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Green Soft Power? Checking in on China as a Responsible Stakeholder¹

Abstract: By assuming a proactive role in international environmental regimes and extending the 'green' dimensions of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been seeking to promote itself as a leader and responsible stakeholder in global environmental governance. This article examines this development concerning the notion of China's 'soft power' and, more specifically, the notion of 'green soft power' – which aims to bridge the traditional concept of soft power with a state's behavior on environmental and climate issues. China presents an interesting case since it has accrued a considerable amount of green soft power through its multilateral environmental diplomacy practiced at the Conferences of the Parties (COPs), the high-profile annual United Nations Climate Change Conferences, but its patchy deployment of environmental standards in the bilateral engagements under the BRI highlights the contradictions in referring to China as a green soft power. With these ideas in mind, this article holds that in the search to understand the evolving nature of China's responsible stakeholder role, attention should be given to exploring the notion of green soft power.

Keywords: *China, soft power, foreign policy, BRI, environmental diplomacy*

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Introduction

Poorly ranked in multiple indexes on environmental and sustainability issues and notorious for its heavy carbon footprint, China has nevertheless sought to bolster its role and eventually steer the global environment and climate agenda. Accordingly, China began to project itself as a “responsible stakeholder” in the way that some analysts hoped and called for (Zoellick, 2005; Mierzejewski & Kowalski, 2018, p. 14). In 2005, Robert Zoellick claimed that responsible stakeholders “recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system” (p. 8). Zoellick singled out China and said the country had both a responsibility and foreign policy opportunities to be a responsible stakeholder. This article poses that by prioritizing the natural environment as part of its foreign policies and acting as an agenda-setter in international environmental regimes, the Chinese state can enhance its image as a responsible stakeholder, with potential benefits including improving the country’s attractiveness, thereby engaging in the generation of “green soft power”. This particular type of soft power has been mentioned only briefly in a few academic and media publications (Min & Montero, 2019; Nicolai, 2022), often in the context of China’s grand connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Thus, it is ripe for further elaboration. Green soft power is conceived here as a soft power built upon a state’s foreign environmental policy.

Understanding the nature of the relationship and interplay between soft power and the necessity for a state to “be green” or “be seen to be green” – implying that a state has stand-out policies that reflect the highest regional and/or global standards and best practices in environmental and/or climate policies, together with an exemplary record in low carbon emissions and optimal use of renewable energies within their national energy mix – remains somewhat neglected and therefore ready for appraising. It is noteworthy that successive iterations of the World Value Survey (WVS) show how citizens have increasingly valued the environment to the detriment of traditional economic growth. According to the WVS, the proportion of respondents prioritizing environmental protection over economic growth grew from 44.4 percent to 54.5 percent between 2000 and 2020 (World Value Survey [WVS], n.d.). Thus, it is possible to surmise that populations respond positively when a country proactively develops its environmental policies and status and becomes “greener” and also that when a foreign country adds strong green credentials to its foreign policy and soft power toolkit, populations will see that country in a more positive light.

With these ideas in mind, this article holds that in the search to understand the evolving nature of China’s responsible stakeholder role, attention should be given to exploring the notion of green soft power. This article is organized as follows. Part one introduces and discusses the notion of green soft power by referring to Joseph S. Nye’s traditional three-resource model of soft power. Part two then looks at China as a potential green soft power producer by considering international and bilateral contexts of China’s environmental diplomacy.

The Green–Soft Power Linkage

This section considers the link between soft power, foreign environmental policy, and diplomacy. It explains this link by referring to Nye’s original conceptualization of soft power.

According to its chief architect, Joseph S. Nye (1990), soft power is about the power of attraction, the power to get others to “want what you want” via tools of persuasion rather than coercion and threats. Accordingly, it is about building coalitions and networks amongst states based on shared values, aims, and objectives. This basic understanding of soft power can be juxtaposed quite neatly to the domain of environmental policy. The past 30 years have witnessed a rise in global efforts to tackle and pre-empt environmental risks and to forge international efforts to address climate change. Within this context, China has grown in importance as an agenda setter, which to some extent gels with Zoellick’s notion of China becoming a responsible stakeholder. Although China has improved its standing and recognition as a responsible actor in climate change governance (Lian & Li, 2023), the motivation to acquire this status and the way it is then used in foreign policy do not necessarily link with strengthening the existing liberal international order but rather with devising an alternative one. Accordingly, China has been crafting its soft power in general and green soft power in particular to render itself attractive to others and with a reputation for environmental responsibility.

Nye’s broad definition of soft power remains attractive with environment-related elements of a state’s foreign policies and how other states and societies perceive them positively or negatively. Nye’s (2008, p. 107) three resource-model of soft power, which emphasizes culture, political values, and foreign policies, provides a solid point of departure for this article as it identifies specifically foreign environmental policy as a critical green soft power resource. To demonstrate how green soft power works, this paper also distinguishes this power’s instruments, transmitters, and receivers (Table 1).

Table 1. Green soft power in action

Green soft power resource	Instruments	Key transmitters	Intended receivers
A state’s foreign environmental policies	Multilateral and bilateral environmental diplomacy	International organizations (e.g., relevant UN agencies and programs); media, relevant ministries, think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), academia, and social media influencers.	Foreign publics and governments

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Given the high-stakes nature of environmental and particularly climate politics and its reputation dynamics (Vogler, 2016, p. 110), how states contribute to the international environmental regime has implications for their reputation at home and abroad and, thus, their soft power credentials. Environmental diplomacy is a crucial instrument of green soft power. Environmental diplomacy or “diplomacy for the environment” (Benedick, 1999) is understood here as efforts between two or more states to jointly address ecological problems through negotiation and collaboration (Suskind, 1994) or to avoid possible negative impacts of their cooperation on local ecosystems. This type of diplomacy is exercised, for instance, during the annual treaty-signing rituals at the Conferences of the Parties (COPs). Green soft power also requires transmitters to carry and inform the intended soft power receivers (foreign governments and the public). Transmitters may include international organizations (e.g., relevant UN agencies and programs), media, ministries, think tanks, NGOs, and social media influencers. Because (green) soft power is about shaping preferences and affecting foreign governments and the public, these transmitters must communicate in English, a lingua franca used by many foreign audiences, or in the language of a particular soft power receiver.

As already noted, research suggests that part of a state’s soft power and its attractiveness to foreign publics derives from the extent of its “greenness” and that being outwardly pro-environment or motivated by “green” concerns gives rise to positive perceptions and reputational benefits. Germany’s conspicuous environmentally conscious foreign policies, particularly on tackling climate change, have earned the country a considerable amount of reputational power and credit (Fischer & Sciarini, 2015), which has reinforced its image as a responsible actor, thus strengthening its soft power and attractiveness to others (Wyligala, 2021). Another example, in this context, is Greta Thunberg’s activism and its positive effects on Sweden’s international reputation (Soft Power 30, 2019). Also, Chen Gang (2009, p. 53–54) asserts that China’s multilateral environmental diplomacy and, mainly, its “international environmental cooperation serves the fundamental national interest and is conducive to the elevation of China’s international image and soft power in the long run”.

The link between foreign environmental policies and diplomacy with soft power is also seen in global soft power rankings that measure soft power based on several indicators. For instance, the Soft Power 30 (2019) rank includes an “engagement” sub-index which, among other things, emphasizes countries’ commitments to international environmental challenges. The Global Soft Power Index (n.d.) distinguishes “acts to protect the environment” and “supports global efforts to counter climate change” among its indicators. These ranks confirm the relevance of green issues and responsibility towards environmentalism as an integral element of soft power, as a concept and in practice.

China: Softening and Greening?

Whether China can be characterized as wielding green soft power remains ambiguous and interesting at the same time. Therefore, before attempting to demonstrate China's green soft power in action and related narrative, this section reviews key arguments about China's softness and greenness.

Nye and others claim that because of its autocratic governance and distance from Western liberal values, China and other authoritarian trendsetters are "ill-equipped to 'do' soft power well" (Walker, 2018, p. 18). According to this argument, because "in China, soft power is primarily a top-down, party-led project" (Sørensen, 2015, p. 114), not "the product of an autonomous civil society" (Wilson, 2015, p. 287), the country can only mimic the soft power performance of democratic states. To echo Nye's claims, the generation and transmission of soft power by liberal democratic states frequently involve civil society actors, NGOs, and individual and business enterprises as core actors, who often play defining roles (Nye, 2002). It is also the case that civil society and non-governmental actors will often actually 'initiate' a soft power action of policy since, in a liberal democracy, the state does not have a monopoly on soft power or its usage. In contrast, and this is one of Nye's main points, an authoritarian state, such as China, by definition, will not rely on such a wide variety of actors from the domain of civil society to initiate, generate, and transmit soft power. Consequently, in China, soft power, including green soft power, is firmly in the hands of the state and the ruling party's elite.

Academic literature has started to discuss soft power concerning non-democratic states and how such policies that do not align with liberal norms interpret soft power. Joshua Kurlantzick (2007, p. 6) argues, "Soft power has changed ... both the Chinese government and many nations influenced by China enunciate a broader idea of soft power than did Nye". The notion of China as a wielder of soft power was recently noted by the Global Soft Power Index (n.d.), which placed China as the world's fourth and fifth holder of soft power in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Far from ignoring the criticisms of China being a soft power, when necessary, this article questions the "softness" of China's supposed soft power strategies. On this point, this study follows Nye's (2018) characterization of soft power as "not good or bad in itself." The question of whether states need to be inherently liberal and democratic to assume the identity of soft power is relevant to understanding China's green soft power for two reasons. First, according to Heidi Wang-Keading (2018), "President Xi never openly endorsed the norm of 'liberal environmentalism' which has underpinned several institutional achievements since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit". As defined by Steven Bernstein (2020, p. 146), liberal environmentalism "describes the normative compromise in global governance that has predicated international environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order". However, scholars note that "China can be expected to co-operate 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 constitutes an important part of its overall development” (Chan et al., 2008, p. 292). Notably, such behavior aligns with China’s posture as a responsible stakeholder, which Zoellick called for. Second, both environmental diplomacy and soft power, as seen by Nye and others, feature the participation of civil society actors, including NGOs, independent experts, scientists, and research institutes engaged in research, advocacy, and monitoring of environmental issues (Susskind, 1994). While Chinese NGO activity has emerged, the extent of their contribution to state environmental diplomacy and building green soft power reserves is hard to gauge. Liu Lei, Pu Wang, and Tong Wu (2017) noticed that “the ability of [Chinese] domestic NGOs to participate in climate change negotiations is still relatively weak”. While they can participate in COP meetings through official channels or as part of international networks most of them “believe that their goal at the COP meetings is to monitor the negotiations and make a good case for solutions to climate change to the international community. However, they are not entirely familiar with the negotiation process. They cannot yet sufficiently understand the complexity of the negotiations in the way that international NGOs such as Greenpeace or WWF” (Lei et al., 2017).

Another argument challenging the notion of Chinese green soft power is linked to the state’s poor environmental record. Leading rankings of countries’ performance on various green and sustainability issues see China as a poor performer, placing the county in low positions (e.g., EPI – 160/180; Earth.org’s Global Sustainability Index – 136/218; EPI, n.d.; Global Sustainability Index, n.d.). Though the assumptions, methodologies, and indicators differ between such rankings, the fact that China is the world’s top greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter significantly affects its performance. However, once the different elements of these scorings are examined, they reveal a mixed picture. For example, under the EPI (2022) categories of sanitation drinking water (54/180) and Marine Trophic Index (31/180), China is much better rated than on its GHG emissions per capita (136/180). Despite an increase in GHG emissions, China has improved its overall EPI (2022) score by 11.4 aggregated points over a ten-year period, which, according to global data produced by Yale, represents a better-than-average rate of improvement. The Climate Change Performance Index regards China’s climate policy as ambitious, with clear policies and timelines. Moreover, the index report notes that “China’s international climate policy rates a medium, as the country will ban overseas coal projects. Yet at the same time, its planning of new domestic coal plants undermines this policy” (Climate Change Performance Index, 2023).

Nevertheless, the selective and relatively positive aspects of China’s environmental performance highlighted by these rankings, predominantly its ambitious carbon neutrality goals and massive renewable investments, create the foundation for Beijing’s green soft power, including the narrative that surrounds its exercises in environmental diplomacy, as the next section of this paper demonstrates.

China's green soft power in action

Intriguingly, a state with such a mixed and relatively poor environmental record could become a responsible stakeholder in environmental governance, including taking a leadership role at the COPs and promoting green, eco-friendly concepts and policies as part of its grand foreign strategies such as the BRI. For instance, in September 2021, Beijing released The Global Development Initiative Concept Paper – Building a 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Development, emphasizing BRI's role in fostering sustainable development, including its environmental dimension. In particular, it points to climate change and green development as one of the Global Development Initiative's priority areas (State Council Information Office, 2021). Moreover, China strengthened its responsible stakeholder posture by referring to its commitments to environmental and climate issues in the Global Community of Shared Future White Paper issued in September 2023. It postulates, 'We should build an ecosystem that puts Mother Nature and green development first ... We should reconcile industrial development with nature... We should pursue green, low-carbon, circular, and sustainable development (MFA of the PRC, 2023).

This section first demonstrates how China's goals and posture in international environmental governance have changed over time, looking at it through the prism of its environmental diplomacy at the COPs and the earlier equivalents of these events. These particular environmental diplomacy exercises mirror China's posture from a marginal player to an agenda setter who accepts responsibility for environmental and climate problems. Second, this section identifies whether this posture aligns with China's performance under the BRI.

Characteristics of China's Multilateral Environmental Diplomacy

Since the UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, where China's delegation demanded the right to undertake industrial development with the memorable metaphor, "We should not give up eating for fear of choking", its participation in international environmental regimes has changed dramatically (Gang, 2009). China has become active in negotiating and willing to accept multilateral treaties. Because of the high profile of climate politics, China's environmental diplomacy practiced at the COPs has the potential to contribute to its green soft power. Moreover, taking a proactive role, shoring up the legitimacy of their actions, and eventually steering the annual ritual of multilateral negotiations at the COPs, as Beijing attempts to do, nurture a state's international reputation, which, as noted earlier, is part of green soft power.

Below are highlights from several COPs that saw fundamental shifts in China's standing.

- *The UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.* Aligning with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, which acknowledges individual states' asymmetrical commitments

to address climate change, China “opposed a legally binding emission reduction target for developing countries. It insisted that industrialized countries transfer advanced, environmentally friendly technologies and offer financial aid to developing countries to fight climate change” (Li, 2009, p. 230). Despite opposing joint legally binding targets – which would therefore bind it – in Rio, Beijing gained green soft power from this meeting, especially in the global South, by speaking on its behalf and consolidating a solid coalition, namely, the G77 plus China (Li, 2009, p. 230).

- *The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto, 1997 (COP3)*. Still adhering to the principle of common but different responsibilities, Beijing achieved diplomatic success in Kyoto. COP3 resulted in the first legally binding climate change agreement, the Kyoto Protocol, which endorsed differential commitments to the international climate regime between developed and developing countries. Notably, it obliged the former “to achieve a collective 5.2 percent reduction [of GHG emissions] against a 1990 baseline” (Vogler, 2016, p. 9). Paradoxically, while assigning responsibility for making reductions to developed countries, the Kyoto negotiations’ results helped China, the second-largest carbon dioxide emitter, preserve its favorable international image as a responsible power (Vogler, 2016, p. 232). Moreover, China’s environmental diplomacy in Kyoto seems to have been effective in elevating the state’s international stature relative to the US’s performance or, to some extent, because of it. While it is highly doubtful that China would have ratified the Kyoto Protocol if the agreement had imposed the same obligations on Beijing as on Washington, the US’s withdrawal benefited China’s soft power capabilities even among developed states. Moreover, this US–China soft power game revealed that a refusal to shoulder responsibility for global environmental issues makes a state look selfish and weakens its international reputation.
- *The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, 2009 (COP15)*. Just before the summit, China declared it would cut “its carbon dioxide (CO₂) emission per unit of GDP by 40 to 45 percent by 2020 compared with the 2005 level” (Gao, 2018, p. 220) to arrive in Copenhagen as a responsible stakeholder and therefore legitimize its place among the climate negotiation leaders. With the most significant CO₂ emissions since 2006 and a GDP close to Japan’s by the time of the summit, China had begun to lose its standing as a responsible player and a G77 representative. This shows a link between China’s domestic environmental problems and its capabilities to influence and attract others. Consistent with this, Björn Conrad (2012, p. 454) argues, “COP15 [showed] that China cannot have it all: trying to achieve new goals on the international stage while at the same time trying to retain its traditional role resulted in an incoherent position that lacked credibility as well as persuasive power”.

Moreover, assessments of China's stance in Copenhagen and its potential impact on the state's green soft power vary significantly. Perceived through the prism of the numerous declarations made by Chinese officials before and at the summit, China's environmental diplomacy exercise at COP15 was viewed positively (Karakır, 2018, p. 12). A balanced overview spread responsibility for the summit's failure among its self-proclaimed leaders, such as China, the EU, and the US, considering it the result of an "unfortunate team effort" (Conrad, 2012, p. 438). In turn, distributing the blame unequally, Western media, in particular, claimed that China tried to "hijack the UN climate summit" (Gao, 2018, p. 214). Xiaosheng Gao (2018, p. 218-227) revealed that the perceptions of Beijing's emissions reduction declarations and negotiation strategy in Copenhagen among media, policymakers, and academics largely reflect a North-South divide. Because of these sharp differences in perceptions of China's stance in Copenhagen, the environmental diplomacy exercised at the summit was a double-edged sword, potentially increasing and decreasing the state's green soft power capabilities, depending on the receiver.

- *The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris, 2015 (COP21)*. While the Paris Agreement "ended the divergence between developed and developing countries" (Gao, 2018, p. 228), its phrase "in the light of different national circumstances" (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015) appears in the context of how parties may respond to climate change, pleased China, leaving the involved states with vast flexibility. As in the case of the summit in Copenhagen, Beijing made some efforts to demonstrate its commitments to the international environmental regime before its delegation arrived in Paris. Specifically, Beijing "actively engaged itself in bilateral climate diplomacy and announced bilateral climate statements with major parties to generate momentum for Paris" (Gao, 2018, p. 234). Most notably, in the US-China joint announcement of late 2014, "China [committed] to peak and then decrease its emissions ... [and] set a new target for 20% of primary energy to come from zero-emissions sources by 2030" (Climate Council, 2014). These unique exercises in bilateral environmental diplomacy, like China's overall stance in Paris, promoted the country to leadership in the international climate regime and were well received by policymakers, academics, and media globally. Specifically, they applauded the US and China for shouldering responsibility for facing the threat of climate change.

China's environmental diplomacy, as observed at various COPs, has made the country considered one of the self-proclaimed leaders in multilateral negotiations and definitely a key voice of the Global South. Despite some criticism, primarily from the West, this perception persists. At COP25 in Madrid in 2019, one EU delegate noted, "If we get China, the rest of Asia will follow" (Kaneti, 2020), emphasizing China's role in combating climate change.

Green BRI?

By improving interregional connectivity and providing energy and transport infrastructure with game-changing potential, especially for the Global South, the BRI confirms China's "acceptance of responsibilities as a major stakeholder in the international order" (Wei, 2018). The BRI's environmental governance architecture suggests China takes these responsibilities seriously, including its role in mitigating global environmental and climate challenges. Therefore, to some extent, Beijing's multilateral environmental diplomacy practiced under the BRI can enlarge China's green soft power. However, Beijing's bilateral cooperation with BRI states suggests a more ambiguous picture. This is often an outcome of a significant lack of transparency and the presence of environmental dimensions in China's bilateral engagements with multiple BRI member states. Moreover, the evidence from Pakistan, which hosts the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is worth over 60 billion dollars, suggests the voluntary character of BRI-related environmental guidelines and policies. Coal-based facilities encompass the majority of the CPEC energy projects. Motivated by its craving for cheap electricity and increasing reliance on coal reserves versus exported oil, "the Pakistani authorities dictated this priority, and their Chinese counterparts adapted accordingly" (Adeney & Boni, 2021). With this in mind, the paper avoids using the term 'environmental diplomacy' in the context of China's bilateral relationships.

Beijing gave the BRI an environmental governance architecture that has significantly expanded since The Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road was announced in 2017. This infrastructure encompasses (i) Chinese domestic governance entities, including ministries, agencies, and banking institutions under the State Council; (ii) international governance structures, including new and existing cooperation networks, platforms, and mechanisms; and (iii) soft laws – e.g., policies and guidelines (Coenen et al., 2021). Such a framework aims to establish a climate-neutral Green BRI that produces zero GHG emissions, is nature-positive and protective of biodiversity, and also improves people's livelihoods (Green Finance and Development Centre, n.d.).

China exercises multilateral environmental diplomacy at the Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation. These forums serve as a platform for discussion and dialogue between the states of the Initiative, resulting in deliverables that expand the above architecture. "Emphasising the importance of ... environmental sustainability of projects, and of promoting high environmental standards" (Belt and Road Portal, 2017) has become one of the five cooperation principles in the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum of 2017. Moreover, in the environmental cooperation context, the participants of the forum's roundtable confirmed their commitments to ensure "the protection of the environment, of bio-diversity and natural resources, in addressing the adverse impacts of climate change, in promoting resilience and disaster-risk reduction and management, and in advancing renewable energy and energy efficiency" (Belt and Road Portal, 2017) Deliverables from this forum include the Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road.

During the Second BRI Forum of 2019, more emphasis was put on environmental issues. Its roundtable participants committed to “open, green and clean” cooperation and agreed to promote sustainable development under the BRI umbrella. Among others, the Second BRI Forum deliverables include the continuation of the Green Silk Road Envoys Program, the training program for environmental officials from the BRI states, and the launch of the BRI Environmental Big Data Platform (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China [MFA of the PRC], 2019a). The Third Belt and Road Forum 2023 encompassed a high-level form-themed Green Silk Road for Harmony with Nature. This forum’s “participants recall the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Paris Agreement, as well as the Convention on Biological Diversity and its Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and support building a green Silk Road together to realize harmony between humanity and nature” (MFA of the PRC, 2023a). The forum’s deliverables include the Beijing Initiative for Belt and Road Green Development, resembling the states’ call for strengthened cooperation on climate and environmental issues, the Belt and Road Initiative for Sustainable Development of Twenty Cities, and the Initiative on Green Finance to Support the Belt and Road Energy Transition (MFA of the PRC, 2023b). Another deliverable from The Third BRI Forum, *The Belt and Road: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future White Paper*, emphasizes China’s responsibilities to mitigate environmental and climate problems. It projects China as “a major developing country that meets its responsibilities... [and] has therefore proposed building a global community of shared future, intending to create an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world” (State Council Information Office, 2023). The “resource-efficient, eco-conscious and low-carbon” (State Council Information Office, 2023) BRI is a critical means to achieve such a world.

The announcement of the Green BRI, coupled with the expansion of the related governance architecture and multilateral environmental diplomacy exercises, helps China project itself as a responsible stakeholder and generate green soft power in the short term. However, the impact of such exercises in multilateral environmental diplomacy is questionable and can bring little or no results in the long term. The doubts in this context are related to the BRI’s potential to trigger multilateral cooperation on environmental issues. It is voluntary for the BRI states to be part of any multilateral engagements under the project umbrella. For instance, the mentioned roundtables at the BRI Forums have never been attended by more than 39 state leaders out of all 140 BRI states. Moreover, most BRI states come from the Global South and are typically mid – to low-income and less well-integrated into international organizations and multilateralism with superior, green-related norms. For such states, the “greenness” of the BRI does not seem to be a push or pull factor. In other words, de-carbonizing and improving environmental standards is not a rationale for joining BRI. Therefore, these states are unlikely to become a part of BRI’s environmental architecture and follow recommended standards.

The BRI is based on myriad bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoUs) that reveal the project's potential environmental cost and related responsibilities to different degrees. Because of the lack of transparency surrounding most aspects of BRI, its environmental impacts are not fully known, undermining China's messaging and casting doubt on its claims to be a green soft power. The full texts of most MoUs are unavailable. However, some joint statements, press releases, and communiques between Beijing and BRI countries are available on Chinese government websites. Since the announcement of the Green BRI in 2017, China's MFA has published 20 joint communiques about its bilateral cooperation that mention the BRI. Most of them point to the environmental aspects of this cooperation without exposing much or any details, and four completely neglect environmental issues.

The most common environmental themes of bilateral cooperation under the BRI include renewable and clean energy and climate change mitigation. The bilateral statements strengthen Beijing's responsible stakeholder posture by highlighting its assistance to the host states in diversifying their energy mix and combating climate change effects. However, this projection often ignores realities, especially concerning BRI's energy infrastructure. For instance, the bilateral statements with Pakistan neglect the environmental aspects of the CPEC's coal-based facilities. The China-Pakistan joint statement of 2018 describes how the early harvest energy projects that enhance the construction or the upgrade of four coal-based power plants (Port Qasim Coal-fired Power Plant, Sahiwal Coal-fired Power Plant, Hubco Coal-fired Power Plant, and Engro Thar Block II Power Plant) are essential for both sides and also contribute to Pakistan's socio-economic development (MFA of PRC, 2018a). The 2022 China-Pakistan statement emphasizes Beijing's support for Islamabad in developing renewable energy projects, explicitly mentioning solar projects and promoting green cooperation under the CPEC to align with Pakistan's efforts to combat climate change (MFA of PRC, 2022a). Similarly, the statements with other BRI countries emphasize clean and renewable energy infrastructure; China's joint statements with Tonga (MFA of PRC, 2018b), Indonesia (MFA of PRC, 2022b), the Philippines (MFA of PRC, 2023c) and Nepal (MFA of PRC, 2023d) all detail bilateral cooperation in clean energy matters. Beijing's bilateral communique with Vanuatu (MFA of PRC, 2019b), Papua New Guinea (MFA of PRC, 2022c), and the Solomon Islands (MFA of PRC, 2023e) recognize their characteristics as developing small island countries and associated environmental challenges. China offers assistance in building these states' capacity to address climate change, including strengthening multilateral cooperation mechanisms concerning climate response and disaster prevention and mitigation. Also, China's joint statements with Nepal (MFA of PRC, 2023d) and the Maldives (MFA of PRC, 2017) mention bilateral cooperation on climate change issues. While these documents have evident limitations, they suggest that China intends to be seen as a responsible stakeholder and a green soft power.

Conclusion: Nudging forward the discussion of China and green soft power

The main aim of this article was to draw attention to the soft power–environment nexus and to advance discussions on the notion of green soft power in the context of China’s environmental policies in both global multilateral and bilateral settings. China’s rise in the international environmental arena and its self-identification as a wielder of soft power poses weighty conceptual and empirical questions about the basic assumptions underpinning the concept of soft power and global environmental governance, which this article attempts to shed light on. In this regard, the article confirmed the need for a discussion about the assumptions underpinning soft power and green soft power and whether they can only be legitimately used concerning Western liberal ideas and democracy promotion, as is often the case (Longhurst et al., 2019, p. 159). Beyond this observation, the article came to two main conclusions.

First, via its multilateral environmental diplomacy as practiced at the COPs, China has been perceived as a responsible stakeholder and a self-proclaimed leader in international environmental regimes. For instance, according to a survey carried out at the COPs between 2008 and 2010, along with the EU and the U.S., China was most frequently mentioned as a leader in climate change. In 2010, 52 percent of respondents in Cancun recognized China’s leadership (Karlsson et al., 2012). Moreover, the announcement of the Green BRI and the expansion of BRI’s environmental governance architecture demonstrates that Beijing regards environmental goals as a core element in its mega-connectivity project. However, the article’s second main conclusion reveals something quite different: Beijing’s bilateral cooperation in the context of BRI, despite being couched in green narratives, strongly challenges China’s reputation as a leader and promoter of green soft power. Thus, there is a profound discrepancy between multilateral and bilateral levels of China’s activities, which pokes holes in the notion of China being a responsible stakeholder in the environmental sphere and also weakens the potency of its green soft power.

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