



## China's Soft Power in South Asian Governance

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*The position of China in South Asia has changed into preferences molding rather than commanding. The nation is employing joint structures, development efforts, training of administrators and specific publicity to make it attractive to the regional governments. This is slowly transforming local bureaucratic practices, directions of policy, and leadership into a way that fits the Chinese way of developing. The region where such an approach has easily rooted is South Asia because the governments of this region have been facing institutional challenges, in addition to seeking external support in order to realize economic growth, political stability, and increased regional integration. In Pakistan, this trend is concentrated in the middle-point, and in this case, the CPEC structures, the existing security relationships, and the diplomatic consultations of the seniors placed a conducive platform of Chinese administrative power. This paper is a discussion of how these interactions can lead to common development priorities, administrative skills transfer, and changes in the manner in which regional diplomacies operate. The analysis is informed by qualitative approaches that are guided by the Soft Power Theory and the Governance Theory. The results point out that the three most crucial aspects are symmetric engagement, strong institutions, and steady strategic planning. Essentially, soft governance in China presents the South Asian states with an actual outlet through which they can consolidate their institutions, perfect administrative processes, and development work with more confidence and clarity.*



## 1. Introduction

China has enhanced the South Asian region in both administrative training and interaction with other institutions in the region, not through military action in South Asia. China has given more than USD 8.1 billion in official development assistance to South Asia compared to many other major donors (AidData, 2023). This funding has devised a platform on which administrative efficiency, strategy, and the management of infrastructure assume center-stage roles. In this respect, its system of governance is framed as being a development-focused alternative to guarantee the stability and prosperity of the countries that are trapped in weak institutions, economic limitations, and political insecurity. It is so attractive due to its diplomacy, which uses governance collaboration as one of the sources of controlling behaviors in politics across the region (Naseem & Yan, 2024).

Soft governance is the dispersion of administrative practices through persuasion, institutions, and capacity building as opposed to binding legal agreements or coercive pressures (Ahmad et al., 2025). China achieves this through providing partner countries with an amalgamation of policy suggestions, educational initiatives, administrative capacity-forming initiatives, and institutional development-related design (Mingjiang, 2020; Ehsan et al., 2024). Another perspective that can be helpful in this situation is the Soft Power Theory, according to which attractiveness and credibility can influence state preferences in a more efficient way than coercion (Nye, 2011; Naseem & Yan, 2024). Governance Theory also relates the spread of norms and the influence of political behavior through the establishment of new norms to make the policies (Peters, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2024). Experts such as Rolland (Rolland, 2017; Rahman, 2021) contend that making partner countries become part of the Chinese-made institutional frameworks is largely dependent on the search for the internationalization of China, which slowly influences the domestic modes of governance. The paper will take up these themes and argue that in China, soft governance is best practiced when there are low and high levels of both development requirements and administrative capability at the national level (Ehsan et al., 2024).

The South Asian research findings prove that the influence of China on governance is more advanced in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, where development cooperation would go hand in hand with governance exchange programs. In one instance, over 15,000 South Asian government officials were taught governance in China since 2014 through several skill-building courses cataloged by China (MOFCOM, 2022). These programs introduce these officials to the Chinese form of administration, which includes centralized planning, project monitoring systems, and proper coordination of bureaucracy. The brightest illustration of the given phenomenon concerns Pakistan. Over 22 specialized task forces connect Pakistani and Chinese officials under the CPEC and allow continuing to education policy and collaborate with the administration (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2021). This system of organization has developed procedures founded on the principles of long-range development planning, the administration of special economic zones, and coordination mechanisms that are at the senior level and reflect the principles

of Chinese governance (Rahman, 2021).

The South Asian structural conditions strengthened the Chinese influence in governance in the region (Ahmad et al., 2024). The problem of weak bureaucracies and divided institutions is present in most South Asian countries. Such limitations render foreign governance assistance more appealing, particularly where it comes through long-term infrastructure investment or administrative cooperation as opposed to political requests (Zakir Ullah et al., 2025). The capability of China to integrate the physical growth with the institutional interaction shapes another influence that is seldom provided by the Western donors (Zakir Ullah et al., 2025). This enables China to influence the way ministries are planning their project developments, budgets, and their interdepartmental inter linkages. In the long run, the practices will lead to familiarity with Chinese styles of administration, which makes the governments open to Chinese preoccupations in regional politics, connectivity establishment, and crisis management (Ahmad et al., 2025).

The increasing influence of China is also attributed to a strategic uncertainty that is increasing in South Asia. The increasing competition between India and China, the US regional shift of focus, and the economic issues of smaller countries have created chances of China to be used as a real and steadfast partner. South Asian governments have been known to emphasize the consistency of Chinese promises and the speed of delivery in opposition to the very sluggishness and inflexibility of the international financial institutions. This offers a platform where governance cooperation may be viewed not as ideological power but rather as a practical tool of getting around domestic administrative problems. To Pakistan, Chinese governance assistance can be perceived as an element of stabilization during economic crisis, political instability, and a change of power in the region. Compounded, these elements underscore the fact that Chinese influence in governance in South Asia is one that has been achieved through a series of deliberate, comprehensive, and strategic interactions. Pakistan must be a valuable case study in the context of how the foreign modes of governance transform the political orders in the region, as the extent of its influence is significant.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Process of Soft Power and the Transformation of the Impact of Governance

Soft power has been brought to the center of discussion of the modern international power that is not based on military and economic coercion. According to Nye (2011), the concept of soft power entails the capacity of a state to influence the taste of other states by use of attraction, legitimacy, and credibility but not by use of force or inducement. Soft power has more recently in the academia been associated with the concept of governance diffusion, which involves states shaping administrative norms, policy orientations, and administrative practices in other countries (to which they are partners). In comparison to conventional types of diplomacy, this type of influence is realized by the effects of long-term interaction, learning of the policy and demonstration and is especially applicable in those regions where instability in the institutions and the lack of development determine the situation.

The emergence of China as an international player has attracted a mass of arguments as to whether its impact can be seen as an alternative system of governance to liberalism systems in the West. Researchers believe that the policy of the country does not explicitly encourage ideological exportation but, instead, it focuses on developing pragmatism, administrative efficiency, and policy stability (Mingjiang, 2020; Rolland, 2017). This has enabled the Chinese governance practices to be appealing to the developing countries who want fast infrastructure development and also increase in state capacity without the need to have far-reaching political conditionalities.

## 2.2 Theory of Governance and Administrative Diffusion

The theory of Governance offers an appropriate level of understanding in context of external practices getting institutionalized at domestic level. Peters (2019) believes that the change in governance is also facilitated by the spread of norms, routines, and decision-making logic, especially when domestic actors engage in the interaction with external institutional structures on a regular basis. These dealings result in cognitive change amongst bureaucrats, which influence the policy making process, implementation, and appraisal. This is an incremental and experience-based process as opposed to legalistic process and hence governance diffusion is distinguished to institutional reform in its form.

In South Asia setting, structural obstacles that help in the spread of governance include fragmented bureaucracies, weak administrative capacities and high turnover of politics. Such circumstances make one open to exogenous governance aid which would ensure stability, coordination, and efficiency (Rahman, 2021). The involvement of China takes advantage of this loophole since it has integrated some administrative practices into development cooperation and, thus, it can have a rather negative impact on governance not by imposing reforms but by exercising an insider influence.

## 2.3 The Soft Governance Strategy in South Asia by China

The intervention of China in the South Asian Governance is closely linked with its aid in development and capacity building. According to AidData (2023), China is already listed among the largest sources of development finance to South Asia, which finances infrastructure, energy, and connectivity initiatives. China as opposed to Western donors engages financial aid with administrative cooperation, education, and shared planning, which enhances governance learning and material growth.

According to empirical research, thousands of South Asian officials have been introduced to the Chinese-sponsored training programs that featured the centralized planning, project monitoring, and inter-ministerial coordination models (MOFCOM, 2022). According to Mingjiang (2020), such exposure is a soft governance mechanism because it describes Chinese administrative practices as normal and reformulates the efficiency and performance standards. These practices are internalized with time, this has an effect in domestic policy processes without institutional transplantation.

## 2.4 A Critical Case of Governance Diffusion, Pakistan

Pakistan can be discussed as one of the most developed examples of Chinese soft governance in South Asia because of the intensity and magnitude of the interactions within



the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is important to note that CPEC is not just an infrastructure project but the platform of long-term administrative engagement, coordination of policies, and institutional learning (Khan and Bukhari, 2024; Naseem and Yan, 2024). Institutionalized Chinese-style project management, long-term planning cycles and centralized coordination mechanisms have been institutionalized in the Pakistani system of the public administration through joint working groups, planning committees and sector specific task forces.

Research also shows that the presence of Chinese in the energy and industry segment of the Pakistani economy has re-constrained the priorities of governance by focusing on the speed with which deliveries are made, technical efficacy, and performance evaluation (Siddiqui et al., 2023). Soft-power-wise, such effects of demonstrations make Chinese system of governance more credible and appealing to the policymakers with limited capacity internally available (Nye, 2011; Rolland, 2017).

## 2.5 Trade-offs in Risk, Limits and Governance.

Although the literature admits that the engagement in Chinese governance can be beneficial, it also suggests the possible risks. The excessive dependence on external governance templates can establish the policy path dependencies, constrain local innovations, and obliterate the accountability frameworks (Peters, 2019). Khan et al. (2024) warn that a deficit of contextual adjustment to governance diffusion can lead to long-term undermining of institutional resilience. So, it is suggested by more and more scholars that a selective and adaptive approach would be suitable, with recipient states absorbing efficiency-enhancing practices and maintaining national policy autonomy.

## 3. Methodology

The research design presented in this study is qualitative and interpretive research design, which is aimed at examining how China practices soft governance in South Asia, especially in Pakistan as a critical case. The data is analyzed based on the analysis of documents and secondary qualitative literature, such as official reports, policy documents, training records, and academic literature on the topic of Chinese development cooperation, administrative exchange, and governance diffusion. Soft Power Theory and Governance Theory guide the theoretical framework of the study and allow conducting an interpretive evaluation of the influence of attraction, credibility, or institutional learning on administrative practices and policy orientations in partner states (Nye, 2011; Peters, 2019). It uses a case-study approach to trace interactions of governance in pursuant to initiatives like CPEC; a prime example is the mechanisms of capacity building, the procedural standardization and strategic planning. The thematic analysis of data provides a chance to discover common patterns of institutional influence, administrative adaptation, and policy convergence, which do not require statistical inference but can be analytically generalized.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Governance Methods of China in South Asia

The emergence of the soft governance approach of China in South Asia transpired due to the gradual change in the manner in which the states in the region interacted with outside

forces, how they organized their administrative coordination, and the evaluation strategy on development alternatives. Instead of imposing a unitary system of governance, China instills its practices in the normal operations of a government through long-term cooperation systems, industry-specific alliances, and bureaucratic interactions. This approach is implemented, not at the stage of high-level diplomacy but in departments, planning divisions, economic agencies, and regional administrations. China presents itself not just as a source of financial resources but as a specific approach to pervasive development, controlling the projects and preserving the policy continuity in politically problematic conditions (Niu 2022). It is slow but critical since it redefines the concept of administrative efficiency and the development reality which is within the reach of the South Asian governments, and the inculcation of the Chinese principles of governance seems real and both achievable and feasible.

The light-hearted style of governance in China is due to the fact that its administrative burdens are reduced as compared to those of South Asian governments, as they have highly fragmented bureaucracies. This can be achieved by cultivating procedural coherence by standardizing reporting systems, monitoring schedules, and ways of project implementation between Chinese institutions. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the example of such similar evaluation templates, which were introduced in the feasibility studies supported by Chinese development banks, was subsequently introduced by national planning organizations (Rahman, 2021). The presence of such procedural influence is rarely mentioned: it does not presuppose the actual redesign of institutions, yet it does alter the manner in which administrators consider development priorities. The resultant standard is a norm that is placed on the degree of the Chinese administrative practices, largely than the West, where the donors often demand regulatory consistency and good governance (Kumar, 2020).

The other determining factor of soft governance in Nepal by China has to be strategic planning. Chinese technical teams were introduced within the infrastructure department of the Nepal link project, which aims to link with budget projections of several years, with the introduction of planning cycles that are longer than the election cycle. Instead of focusing on transparency and regulatory change systems, which the Western approach to governance focuses on, stability, continuity, and speed are emphasized. These ideals are subsequently attractive in South Asia, where frequent administrative transitions, budgetary insecurity, and administrative overload do not provide uniformity in development undertakings. It is the stability-oriented aspect of Chinese governance that turns out to be desirable, not because it is associated with ideological persuasion, but because through the possibility to project development projects that do not involve interruption by politics it creates a different relationship between the worlds of the political and the administrative through first-hand experience of the way of working with the operational styles of Chinese project coordinators.

This propagation of governance is theoretically situated in the best context of Soft Power Theory and Governance Theory. Specifically, the Soft Power Theory is the view that attraction comes about because states have found the strategy used by the other state to be effective, dependable, or able to address the local issues (Nye, 2011). The credibility



of the way China carries out its governance is intertwined with how fast Chinese-backed projects are being fulfilled and the administrative discipline that is instilled in the process timeline. Systems of this nature are valued by administrators who are able to avoid the challenges and accomplish long-postponed infrastructure projects. Governance Theory goes further to describe how the new institutional expectations are brought out by such interactions. Having repeatedly operated in Chinese systems, such as administrators, they come to tolerate ways of centralized coordination, directive planning, and sector-based control. These are internalized at some point and influence the perception of the officials regarding their roles and responsibilities (Peters, 2019).

In addition to the administrative exchange, the presence of China in the governance system is rooted in the informational system that China develops in the partner countries. Policymakers, media officials, and academics participate in policy debates, media training, and governance meetings in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen on a regular basis. These programs do not merely inculcate administrative skills; instead, they reveal a story in which development-focused governance might be narrated: state competence, political administration, and economic progression are interconnected. This is because such programs are based on exposure. In this way, tourists visit technology hubs, special zones, and high-speed railway networks, which are the dreams of the Chinese administration. Scholars have argued that exposure to tangible signals of state capacity can bring about changes in cognition regarding the manner in which the authorities think about options to governance (Rolland, 2017). Without the advocacy of ideology, the attraction of China is the advocacy of the experience of successful governance, congealed tangible advancement, timely achievement, and rational unification.

Meanwhile, institutional differences between China and the regional states also contribute to the enhanced openness of South Asia to Chinese soft governance. The majority of the South Asian governments are characterized by strong political pressure, decentralization of power, inconsistent funding, and a lack of cohesion in roles. The governance model that is applied in China is therefore based on a single authority and disciplined administration as the solution to the structural problems mentioned above. The Chinese agencies in their business with the South Asian ministries usually insist on simplification of processes, consolidated approvals, and that there is a consistent regulatory environment. The demands put in place require the local bureaucrats to realign the internal processes, which, over time, align the national processes with the Chinese operational psyche. The Chinese government departments and firms have become internal actors in the national development in the examples of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, meaning that the Chinese administrative models have even more influence on the domestic administrative models. Indications of this nature demonstrate that the governance diffusion process works best when the outside actors have sustained and regular access to the internal policy processes.

Demonstration effects are another form of soft governance of China. Having accomplished major projects like highways, power facilities, and harbors, China demonstrates a real-life story of what can be accomplished through coordinated planning.



These completed projects are therefore evidence of a governance strategy that has borne fruit even in challenging political and economic situations. The energy sector in Pakistan is one such example. Chinese-aided projects have contributed more than 8,000 MW of electricity to the Pakistan power grid, significantly reducing power outages to the industrial zones, which otherwise experienced chronic electricity shortages between 2015 and 2020 (Siddiqui, 2022). This has changed the yardstick of the performance of governance in Pakistan: the quick delivery began to be of great importance compared to the transparency of the procedure in Pakistan. The effects of demonstration do not work through persuasion but through providing outcomes that reinforce the attractiveness of the Chinese system of governance.

Notably, the soft governance that China exerts in South Asia is not performed in a vacuum of the world; the relations in the region alter, and the expectations held by the states towards outside partners are modified. The countries that are immersed in Chinese systems of governance tend to tune the language of diplomacy and assume the sets of conceptual images similar to the Chinese strategic lexicon, including win-win cooperation, developmental corridors, and collaborative growth models. Such discursive modifications can be attributed to psycho cultural shifts. The South Asian governments start discussing the development in Chinese terms, and they bring China into the situation as a source of money but as a model of governance. This is of great importance to regional foreign policy.

#### 4.2 Analysis of the Case of Pakistan

In South Asia, China has taken the lead in exerting its dominance in the form of gentle governance through the example of Pakistan. In contrast to other regional nations, the institutional relationship to China is a closer one in recent years and particularly through CPEC, which can be seen not only as an infrastructural project but also as a foundation of governance collaboration. Chinese participation extends beyond finances to administrative coordination, capacity building, and policy guidance. Over 12,000 Pakistani officials, engineers, and administrators have attended governance seminars, exchange schemes, and technical training in China since 2014 (MOFCOM, 2022). These programs involved exposing the administrators to the Chinese approaches towards monitoring, planning processes, and inter-ministry coordination as an example of Soft Power Theory. The Pakistani officials perceive China to be efficient, reliable, and admirable in terms of its consistent delivery of projects (Nye, 2011).

In Pakistan, institutional cooperation has slowly transformed the administrative procedures across the country. The Chinese professionals work in the energy, transportation, and industrial joint working committees so that the expertise sharing and coordination of the processes can be achieved. In one example, the CPEC Energy Coordination Committee established multi-year timetables of the project, monitoring systems, and criteria of standard evaluation of the power plants and grid construction. According to the Planning Commission of Pakistan (2021), this kind of integration minimized the delays in the processes, and the projects were progressing compared to previous national projects. This can be explained by Governance Theory (Peters, 2019): when Pakistani bureaucrats engage with Chinese institutional structures on a regular basis,



they start to adopt norms of centralized coordination, systematic project management, and organized evaluation, which slowly infiltrate policy making and administrative activities.

This soft rule influence of China finds another expression in a harmonization of policies and institutional strategic integration. Regional and federal authorities are also connected with the Chinese consultants on the implementation of the Chinese principles of governance in economic planning through working committees, including the Special Economic Zone Committee. To illustrate, procedural systems, security control, and oversight practices, which are directly connected to administrative practices in China, have been implemented by the management of Gwadar Port and have led to improved operational reliability and effectiveness of the project, respectively (Akram, Mustafa & Liaqat, 2025). Moreover, the Chinese technical assistances have brought with it practices such as long-range planning, project coordination, and multi-agency coordination which was scarcely felt in the Pakistani administrative culture. In short, this is how Governance Theory operates in practice: an outside source of institutional norms transforms inner ways of decision-making, bringing a mental and operational change in the ways of governance.

Another factor that is important in the soft governance of China is the experiential training of the Pakistani officials. A particular part of the Chinese governance training that may involve the majority consists of site visits to sites like industrial complexes, aspects of high-speed rail, and urban development of cities like Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing. This exposure helps the Pakistani managers to observe with their own eyes the efficiency of the administration and the process of implementing realized development, and this makes the theoretical part of the Chinese governance tangible and realistic. It is due to this fact that the Soft Power Theory introduces the concept of attraction not by the force of the agent but by the proven ability of the Chinese system to accomplish ambitious projects on time, therefore, enhancing respect and willingness to apply the same methods at home (Nye, 2011; Rolland, 2017).

Lastly, institutional transparency in Pakistan has offered a gateway to the expansion of China in the control of governance across different industries. With procedural structures that are affected by Chinese practices, multi-ministry committees, inter-regional coordination organizations, and specialized working groups, especially in energy, transportation, and industrial sectors, are gradually working with procedural structures. The very fact that the skill-building, joint projects implementation and the experience education are combined is that the principles of the governance of China are not only assimilated in the particular projects but also in the culture of the Pakistani public sector administration. Standard acceptance and operational alignment through this process of institutional establishment across a period is in itself a practice of Soft Power and Governance Theories into use.

## 5. Conclusion

The soft governance by China in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, is manifested in the deep reformation of the administrative behavior, priorities of the policies, and regional positioning of the diplomacy. It does not happen by force like the other types of influence, but through attraction, and provides a plausible and practical model of governance



involving financial ability and transfer of procedural knowledge and entrenchment. CPEC framework in Pakistan is not merely an infrastructure corridor, but a laboratory of governance diffusion where bureaucrats, technical experts, and policymakers have been engaged in interaction with Chinese norms of operation on a long-term basis. According to the empirical evidence, the high attractiveness of external governance support can be associated with weak regulatory frameworks, fragmentation of institutions, and high turnover, but there are both opportunities and risks related to it. Although administrative efficiency and project delivery have been improved, over-reliance on the Chinese templates of procedures will inadvertently hold down domestic innovation, create path dependencies of policies, and obscure lines of accountability. The introduction of external governance practices is not a neutral act that transforms internal norms and levels of decision-making. This means that there is a need to strike a balance between the gains that China's soft governance brings with it and national autonomy. The Government of Pakistan ought to make sure that the institutional evaluation frameworks are constantly on what external practices contribute to efficiency and which can cause dependency. It is essential that Chinese models of procedures are selectively adopted and those that occupy particular gaps in governance are implemented, leaving room to domestic policymaking and innovation. Further spreading of Chinese administrative practices to different ministries can facilitate knowledge transfer to local bureaucratic cadres, and cooperation with domestic actors of the domestic sector can help to avoid making governance modernization a rather centralized and foreign-dominated process. Simultaneously, the diplomatic interaction must be organized in such a way that it would not replace but rather complement the national decision-making power. In the end, soft governance of China can offer Pakistan a special opportunity to update the capacity of the state, improve bureaucratic performance, and adjust the priorities of development to the local requirements, but its strategic importance is not in the imitation but in the rational adjustment. The models of external governance are effective instruments, but the long-term outcomes of their application rely on the resilience of the institutions, the eloquence of strategies, and the policies that are planned.

### 5.1 Research Implications

This research paper has some significant theoretical, policy, and practical implications to the contemporary influence of governance in South Asia. Theoretically, the study moves the Soft Power Theory and the Governance Theory forward because it indicates that the influence in international relations becomes more relevant through administrative diffusion and institutional learning as opposed to coercion or the export of ideologies. The study put forward a conceptualization of the engagement of China as soft governance that builds on the existing body of literature by demonstrating how a long-term bureaucratic engagement, capacity-building initiatives, and standardization of procedures can transform domestic practices of governance with time.

Policy wise, these findings imply that the South Asian governments may use foreign governance collaboration more effectively especially Pakistan. Although Chinese administration support has promoted administrative effectiveness, planning and project execution capacity, the policymakers should make sure that the practices are not



implemented wholesale but selectively. This is where there should be institutional evaluation mechanisms to determine what external administrative practices enhance the capacity of the state and what can lead to dependency or undermine accountability. To Pakistan, the analysis shows the significance of harmonizing the Chinese-backed administrative frameworks and national development programs and democratic accountability frameworks.

In practice, the study offers the advice to the administrators and development planners of the population by showing how the governance learning takes place through exposure, joint committees and demonstration effects. It highlights the importance of long-term training, inter-ministerial coordination, and project management results as the key to the improvement of bureaucratic performance. Simultaneously, the research warns practitioners against excessive centralization and overreliance on the outside templates and recommends a middle ground between maintaining local innovativeness and institutional independence.

Lastly, regarding future research, the research provides opportunities to study the long-term implications of governance diffusion, the similarities between Chinese soft governance and Western models of governance, and empirically evaluate how administrative norms change with the transformation of various political systems. In general, the study demonstrates that soft governance of China is a chance of institutional empowerment and a challenge to policy autonomy, and strategic accommodation is a key to sustainable governance building in South Asia.

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