if only to create a balance against Anglo-American influence. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that Chinese soft power in Bangladesh is exclusively pragmatic, utilitarian, and instrumental rather than value based.

The study concludes that China's soft power has played a significant and growing role in shaping Bangladesh's foreign policy and development trajectory between 1975 and 2023. The evidence shows that Bangladesh's guiding foreign policy principle of "Friendship to all, malice to none" has enabled a pragmatic balancing approach in which China is engaged as a key development partner without full political alignment. China's influence is most visible through economic engagement under the Belt and Road Initiative, extensive infrastructure development, trade expansion, cultural and educational exchanges, and strategic cooperation. However, the conclusion also emphasizes that Bangladesh remains cautious about overdependence on China due to concerns about debt sustainability, strategic autonomy, and regional geopolitical competition, particularly with India and Western actors. Overall, the study argues that China's soft power in Bangladesh is not based on ideological attraction but on practical utility, where economic incentives and development cooperation are the primary drivers of influence, while Bangladesh continues to carefully manage its sovereignty through a multi-vector foreign policy strategy.

Acknowledgements
No Acknowledgements to Declare.

Declaration of Competing Interest
No Conflicts of Interest.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process
While preparing this work, the authors used Grammarly and CoPilot or ChatGPT to improve the manuscript's readability and language. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Funding
No Funding.

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