


Chapter 16


China's Global South Engagement: Balancing Soft Power and Strategic Influence

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ABSTRACT

China's engagement with the Global South has emerged as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, reflecting a nuanced interplay between soft power and strategic influence. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), foreign direct investments, and cultural diplomacy, China has positioned itself as a pivotal partner for developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This chapter critically examines how China balances its economic, political, and cultural tools to advance its interests while promoting a narrative of mutual benefit. By offering a balanced critique of China's approach, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted and evolving nature of its Global South strategy. It underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable partnership that aligns with the sustainable development goals and addresses the diverse needs of the Global South.

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INTRODUCTION

China's engagement with the Global South has emerged as one of the defining dynamics of international relations in the 21st century. By fostering extensive economic, cultural, and diplomatic partnerships, China has significantly bolstered its influence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Central to this strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure development project aimed at enhancing global connectivity and trade (Blanchard, 2018). Through this initiative and other collaborative efforts, China has positioned itself as an alternative to traditional Western-dominated development frameworks, such as those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Cai, 2017). This strategic pivot has not only reshaped the economic landscapes of participating countries but has also introduced new dimensions to global power structures.

The appeal of China's engagement lies in its distinctive approach, emphasizing principles of mutual benefit, non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for national sovereignty (Shambaugh, 2015). This contrasts sharply with the conditional aid and development programs often associated with Western institutions, which are frequently criticized for imposing structural adjustments that undermine local autonomy. By presenting itself as a partner rather than a patron, China has cultivated a narrative of solidarity with the Global South, drawing on historical ties and shared experiences of colonialism and underdevelopment (Chen et al., 2019). Despite its emphasis on soft power, China's engagement with the Global South is not devoid of strategic considerations. Its investments in critical infrastructure, natural resources, and emerging markets are designed to secure long-term economic and geopolitical advantages (Jones & Zeng, 2019). For instance, the development of ports and logistics hubs under the BRI serves both commercial and strategic purposes, facilitating trade while expanding China's maritime reach. Similarly, partnerships in energy and technology sectors provide China with access to vital resources and emerging technologies, ensuring its competitiveness in the global economy (Zhang, 2018).

The duality of China's approach combining soft power initiatives with strategic imperatives has sparked debates about its implications for the Global South. On one hand, Chinese investments have been lauded for addressing critical infrastructure gaps, creating jobs, and fostering economic growth in developing countries (Blanchard, 2018). On the other hand, concerns have been raised about the potential risks of dependency, debt sustainability, and environmental degradation (Cai, 2017). Critics argue that while China's projects promise long-term benefits, they often come with hidden costs, including loss of local control over key assets and increased vulnerability to external pressures (Shambaugh, 2015). The significance of China's engagement extends beyond its economic impact. By actively participating in regional and global governance, China is reshaping the norms and institutions

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