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From Infrastructure to Influence: Evaluating Public Support for China in BRI Recipient States

I Introduction

Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has evolved into the single largest unilateral development project in modern history, amassing an estimated $1 trillion to $1.3 trillion in overseas infrastructure, energy, and transportation projects (Hillman 12; AidData; Boston University Global Development Policy Center). With more than 140 participating states, the BRI is widely considered the centerpiece of China's economic and foreign policy. A policy that is widely considered the cornerstone of what scholars call economic statecraft. While Chinese officials frame the BRI as a platform for "win-win cooperation," development, and connectivity, academic debates emphasize the initiative's political dimensions: its potential to shift global trade routes, reshape international institutions, and extend Chinese influence well beyond its borders (Rolland; Bräutigam and Hwang; Kurlantzick).

At its core, the BRI is far more than the ports, highways, and railways. It represents China's intentionality in cultivating long-term economic interdependence and political alignment, particularly across Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Scholars argue that this strategy blends material inducements with soft-power aspirations, which Nye defines as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye 5; Repnikova). China's leadership appears to share this view: official BRI documents emphasize "people-to-people bonds," cultural exchange, and shared development narratives as essential pillars of international legitimacy. Yet, the central question driving academic and policy debate is whether this strategy is effective. Does China's dramatic surge in overseas development finance translate into improved public sentiment, or does it generate skepticism about political influence, debt, and sovereignty?

This research examines the micro-level dimension of China's statecraft, with a focus on public attitudes toward China in countries participating in the BRI. While most analyses of the BRI focus on state-to-state relations, debt diplomacy, or geopolitical strategy, this project turns to public opinion as a measure of China's soft power effectiveness. This project addresses that gap by systematically analyzing public attitudes toward China across countries with varying degrees of exposure to the BRI. Drawing on Pew's Global Attitudes Survey and AidData's Chinese Official Finance Database, it evaluates whether higher levels of Chinese development finance are associated with more positive perceptions of China.
By comparing public opinion across countries with high, medium, and low levels of BRI engagement, this study seeks to determine whether the BRI effectively enhances China's soft power or whether its influence remains primarily economic rather than ideological. Ultimately, this project contributes to debates in international political economy and global governance by connecting macro-level statecraft to micro-level public sentiment. Through cross-national polling data and regional case comparisons, it evaluates whether the BRI fulfills China's aspiration to lead not just through material power, but through legitimacy, attraction, and shared development narratives, the hallmarks of true soft power.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, it situates itself within the broader BRI debates. Understanding what scholars are researching when it comes to economic statecraft and soft power, and how those phenomena create global influence. Second, it reviews current literature on China's international image, public perceptions, and the politics of development finance. Third, it outlines the data sources and empirical strategy that were used to construct cross-national visualizations that link financial exposure to public attitudes. Finally, it presents these findings and discusses their implications for understanding the political effectiveness of China's development model.

The paper makes the case that any soft power gains China makes through the BRI are not intrinsically correlated with the size of its investment. What is more important is the recipient's perceptions of China's intent. Does the recipient believe the investment was made in a transparent way that provides local benefit?

The research questions that help guide this project are: Do countries that receive high levels of BRI investment showcase more favorable public attitudes towards China? Finally, to what extent does the BRI function as a tool of soft power rather than merely an economic or geopolitical one?

Ⅱ Literature Review

Current research on the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as China's investment patterns more broadly, spans multiple disciplines. Those being international political economy, development studies, public opinion research, and geoeconomics. Given the relevance of the matter, research and scholarship are vast and rapidly growing; however, there are still gaps to be filled. Namely, the micro-level political effects of China's overseas development projects, specifically how the firm approach of the BRI shapes public attitudes towards China. The following literature review synthesis is for the core bodies of relevant literature. (1) economic statecraft and soft power; (2) China's BRI as a geoeconomic strategy; (3) public opinion toward China in developing regions; and (4) mediating factors that explain perceptual variation. Although separate in nature, these themes are inherently interdisciplinary, uniquely converging on China's strategic objectives, but diverging in their effectiveness, which leaves substantial space for the type of cross-national, BRI-tiered analysis this project proposes.

Economic statecraft and soft power

Numerous scholars who are researching the impact of the BRI are increasingly viewing it through the lens of soft power and economic statecraft. Both of which emphasize how states use or materialize symbolic tools to shape global political outcomes. According to Economist David Baldwin, "foundational work on economic statecraft argues that states deploy aid, trade, investment, and financial leverage to achieve foreign policy objectives" (Baldwin 1985). Joseph Nye, a prominent figure in political science and the father of neo-liberalism, coined the term soft power. He explains that soft power is a phenomenon where a nation attracts others through legitimacy and positive sentiments rather than coercion (Nye 2004). More contemporary work focuses on these ideas in direct relationship to China. Macikenaite argues that Beijing's economic statecraft has expanded in scope with its economic rise, shifting from defensive to proactive strategies that combine inducements and pressure (Macikenaite 2020). In extension, Gong (2020) shows how the BRI has been weaponized in Southeast Asia not just for connectivity but for the goal of altering relationships and alignments of China's regional adversaries.

Other studies and the large academic opinion showcase the BRI as the centerpiece of China's economic ambitions. Noting that loans, construction contracts, and market access create a vested interest in partner countries' economies that may, over time, translate into political leverage (Kostecka-Tomaszewska et al, 2021). The limitation, however, is that this research and thought remain highly macro-structural and inferential. This means it focuses on China's intentions and capabilities rather than measuring the effect these policies have on citizens in recipient states and how the BRI shifts perceptions, which have the potential to lead to long-term favorability towards China.

BRI as a geoeconomic strategy: scope, aims, and the debt trap debate

A second line of work examines the structure and consequences of Chinese development finance, including BRI lending, which has led to a heated debate surrounding "debt trap diplomacy". AidData's Chinese Development Finance Program has dramatically improved transparency around Chinese overseas lending, documenting thousands of BRI-tagged projects and showing that most are delivered as loans, often at or near market rates, to state-owned or special-purpose vehicles (AidData). As a result of this transparency, policy debate has arisen about whether China is intentionally using debt to gain control over strategic assets, but the academic literature is a bit more sceptical of this “trap” narrative. For example, Bräutigam’s *The Dragon’s Gift* (2009) and subsequent work argue that Chinese finance has often supported infrastructure and productive sectors, and that debt problems typically arise from host-country governance failures rather than deliberate Chinese strategy. Bräutigam and co-authors back this up empirically by showing that private creditors and multilateral institutions account for a large share of African debt stress, complicating simplistic narratives that single out China (Bräutigam 2009). On the other hand, researchers at the Lowy Institute and Boston University showcase a growing net outflow from developing states to China as repayments exceed new disbursements, and warn that a “tidal wave” of BRI-related servicing is straining budgets in low-income recipient countries (Goko 2025). These studies showcase the importance of investigating the BRI as a tool for economic grip. However, they continue to use public opinion as a black box and are presumptuous about the micro-political ramifications that this study aims to address.

Public attitudes towards China: polling evidence

There is a significant amount of cross-national polling that helps paint the picture of how recipient nations of the BRI perceive China. The polling reveals a complex and interestingly often regionally divergent illustration.

In Pew Research Center's global attitudes survey, there is a consistent wide variation when it comes to favorability towards China. For example, it is consistently quite high in many parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. However, it turns sour in high-income Western democracies like the US and EU(Wike, Huang, & Batting, 2024)

Afrobarometer surveys reinforce this narrative across Africa, finding that the bulk of China's economic influence is positive, particularly in places where infrastructure projects are visible to the recipients. This sentiment is contrary to findings from AidData and research supplemented by Herrero and Xu. This research employed large-scale perception analysis that challenges the assumption that BRI participation generates positive sentiment. The study employed global media sentiment, which drew on over 5.9 million news articles across 200 countries. It found results that were "generally positive by highly uneven" tone towards the BRI and critically, detects no systematic difference in sentiment between BRI signatories and non-signatories (Dreher & Fuchs, 2019). These findings suggest that public and media reaction to China is influenced less by the mere fact of BRI membership and more by contextual domestic situations. These studies help paint the picture that China's soft power momentum is neither uniform nor automatic. Further, it is important to investigate how levels of economic exposure intersect with public opinion.

Why Perceptions Vary

There is academic scholarship that explains the wide variation in public attitudes towards China. One recurring factor is BRI visibility and quality. Research shows that well-delivered, highly visible infrastructure projects tend to enhance China's image, whereas corruption scandals, environmental harms, or poorly executed projects can generate backlash (Parks, Malik & Strange 2023; Strange et al. 2021). A second factor is host-country governance, as strong institutions tend to reduce project delays and corruption—problems that citizens often attribute to China even when they originate domestically (Bräutigam & Hwang 2021). A third and likely possibility is media framing which is discussed by Repnikova (2022) and Kurlantzick (2007). They make the claim that framing plays a critical role in shaping sentiments, particularly in countries where Western media portrays China as enacting a debt trap. Finally, public perceptions are filtered through existing political and economic contexts, including dissatisfaction with domestic governance, historical ties to Western donors, and local political competition (Sanny & Selormey 2021). These mediating factors imply that attitudes toward China cannot be explained by investment flows alone, which strengthens the need for a firm research design that seeks to link economic exposure to perception outcomes while accounting for national-level variation.

Ⅲ Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Framework

This project, and larger studies of the economic and social impact of the Belt and Road Initiative, rely on two interlinked theoretical concepts. Typically, economic statecraft is segmented into either positive or negative statecraft. Positive, meaning it is not coercive by nature, i.e, not imposing tariffs or sanctions to other countries. China's use of infrastructure financing through the BRI can be seen as positive economic statecraft, even if it has a larger goal of influencing abroad. At the same time, this phenomenon is not new. Economists make the claim that economic statecraft has been a tool used in geoeconomics since the end of the Cold War, as great powers increasingly pursue political goals through economic instruments rather than military force (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2020). What is missing from much of the existing literature and what this study aims to address, is whether this form of statecraft actually creates or translates into soft power gains among the general public of BRI recipient countries.

So what is soft power? In the context of the BRI, one must look beyond the physical infrastructure of highways, ports, and railways. A clear aim of China is to foster admirations, align norms and values, and create long-term partnerships oriented towards China. Ultimately, the BRI offers people-to-people connectivity and perpetuates China as a benevolent partner in that development.

Crucially, the success of this strategy in generating lasting influence depends not only on economic engagement but on how the public in recipient states perceives China. Absolutely positive sentiments among citizens would indicate that China's economic statecraft is translating into soft power. Conversely, negative or ambivalent feelings may signal that economic dependence is turning into suspicion or resentment rather than attraction. The connection between economic involvement (trade, infrastructure, investment) and soft power outcomes (public favourability) is therefore central to this study.

Therefore, the theoretical logic goes as follows. When China deploys economic statecraft through the BRI, it creates a structural presence in recipient economies through things like trade linkages, debt, and infrastructure. This presence now has the potential to generate soft power if the public preserves it as favorable. Should the perceptions be favorable, it locks in those relationships, reinforcing long-term trading partnerships and geopolitical ideology alignment. This study tests that logic by exploring whether countries with higher Chinese economic involvement (i.e, infrastructure, loans, trade) also register higher public favorability toward China, and thus whether the BRI is working as a tool for soft power.

Hypothesis

The study evaluates whether China's economic engagement through the Belt and Road initiative generates soft power gains among the public of recipient states. The methodology will be elaborated upon in great detail below, but Chinese involvement is operationalized using data that will group recipient countries into three buckets: high, medium, and low levels of Chinese engagement. Public sentiment will serve as the dependent variable, measured with weighted country-leval averages from Pew Global Attitudes and Afrobarameters' evaluation of China's influence. Three hypotheses follow from the theoretical framework: (1) countries with higher levels of Chinese financing should exhibit more favorable public attitudes; (2) this positive relationship should be strongest in regions with higher infrastructure needs and less negative media framing, such as Sub-Saharen Africa; and (3) high engagment may fail to produce favorable perceptions when domestic political or media enviroments portray Chinese involvement as risky or coercive.

Ⅳ Data and Methodology

This project draws on a combination of cross-national survey data and economic exposure measures to evaluate whether the BRI functions as an effective instrument of Chinese soft power. The analysis that follows utilizes three key data sets, all of which are discussed in length below. First, the Afrobarometer, second, Pew Research Center's Global Attitude Survey, and third, AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset.

Data

Starting with the Afrobarometer, which provides survey data from over thirty African countries across multiple waves (2014-2024). The goal of this survey was to create variables that would capture general attitudes towards China's presence in independent nations. For example, respondents were asked whether they viewed China's activity as positive or negative, whether they believed China helps national development, or how they compared Chinese involvement with that of the United States. The responses were coded *very negative, somewhat negative, neither, somewhat positive,* or *very positive*, with numeric coding on a 1–5 scale and additional categories for "don't know," "refused," and missing data. This is crucial because Africa represents a key demographic of BRI recipients. As a result, the barometer serves as a key dataset for assessing micro-level public opinion.

Moving to the Pew Global Attitudes Survey. This survey complements that of the barometer because it is cross-national in nature. It covers Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Although many of those regions are not directly impacted by the BRI, being able to ground specific findings with those of larger nations helps control the variables for biases. The dataset includes 24 countries and questions on favorability toward China, trust in Xi Jinping, and perceptions of China's global role. First, the Pew Global Attitudes Survey provides nationally representative measures of favorability toward China using a four-category response scale, *very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable,* and *very unfavorable*, with all microdata weighted using Pew's standard post-stratification weights. Because Pew does not publicly release the numeric coding scheme in its reports, this paper follows the coding provided directly in the dataset's SPSS codebook. It recodes the four categories into a 0–100 favorability index for comparability across countries.

The final survey data that will be used is AidData's Chinese Development Finance Database, which tracks thousands of Chinese-funded projects across the Global South from 2000 to 2021. Using this dataset, countries are grouped into three tiers: high, medium, and low involvement, based on total Chinese investment, project volume, and lending exposure as a share of GDP. The survey compiles more than 20,000 project-level records of Chinese official finance in 165 countries. This allows for empirical linkage between objective economic exposure and subjective public attitudes.

The analysis used below will be based on descriptive and visual comparisons rather than formal statistical modeling.

Methodology

Building on these datasets, the methodology follows three stages: (1) defining levels of Chinese economic development, (2) linking those levels to public opinion outcomes, and (3) visualizing cross-national patterns. The goal is not to estimate causal effects through a regression, but rather to analyze whether consistent, observable relationships emerge across countries when public attitudes are compared against varying levels of BRI financing.

Initially, charts will be constructed to measure a country's exposure to Chinese development finance. Using AidData's country-level aggregated commitments. Countries will be grouped into three groups: high, moderate, and low BRI engagement. This will be based on the total value of the Chinese loan and the committed grant finance through the period of 2013 to 2021. This will produce an easily understood and replicable typology for economic engagement.

Next, these engagement categories will be linked to public opinion indicators from Pew and the Afrobarometer. The challenge is that both surveys have differing levels of country participation. To counter this, the results will only utilize countries that have overlap, and then national averages of attitudes towards China will be calculated using each dataset's post-stratification weights to ensure representation.

The third step will be to visualize the relationship between economic engagement and public attitudes through descriptive visualization. These visual methods include: Bar graphs to compare attitudes across high, moderate, and low BRI engagement groups. Scatter plots that will map total Chinese financing against national favorability scores, which will allow visual assessment of trend strength and direction. Finally, regional comparison tables will show how similar levels of Chinese financing correspond to different public reactions across countries.

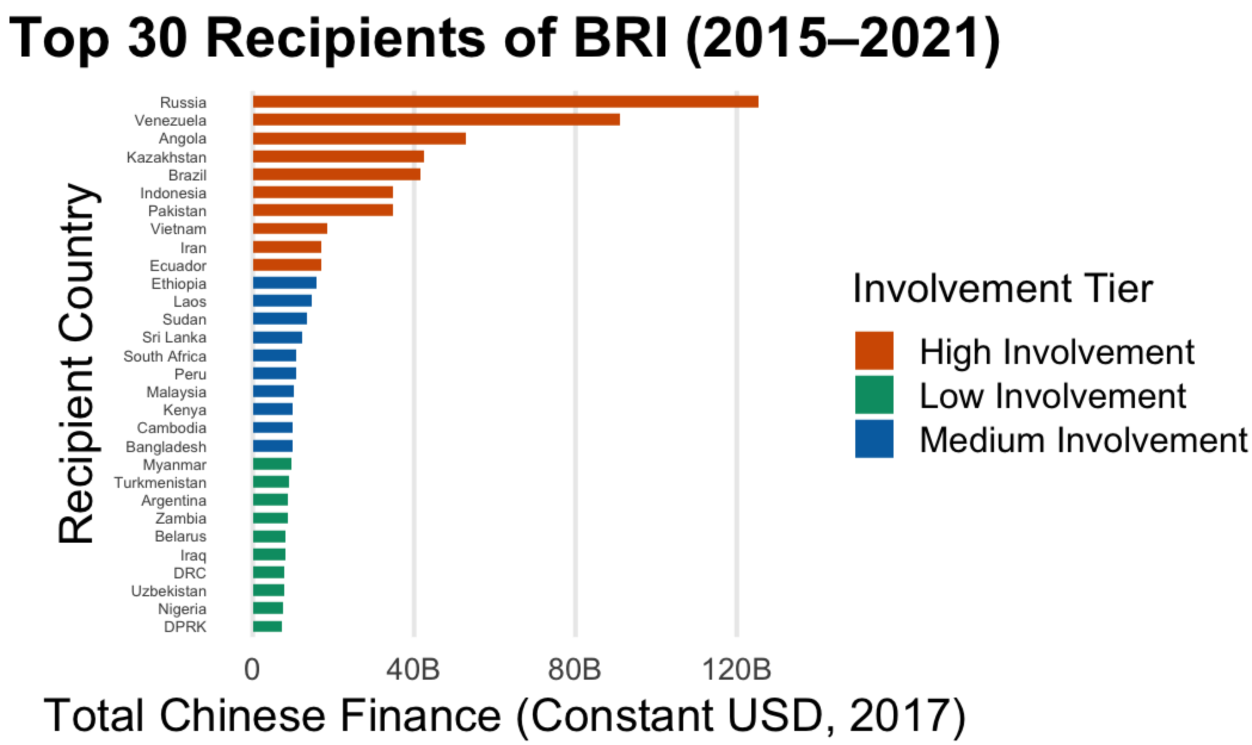
The final step will be qualitative contextualization. In order to draw substantial conclusions, it is necessary to compare results with those of existing literature. For example, for countries with high levels of financing but comparatively negative views of China, there are extraneous circumstances occurring. This form of triangulation will strengthen the analysis by comparing this paper's results with those of national trends and politics.

Together, these methodological steps enable a systematic evaluation of whether China's use of development finance as a tool of economic statecraft is associated with measurable soft power outcomes in recipient states.

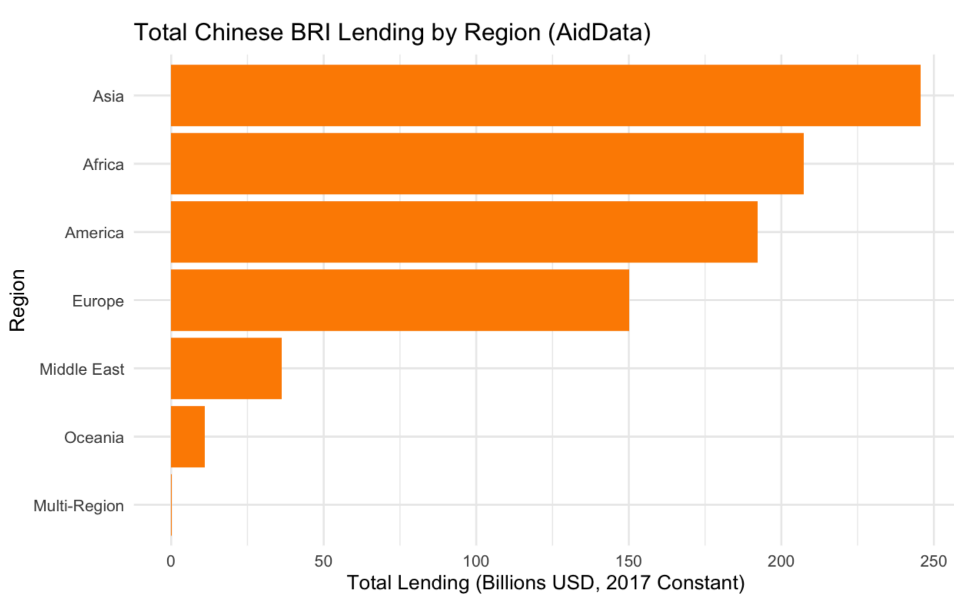
Ⅳ Data Analysis

Countries Receiving Chinese Development Finance

Graph 1 (AidData)



Graph 2 (AidData)

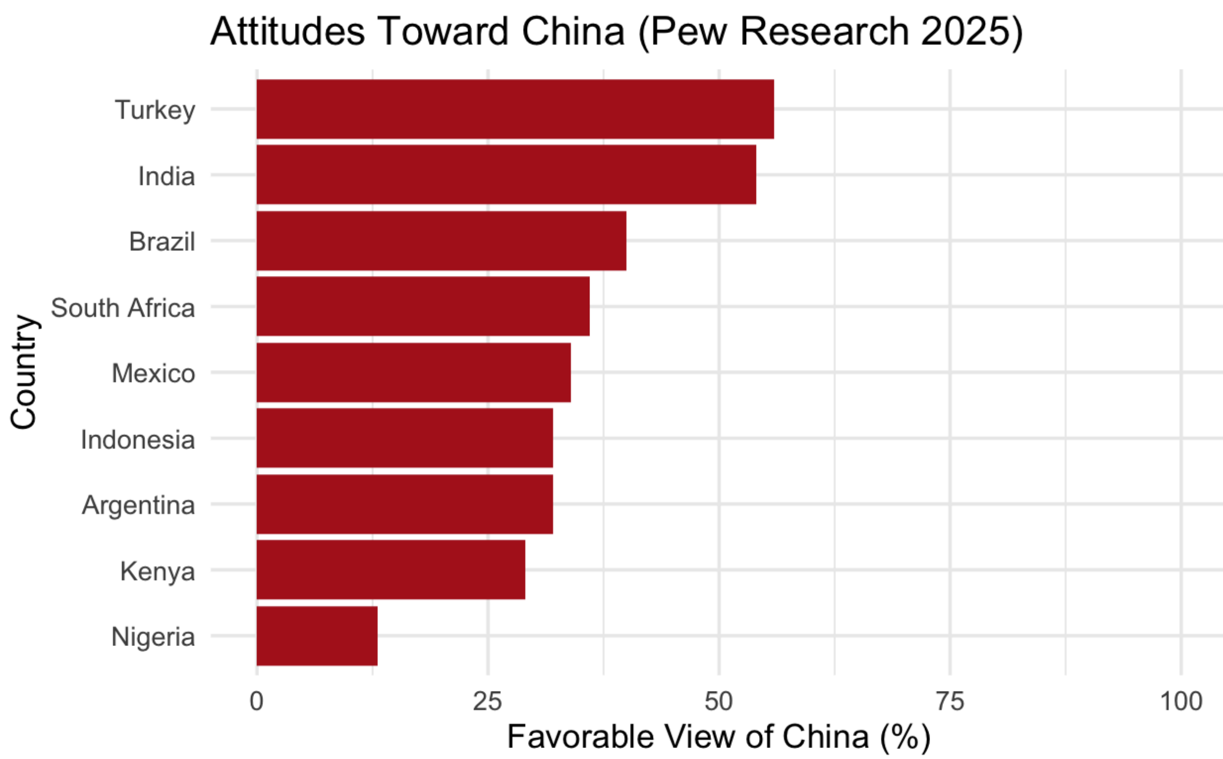


Graph 1 ranks the top recipients of Chinese BRI lending. This highlights the highly concentrated nature of the loans. The data shows that loans have been distributed to strategically significant states, like Russia, Venezuela, Angola, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan, which all receive exceptionally large loans. This leads us to believe that the BRI is multi-purpose, as our hypothesis suggested. It is not merely a broad development program but a targeted case of economic statecraft. The countries in question share the characteristics that are aligned with China's geopolitical and geoeconomic goals. Those being resource endowments, logistical importance, or financing needs that Western institutions have been unwilling to meet. Moreover, the graph does a good job of establishing China's economic strategy and provides context for the central empirical question of this study.

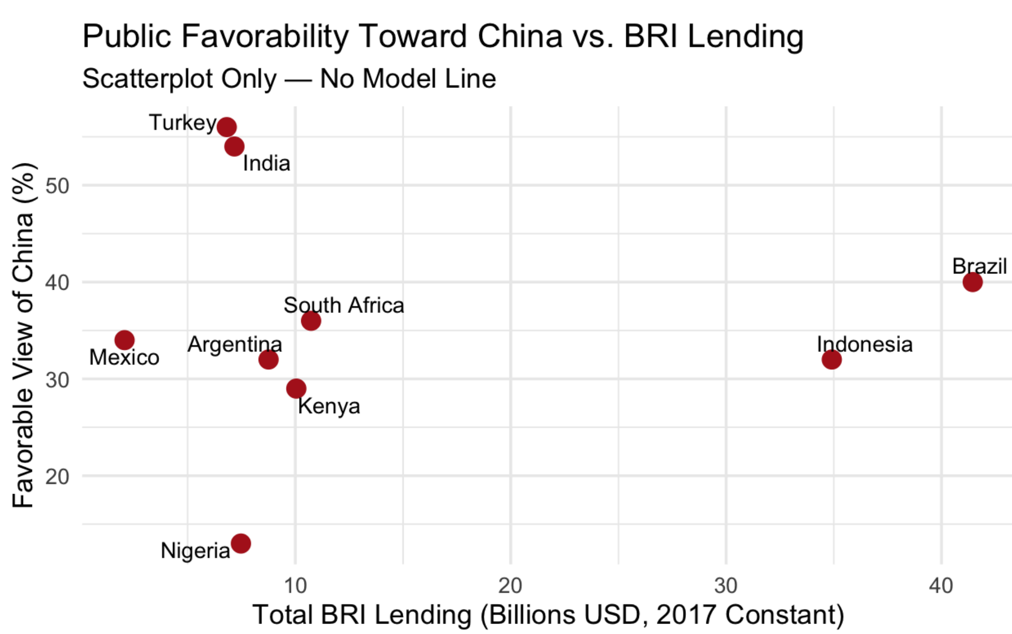
Graph 2, showcases the regional breakdown of BRI lending between regions. It establishes the norm that BRI distribution is highly unevenly distributed between regions, with the largest flows directed toward Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia. It begins to tell the narrative that China is investing in locations where there is historically low infrastructure, where long-term political and economic alignment is most attainable. Regions with substantial energy and transport needs, such as Africa and South Asia, receive disproportionately large commitments, reinforcing China’s position as a critical development partner.

Global Attitudes Toward China

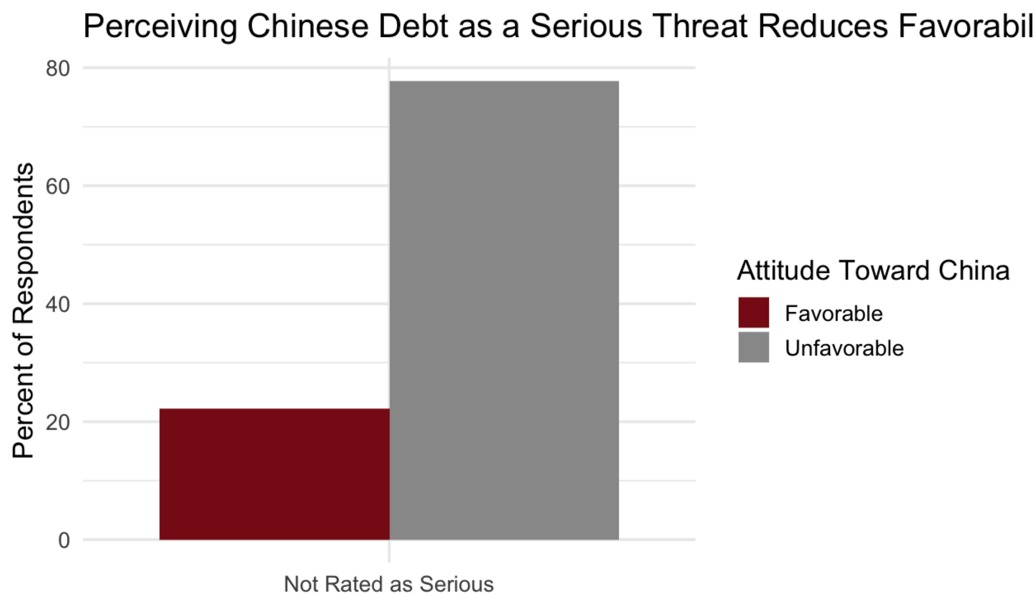
Graph 3 (Pew Research)



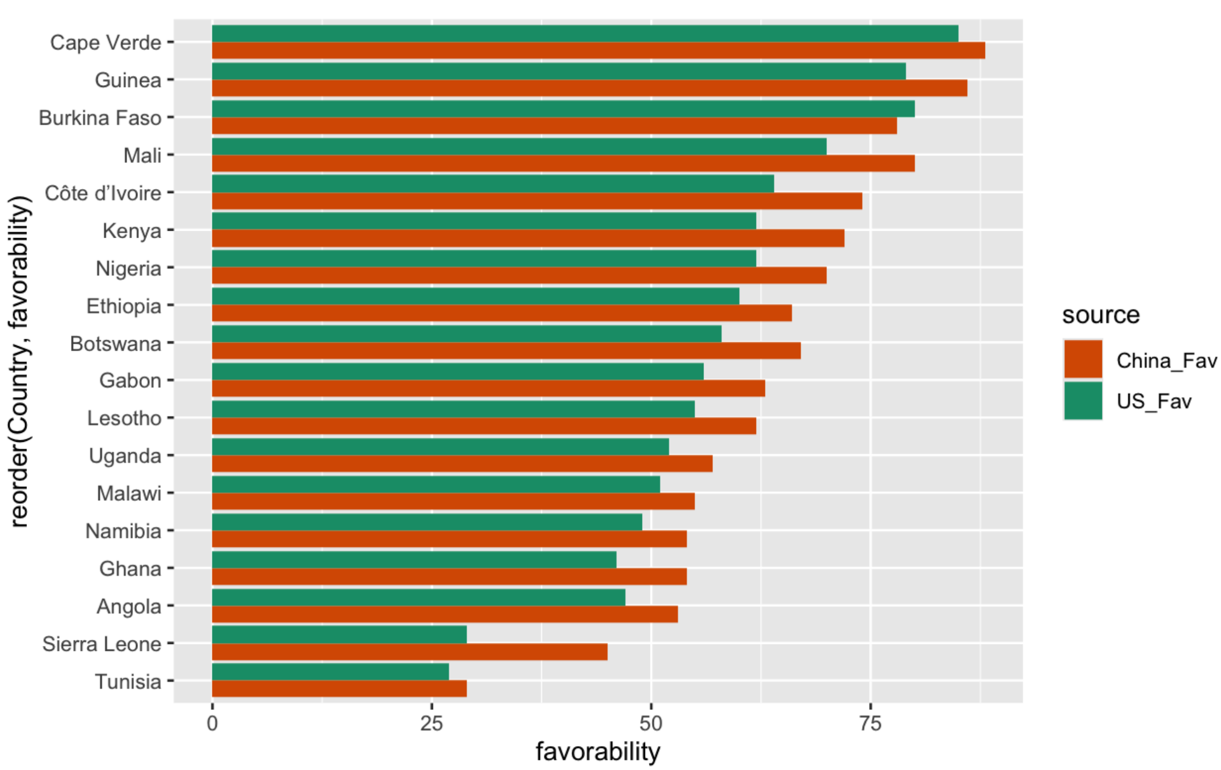
Graph 4 (Pew Research)



Graph 5 (Pew Research + AfroBarameter: Favorability)



Graph 6 (AfroBarameter)



Graph 3 shows that public attitudes toward China vary widely across BRI-Recipient states, with little consistency in favorability. Unfortunately, the countries that received the most BRI funding, like Russia and Venezuela, were not included in the Pew research. From the little overlap that does exist, we can create a few takeaways. Countries such as Turkey, India, and Brazil report the most positive views of China (50–60%), suggesting that in some contexts, China's global outreach may translate into meaningful soft-power gains. However, several other major BRI partners, including South Africa, Mexico, Kenya, and especially Nigeria, show much lower levels of public favorability, often below 35%. This variation underscores a central tension in China's economic statecraft: despite extensive material engagement through infrastructure, lending, and trade, China does not automatically secure positive public sentiment in recipient countries.

Graph 4 further illustrates this narrative that lending does not neatly correspond to public favorability towards China. Countries with high BRI funding, like Brazil and Indonesia, do not showcase a significantly higher public approval than countries that receive far less in financing, like Mexico or South Africa. Nigeria shows low favorability despite receiving significant Chinese investment, while Turkey displays relatively favorable attitudes despite modest lending levels. The absence of a clear upward trend in the scatterplot suggests that China's financial presence alone does not translate into improved public sentiment.

Graph 5 showcases a comparison of favorability and perceived debt threats, showing a strong negative relationship: countries where respondents describe Chinese loans as a "very serious threat" exhibit overwhelmingly unfavorable attitudes toward China. In contrast, populations that do not view Chinese debt as threatening are far more evenly divided, and in some cases lean favorable. This pattern indicates that the soft-power potential of economic engagement is highly sensitive to debt concerns, especially where Chinese lending is interpreted as risky, opaque, or sovereignty-eroding. The results reinforce existing scholarly claims that perceptions of predatory lending undermine China's soft-power gains, even in major BRI recipient states.

Graph 6 compares public favorability toward China and the United States across eighteen African countries using Afrobarometer survey data. Respondents were asked two key questions: (1) “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of China?” and (2) “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the United States?” Favorability is measured through a standard four-point scale derived from the question: “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of China/the United States?” Respondents choose from “Very favorable,” “Somewhat favorable,” “Somewhat unfavorable,” or “Very unfavorable.” For this analysis, the share expressing either very or somewhat favorable views is aggregated into a single “favorable” percentage for each country.

The graph reveals substantial variation across the continent but also several consistent regional patterns. The general consensus is that African nations prefer China. In Cape Verde, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, and Nigeria, majorities hold favorable views of China, often exceeding favorability toward the United States. In a handful of cases, such as Burkina Faso and Botswana, U.S. favorability narrowly surpasses China, but the differences remain modest. The overall pattern suggests that China’s economic outreach has translated to significant soft power returns. Importantly, the polling data show that China is not universally trusted, but in many key BRI countries, favorability is preferred to that of the US.

V Conclusion and Limitations

Conclusion

This study shows the impacts of Chinese economic statecraft through the medium of the Belt and Road Initiative. From the data collected, both polling and graphs of economic activity, the results suggest that the BRI does not automatically translate into the soft power gains often assumed in policy discourse. Across the empirical evidence examined, including BRI lending patterns (AidData), global attitudes

(Pew), and regional African public opinion (Afrobarometer), the relationship between Chinese economic engagement and public favorability is real but uneven, shaped as much by domestic political contexts as by the scale of investment. Theoretically, these findings work to challenge widely held beliefs that positive economic statecraft and the movement of capital lead to increased positive perceptions. Instead, the findings support a more loose and conditional understanding. That is, economic engagement creates potential soft power benefits, but those benefits only materialize when recipient citizens view China as a beneficial, fair, and non-coercive actor.

Politically, in key areas like African and Asian BRI partners, China enjoys quite high levels of public approval, which may indicate that the BRI does lead to soft power control. Yet in other countries, especially those concerned about debt sustainability, political influence, or military expansion, Chinese engagement appears to provoke skepticism rather than admiration. This divergence highlights why China's soft-power strategy remains contested: its economic footprint is immense, but its public reception depends on governance quality, project performance, and national political narratives.

More broadly, these findings suggest that material power alone is insufficient to secure prolonged influence in a global system. This research contributes to the ongoing debates surrounding how public attitudes mediate the effects of development finance, an area that seems to be growing but is still quite underdeveloped. In doing so, it works to highlight the future of the BRI and the broader aims of the CCP. These goals will hinge not merely on the investment, but on whether those investments are perceived as mutually beneficial.

Limitations

Several limitations surround these findings. Namely, the research done by PEW and the AfroBarometer, while vast, is highly uneven among key regional areas. For example, neither includes polling results from

Russia, which would have been key to understanding how the largest recipient of BRI loans views China. Additionally, a large challenge with public opinion data is that it only captures sentiments within a unique moment in time. It does not account for the changing and dynamic views of progress, as the BRI is constantly in flux and in different stages of development.

Furthermore, China does not publicly disclose all official lending data, specifically those that are loans involving state-owned enterprises; as a result, this paper neglects to engage with the full picture of how much has actually been appropriated. Finally, while the scatterplots and cross-tabs reveal important associations, they cannot rule out alternative explanations such as domestic political polarization, media framing, elite influence, or economic conditions unrelated to Chinese financing. Ultimately, the findings showcase how China's ability to convert economic statecraft into long-lasting soft power is contingent not on the scale of its investments but on the perceptions of tangible results of those investments.

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