



www.gfprjournal.com

GFPR
GLOBAL FOREIGN
POLICIES REVIEW

ISSN-P : 2788-502X

ISSN-E : 2788-5038

VOL. IX ISSUE II, SPRING (JUNE-2026)

GFPR

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW (GFPR)

HumanityPublications
sharing research
www.humapub.com
US | UK | Pakistan

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gfpr
DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX)
DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II)

Double-blind Peer-review Research
Journal

www.gfprjournal.com

© Global Foreign Policy Review

Title: Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa

Abstract

South Africa is the center of world strategic rivalry, where the United States and China use opposite soft power strategies to increase their dominance. This paper examines how these two powers use soft power to assert greater influence in South Africa, the most industrialized African country and a powerful state in BRICS. The involvement can be predominantly defined as China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, infrastructure investments and cultural diplomacy and the US with regards to the democratic government, institutional cooperation, and education. It will also look at the South African perception of the emerging U.S. China competition and how it manages to maneuver its national interests and strategic independence. The qualitative research is related to the comprehension of how this competition is formed in the orientation of South Africa foreign policy, regional leadership, and place in the changing global power system.

Keywords: Soft Power, U.S. China Competition, South Africa, BRICS, Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Africa

Authors:

Virda Hayyat: BS Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Urwa Nasir: BS Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Bilal Bin Liaqat: (Corresponding Author)
Assistant Professor (OPS), Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
(Email: bilalbinliaqat@gcuf.edu.pk)

Global Foreign Policies Review

p-ISSN: [2788-502X](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr) e-ISSN: [2788-5038](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr)

DOI(journal):[10.31703/gfpr](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr)

Volume: IX (2026)

DOI (volume):[10.31703/gfpr.2025\(IX\)](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX))

Issue: II Spring (June-2026)

DOI(Issue): [10.31703/gfpr.2025\(IX-II\)](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX-II))

Home Page

www.gfprjournal.com

Volume: IX (2026)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue>

Issue: II-Spring (June-2026)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue/9/2/2026>

Scope

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/about-us/scope>

Submission

<https://humaglobe.com/index.php/gfpr/submissions>

Scan the QR to visit us



Google
scholar



Pages: 16-24

DOI:[10.31703/gfpr.2026\(IX-II\).03](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).03)

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026\(IX-II\).03](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).03)

Article link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/competing-for-influence-uschina-soft-power-strategies-in-south-africa>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/competing-for-influence-uschina-soft-power-strategies-in-south-africa>

Pdf link: <https://www.gssrjournal.com/jadmin/Author/31rv1olA2.pdf>



This work is licensed under the Attribution-Noncommercial- No Derivatives 4.0 International.

Citing this Article

Article Serial	03
Article Title	Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa
Authors	Virida Hayyat Urwa Nasir Bilal Bin Liaqat
DOI	10.31703/gsr.2026(IX-II).03
Pages	16–24
Year	2026
Volume	XI
Issue	II
Referencing & Citing Styles	
APA	Hayyat, V., Nasir, U., & Liaqat, B. B. (2026). Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa. <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , 9(2), 16-24. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).03
CHICAGO	Hayyat, Virida, Urwa Nasir, and Bilal Bin Liaqat. 2026. "Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> 9 (2):16-24. doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).03.
HARVARD	HAYYAT, V., NASIR, U. & LIAQAT, B. B. 2026. Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa. <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , 9, 16-24.
MHRA	Hayyat, Virida, Urwa Nasir, and Bilal Bin Liaqat. 2026. 'Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , 9: 16-24.
MLA	Hayyat, Virida, Urwa Nasir, and Bilal Bin Liaqat. "Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> 9.2 (2026): 16-24. Print.
OXFORD	Hayyat, Virida, Nasir, Urwa, and Liaqat, Bilal Bin (2026), 'Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , 9 (2), 16-24.
TURABIAN	Hayyat, Virida, Urwa Nasir, and Bilal Bin Liaqat. "Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> 9, no. 2 (2026): 16-24. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).03 .

Competing for Influence: Us-China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa



Virida Hayyat¹, Urwa Nasir², Bilal Bin Liaqat (Corresponding Author)³

¹ BS Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

² BS Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Assistant Professor (OPS), Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
(Email: bilalbinliaqat@gcuf.edu.pk)

Abstract

South Africa is the center of world strategic rivalry, where the United States and China use opposite soft power strategies to increase their dominance. This paper examines how these two powers use soft power to assert greater influence in South Africa, the most industrialized African country and a powerful state in BRICS. The involvement can be predominantly defined as China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, infrastructure investments and cultural diplomacy and the US with regards to the democratic government, institutional cooperation, and education. It will also look at the South African perception of the emerging U.S. China competition and how it manages to maneuver its national interests and strategic independence. The qualitative research is related to the comprehension of how this competition is formed in the orientation of South Africa foreign policy, regional leadership, and place in the changing global power system.

Keywords: *Soft Power, U.S. China Competition, South Africa, BRICS, Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Africa*

Introduction

All of humanity has been characterized by the game of power relations, which is most likely to be persuasive and influential, not authoritative, and a soft power in the 21st century is becoming a vital tool of international relations. Africa and specifically South Africa has become the center of interest in this international rivalry with the United States and China struggling to reinforce their presence both diplomatically, economically and culturally. The fact that South Africa is the most industrialized state in the continent and has also been a member of BRICS and a leading country in the African Union, gives it significant strategic value in the geopolitical tussle between the two great powers (Mongae, 2025). The increasing momentum of Chinese influence in South Africa has been driven by the colossal economic investments, the development of infrastructures and, in large part, cultural diplomacy, which have mainly been implemented through the models of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These efforts are meant to establish the image of China as a safe development companion and further integrate further into African markets and natural resources (Ngundu, 2025). On the contrary, the United States utilizes a soft power strategy with emphasis on democracy promotion, good governance, educational exchange, and humanitarian aid to continue being relevant and legitimate in the region (USIP, 2023). The ever growing rivalry of soft power between the U.S and China in South Africa is not just a bilateral battle it is a re-enactment of the global order reconfiguration where developing countries such as South Africa have active roles in the process of determining the outcome. With two powers having different instruments of power and influence, South Africa has a complex challenge of balancing the two relations and thus avoiding jeopardizing its national interests, economic independence, and policy autonomy (Chivvis et al., 2023). Consequently, the paper will compare and contrast the United States and Chinese approaches to soft power in South Africa, examining the ways in which both the power projects



impact the country, the way in which the actors of the South African nation perceive and act upon the projects, and what the competition means to the foreign policy orientation and South African regional leadership. The study will also seek to make a fine contribution to the dynamics of soft power in the African changing geopolitical context especially the manner in which South Africa is maneuvering its position in the larger U.S.-China influence contest.

Competing for Influence: U.S.China Soft Power Strategies in South Africa is a book that examines the complexities that surround the approach of the two countries, the United States and China, in fighting over South Africa, a key figure in the geopolitical hierarchy of the African continent. This rivalry was founded on the historical background of colonialism and development of foreign relations of South Africa in the post-apartheid period which is characterized by its characteristic to seek strategic independence in the context of multipolar world order. Since these two countries are using soft power tactics, non-military instruments used to make both countries more attractive to the world, the stakes are high, as it is a global subject of shift in power, and the intricacies of the global politics in the post-colonial world. The U.S. cultural diplomacy, exchange of education, and humanitarianism are just some of the elements of the soft power strategy the United States has implemented in response to the increasing influence of China. Conversely, China capitalizes on its economic expansion and investment by programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and at the same time, it also enhances cultural interchange programs via Confucius Institutes as a means of improving its reputation as a good neighbor in the developing world.

The policies of the two countries though do not pass without criticism; the U.S. has frequently criticized the policies of China on the ground that it causes dependency and sovereignty, and Chinese way of doing things is also doubted as to whether this will have any long-term effects on the recipient nations. It is important to note that the U.S.-China competition in South Africa is complicated by national foreign policy ambitions of the country, which imply the ambition to have a balance and multialignment. South Africa manages these forces at a time when it claims its agency, indicative of further ambitions to be leaders in the Global South. The changing environment poses very important concerns about the successfulness and consequences of these soft power practices where the effects of democratic backsliding, grassroots campaigns and dissatisfaction in the Global South are changing the way the international relations will be in the future.

Literature Review

In the article of Mitchell Gallagher titled ‘*China flexes its media muscle in Africa - encouraging positive headlines as part of a soft power agenda*’, the author dwells upon the role of the Africa-oriented media landscape which has become the target of the communication activities of China. Gallagher believes that in addition to the well-documented infrastructural and economic activism of china, Beijing has shifted its efforts to narrative fabrication- fuelling favourable headlines, forming alliances with local media houses, and accentuating good-news narratives of the china’s activities on the continent. This changes, he opines, is an indication of the overall soft-power project of China in its endeavor to mold the world image and establish its presence in Africa. The paper also assumes that this media approach fulfills several roles: supporting the diplomatic agenda of China, challenging Western media discourses, and creating the environment conducive to Chinese investments and political relations. Gallagher ends by stating that though these forms of engagement both in the media might seem harmless; they pose significant areas of concern about the independence of the media, agenda-setting, and the dynamic information environment in African nations (Gallagher, [2025](#)).

In the paper by Mmabatho Mongae entitled ‘*SA balancing act with the US: Diplomacy and Strategy*’, the author looks at the way South Africa is maneuvering its relationship with the United States in a multipolar world. Mongolia highlights how the fact that South Africa is the second-largest trading partner of the U.S. as well as a significant recipient of U.S. aid puts South Africa in a precarious situation where economic needs clash and a foreign policy that focuses on non-alignment and relationships with the up-and-coming power of BRICS. The article singles out areas of conflict, including the relationship of South Africa and Russia, China, and Iran, and land-expropriation law, that could cast doubts among Washington politicians on the strategic dependability of Pretoria but presents channels to diversification. The most effective alternative, according to Mongae, is to practice active diplomacy: to retain basic economic ties with the U.S. and at the same time to maintain independent strategy and develop relationships with other countries outside the West (Mongae, [2025](#))

The article “*South Africa’s trade-deficit dilemma with China*” by Marvellous Ngundu who discusses the idea of how South Africa is becoming increasingly vulnerable in terms of its trade imbalance with China and is also missing out on value-added economic upgrading. The article demonstrates that, although South Africa imports more and more products produced in China, exported to this country continue to be concentrated in primary products, and Pretoria will be vulnerable to the variability of the prices of raw materials and the effects of structural changes in the world market. Ngundu suggests that rather than the size of the deficit, the problem with South Africa is that it is a trade that the country is seeking to lock-in to the resource-export business, as China is increasingly becoming entrenched into advanced manufacture. The author believes that South Africa needs to pursue a two-pronged approach of negotiating improved access to the Chinese market to its more value-added exports and aggressively develop local production strength that complements as opposed to competing with the Chinese imports to transform the relationship into more of a beneficial partnership (Ngundu, 2025)

In the paper titled ‘*U.S. Soft Power: Next Steps After the Foreign Aid Withdrawal*’, Stephanie Psaki discusses how the recent extreme cut in American aid to third world countries is a significant change in long-term traditions of self-sacrificing global leadership to a more transactional one. She claims that although the retreat risks to destroy the ability of the U.S. to define the global agenda, the soft power is still an important strategic asset as long as future investments are transparent, in concert with those of partners, and clearly advantageous to both the recipients and U.S. interests. According to Psaki, neglecting to use this soft power tool would leave a vacuum, which other powers are ready to take advantage of, and would redefine the power in the world of global health and development (Psaki, 2025)

The article “*Rethinking U.S.–Africa policy amid changing geopolitical realities*” by John J. Chin and Haleigh Bartos is based on a critical evaluation of how the accelerated increase in coups, insurgencies, and great-power competition on the African continent are revealing the shortcomings of the current United States Africa policy. Using this argument, they state that Washington is facing a consistent trilemma of attempting to advance democracy, fight violent extremism, and be involved in great-power competition all at the same time, a balancing exercise that reminds us of the Cold War quandary, but this time made difficult by the emergence of China and Russia. The article brings out the role that U.S. policies have played in promoting security and strategic interests at the cost of values based engagement, compromising credibility and influence in the continent. It finds that the U.S. policy towards Africa needs to be reevaluated by rebalancing the defence, diplomatic, and development components, enhancing the support of democracy, and developing deeper partnerships through the consistent and credible action (Chin & Bartos, 2024)

Research Gap

Most of this growing literature focuses substantially on the global contest for influence between the United States and China ideologically, economically, and diplomatically and their cultural engagements across Africa. However, the research that soft power strategies of the two superpowers, as well as their competitions, still specifically within South Africa’s domestic and regional context are largely ignored by the literature is sparse. Existing studies heavily emphasize China’s economic diplomacy through building infrastructures, media story, and the Belt and Road Initiative, while the United States’ soft power activities based on governance initiatives, education, and public diplomacy are less talked about. Although the strategic value of Africa has been well-argued by scholars in the light of these powers, most of the analyses consider the continent as one single geopolitical unit, thus failing to thoroughly explaining South Africa’s unique position as a regional leader and BRICS member. Besides, a comparative understanding of how South Africans perceive and react to the U.S. and Chinese influence is lacking. What this rivalry means for the country’s political autonomy, economic sovereignty, and diplomatic alignment is still a question. Consequently, this research works to close the gap by providing a critical assessment of convergence and divergence between the U.S. and Chinese soft power strategies in South Africa and how their competition determines the broader balance of influence not only in Africa but also globally.

Research Questions

1. How do the U.S. and China utilize soft power techniques to keep on top of their influence in South Africa?
2. What is the attitude and reaction of the South African policymakers, civil society, and the public towards the competing soft power interventions of the two powers?
3. What are the consequences of U.S.-China soft power competition far beyond South Africa's foreign policy and regional leadership within Africa?

Research Methodology

This paper will assume a qualitative research design and examine the rivalry among the competing soft power tactics of the United States and China in South Africa. It discusses the ways the two powers have influence in the form of diplomacy, development aid, education, the media and cultural activity and how they have influenced the political and economical course of South Africa. The study is primarily based on the secondary data sources such as government and institutional reports, publications prepared by think-tanks, policy briefs, scholarly articles, and reliable media analyses. There is a qualitative content analysis method used to understand the U.S and Chinese involvement in South Africa in terms of policies, narratives and strategic discourses. The analysis is directed towards the 2018-2025 period, which covers new tendencies in the great power competition. It aims at determining major trends and differences in the policies of the two countries and how South Africa countered their pressure. Finally, the study will contribute to the existing knowledge about the realities of the soft power competition in the new geopolitical setting in Africa with a specific focus on the South Africa as both an object and a mediator of foreign interests.

Objectives of Research

- The researcher will discuss the Chinese strategies of soft power and its influence in South Africa, such as the application of economic diplomacy, its involvement in the media, educational exchanges, and development assistance, as the strategies to boost its presence and influence perceptions.
- The researcher will examine the instruments of the soft power used by the United States in South Africa, with the primary emphasis on the programs of governance, cultural diplomatic activity, partnerships in higher education, and promotion of democratic values as tools of influence.
- The researcher will evaluate South Africa reaction and management of counter-hegemony soft power of both the United States and China, focusing on the domestic policy decisions, economic relations, and the diplomatic alignment.
- The researcher will have to perform comparative analysis of the effectiveness and consequences of the U.S. and Chinese soft power strategies in order to assess the effect of this rivalry on the sovereignty of South Africa, its leadership in the region and its long-term geopolitical orientation.

Historical Context

The dynamics of U.S. and Chinese influence in South Africa require a historical background that entails the heritage of the colonialism and a development of foreign relations since the fall of apartheid. The effects of the European colonialism in Africa created economies whose main purpose is to favor the European nations and this resulted in a dependency on commodities exports which is still perceived in African countries to this days. Ethnic and regional differences that have been experienced in the post colonial period were aggravated by the political structures that were put in place during the colonial times. After gaining independence during the mid 20 th century, most of the African nations among them South Africa wanted to establish themselves as sovereign nations with a stand-alone economy. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a group that came into existence to enable these countries to oppose Western supremacy, although, China, even though not a member state, tended to concur with the views of the movement, which supported unity among the developing countries. The 1990s were a very turning point in the life of South Africa, as it was the period when it became isolated under the apartheid regime but was then re-integrated in the world community as a whole. The new South Africa diplomacy aimed at forging a universal foreign policy that would see to it that the country has relations with as many countries as possible, including those ones that were once regarded as pariahs like Libya

and Cuba. (Adarkwah et al., [2025](#)) The period of diplomacy was characterized by the focus on multilateralism and preventive diplomacy, unlike the previous regime, which was characterized by secrecy and a rather aggressive stance. The foreign policy of South Africa has been developed under the rule of different presidential regimes and each of them represents the varying priorities and the approaches to the international relationships. The HR and Moral authority and the human rights were the priorities under Nelson Mandela and the Africans Agenda and the anticolonial agenda of Thabo Mbeki. The government of Jacob Zuma changed to focus on the economic needs and more aggressive approach to the African problems, consolidating the role as a leader of the continent. (Muller, [1998](#))

US Soft Power Strategies

The U.S. applies different forms of soft power tactics to improve its power in the world, especially in the areas where it is competing with China. The main aspect of these strategies is the use of non-military instruments in foreign and domestic security policies and focus on cultural diplomacy, education, and development aid. The man behind the concept of soft power, Joseph Nye, has advocated that the U.S. should be able to use these non-military tools in order to supplement its hard power in order to see its interests being promoted in a more globalized world.

Cultural Diplomacy and Educational Exchanges

Cultural diplomacy is one of the prominent aspects of the U.S. soft power. The American government invests in the programs that propagate American values and culture, which make different countries understand and have goodwill. Programs like Fulbright Program and other institutions like the Peace Corps are a platform where education takes place and mutual respect and sharing of knowledge is achieved. Also, such interactions enable increased interactivity with the local communities, effectively disabling the discourse that can be pushed by other actors of power, especially China, which has also stepped up its cultural offensive efforts via its Confucius Institutes. (Congressional Research Service, [2008](#))

Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid

In the U.S. soft power approach, the country supports other nations with significant developmental aid and humanitarian support especially those in Africa and Southeast Asia. This help is meant to develop infrastructure, enhance education, and healthcare and hence enhance the livelihoods of recipient countries. The U.S. aims at making itself a reliable partner by focusing on democracy-building and economic development as opposed to the rising power of China brought about by its economic cooperation framework that mostly encompasses infrastructure and resource mining.

Public Diplomacy and Engagement

The U.S. has undertaken public diplomacy actions that have targeted strengthening the dialogue with nations through activities like the Pacific Island Forums, with the resulting emphasis being on regional integration and addressing urgent concerns such as climate change and fisheries control. The American agenda is to make business climates favorable and economic relations stronger, according to the Chinese aggressive approach to businesses in these areas. The U.S., via the multilateral relations, including the relations with the APEC and bilateral talks with the countries, such as Japan and South Korea, understands that there should be collaborative methods of dealing with security issues and encouraging a balanced trading relationship in Asia.

China's Soft Power Strategies

The soft power policy of China is part and parcel of its international policy particularly in places such as South Africa. The Chinese government focuses on soft power as a means to reach positive impressions and propagate its global image in order to prove its non-violent intentions and its desire to develop sustainably. The given strategy is becoming acknowledged as the focal point to the larger geopolitical interests of China and comprises a range of factors that make it attractive in terms of its soft power.

Economic Growth and Investment

The strong economic development of China is one of the pillars of China soft power strategy as it can invest heavily in developing countries such as Africa. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of the examples of how China tries to improve infrastructure and economic collaboration on the international level. China is investing heavily in infrastructure projects in Africa in pursuant to building goodwill and enhancing its influence as such projects are commonly viewed as having a great impact towards the local development requirements. An example is the economic relationship between China and Africa whereby there have been significant investments especially in construction and energy as they are required due to the infrastructural gaps being experienced in the continent.

Cultural Diplomacy

Another way of enhancing the soft power of China has been the focus on cultural diplomacy. This involves the development of Confucius Institutes all over the world where Chinese language and culture is promoted. The network has since opened many locations since the opening of the first one in Seoul in 2004, with a number of these being located in South Africa. These cultural campaigns are aimed at improving such understanding and creating closer relations with the local people and, as a result, create a more positive perception of China.

Multilateral Engagement

Further, the presence of multilateral organizations in China is a major determinant of the soft power strategy. China has traditionally been reluctant to be a member of the United States-dominated institutions but has increasingly been participating in these institutions and has been using its increasing influence to push policies that favor its interests. This movement is an indication of a manipulative gesture to reform the world standards and discourses in a manner that brings more prestige to China in the international arena. The partnership with the local bodies like the African Union is another indication that China is fully committed to multilateralism as an instrument of soft power boosting.

Comparative Analysis

The United States and China have conflicting interests that have complicated the foreign relations scene in South Africa. The two countries are also strategically competing to gain soft power which greatly influences their interaction and dealings with South Africa, and the African continent at large.

U.S. Strategies and Engagement

South Africa has long been considered as a strategic ally to counter the increasing role of China and Russia in Africa. Trump administration foreign policy to Africa focused on harder approach to partnerships aimed to reduce the so-called predatory nature of China and Russia that aim to gain competitive advantages with the help of investments in low-cost infrastructure projects. Nonetheless, there is doubt about U.S. conflict management strategies in Africa particularly due to foreign policy differences that exist between the U.S. and South Africa and rapprochement appears to be a far-fetched event in the near future. Further, the U.S. acknowledges that it is essential to have an interest in engaging with China on African matters to reconcile national interests and security interests. This is necessitated by the need to collaborate on issues like governance and stability in some parts of the world like South Sudan but the U.S. is cautious about the U.S. China alliance that may cause it to lose some of its traditional relationships with African countries. (Mills & Onyango, [2018](#))

China's Soft Power Strategy

On the other hand, Chinese soft power approach to Africa, particularly to South Africa, aims at strengthening bilateral ties by business partnership, peace, and reforming the global governance that favor the Global South. The presence of China is not purely economic because China is aiming at cementing its geopolitical footprint in Africa, taking advantage of U.S. strategic rebalancing not to Africa. The method that China uses tends to be opposite to that of the U.S. where investments and developmental assistance takes precedence over the political

emphasis of the western help. This has created positive attitude of China by some African leaders and business community who regard the presence of China as the chance to grow and develop regionally.

Comparative Outcomes

The various approaches that have been used by U.S and China lead to different perceptions of influence in South Africa. Whereas the U.S. tries to establish itself as an ally that supports democratic principles and economic freedom, the Chinese model is focused on concrete developmental projects and non-interference into the internal matters, which is attractive to the short-term interests of the African countries. The foreign policy of South Africa is marked with non-aligned stance which is an indication of need to strike a balance of these forces as it deals with the complicated relationship with the two powers. Despite South Africa being aware of the economic advantages of them engaging in relations with the Western countries, it also believes in more political relations with other African countries and Global South countries members, and is showing a multialignment approach, as opposed to being aligned closely with either the U.S. or China. (Resolution, [2009](#))

Challenges and Criticism

The rivalry between the United States and China to gain influence in South Africa has been discounted with great challenges and criticisms especially on the effectiveness and implications of the respective soft power approaches through their respective strategies.

Discontent in the Global South

A significant difficulty is the result of a general dissatisfaction in the Global South which is reflected in numerous forms. India has been offering the 4R framework of the respond, recognize, respect and reform to handle these grievances, whereas China has focused on other aspects such as solidarity in its efforts. Brazil and South Africa have raised their concerns with inequality and moral conflict issues, respectively, which points to the fact that people are not entirely satisfied with the Western world, which will allow countries like China to increase its influence. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has also outrightly noted that he felt the need to tackle the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S and China and the expanding divide between the North and the South indicating that they should look at the interrelated problems simultaneously.

22 of 24

Evolving Dynamics of Soft Power

Contributions related to the dynamics of soft power have also become more specific, specifically to the example of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, which is a massive economic engagement policy designed to enhance stability and expansion. According to critics, although the approach by China presents short-term gains, it has the potential of creating addiction, which weakens the sovereignty of the recipient countries. In addition, some analysts are of the opinion that the American soft power has been weakened by its own policies, restricting it in addressing the rising influence of China.

Democratic Backsliding and U.S. Support

In places such as the Sahel, the U.S. has been accused of not doing enough to foster democracy particularly as the bonds between dictatorships and other world powers such as Russia, China and Turkey are strengthened. (Bakare, [2025](#)) The US has been known to put more priority on strategic interests rather than on a democratic principle, and this has made the image of hypocrisy emerge in the US foreign policy. This has added more credibility to the U.S. as it has failed to balance its counterterrorism programs with its actual support of democratic governance in sub-Saharan Africa due to the absence of a solid criticism of fraudulent elections in the region.

Grassroots Movements and African Agency

In addition to this, emergence of grassroots movements in Africa is yet another challenge to the influence of both the U.S. and China. Popular protests have come out as a response to corrupt leadership and poor governance meaning that outside forces should become more authentic with the African people. Though soft

power strategies seek to draw in and assimilate the local leaders, nevertheless, it has to counter the increasing demands of the African people themselves that their leaders have their own voice and representation. Such a situation makes it hard to maneuver through the complexities of influence not only by the U.S. but also by China in South Africa and other countries.

Conclusion

The struggle of influence between China and the United States in South Africa is indicative of a larger trend in the global politics where the soft power has gained prominence as a tool of geopolitical contention. The two powers aim to influence the South African preference and partnership with either culture, development aid, economic involvement, and diplomatic approaches rather than depending on the military or forceful approach. The strategic position with which South Africa can be object of interest in this contest due to its potential economic power, its political presence in Africa, and its moral power based on its anti-apartheid legacy is what makes the country a central focus of this struggle and an important source of insight into the dynamics of the Global South.

The discussion reveals that the U.S. and Chinese soft power approaches and images vary in their practice and image. The United States has been focusing on values based engagement, facilitating democracy, human rights, educational interactions and humanitarian aid. By using these tools, the U.S. tries to present itself as a stable and long-term ally. But the success of such a policy has been undermined by the lack of consistency in American foreign policy, especially where strategic / security concerns take precedence over democratic commitments. These conflicting issues have led to the distrust of some people of Africa and lowered the overall popularity of American soft power.

China on the other hand bases its soft power on economic collaboration and engagement based on development. Infrastructure and trade investments and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative have visible short-term and long-term benefits, which can meet the South African development priorities. The Chinese focus on non-intervention, national independence and South-South cooperation is very close to post-colonial states that fear Western conditionality. Cultural diplomacy particularly by Confucius Institutes helps China in its quest to give a positive image. However, the issues of debt dependence are also questioned as well as the transparency and long-term sovereignty, which casts doubt on the sustainability of the Chinese way.

One of the main discoveries in this paper is that South Africa is not a passive participant in the great-power rivalry but an actor who is pursuing a policy of multialignment. South Africa aims to create a balance between its relations with the United States as well as China using its historical experiences and foreign policy traditions without compromising on its strategic autonomy. To sum up, the U.S.-China soft power rivalry in South Africa reflects a larger pattern in the Global south, as states strive to diversify their partnerships and benefit as much as possible without identifying with a single power. Both forces do not have an overpowering hand and instead, power is influenced by credibility, consistency and sensitivity to local interests. In the case of South Africa, this competition presents development and diplomatic leverage, and dependency and outside pressure. Finally, the long-term dependence of the sustainable impact will be determined by the degree of respect towards the African agency among external actors and their alignment of the interaction with the long-term goals of South African society.

References

- Adarkwah, G. K., Sabel, C. A., & Zilja, F. (2025). Caught between a rock and a hard place? Africa's position in the US–China strategic rivalry. *AIB Insights*. <https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.130834>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Bakare, O. (2025, November 27). *US influence is waning in Africa's Sahel, but new partnerships could rebuild influence to counter Russia and China*. LSE United States Politics and Policy. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2025/11/27/us-influence-is-waning-in-africas-sahel-but-new-partnerships-could-rebuild-influence-to-counter-russia-and-china/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Chin, J. J., & Bartos, H. (2024). Rethinking U.S.–Africa policy amid changing geopolitical realities. *Texas National Security Review*, 40(4), 110–123. <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/52237>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Chivvis, C. S., Usman, Z., & Geaghan-Breiner, B. (2023). *South Africa in the emerging world order*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Congressional Research Service. (2008). *China's foreign policy and "soft power" in South America, Asia, and Africa: A study prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate*. U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO).
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Gallagher, M. (2025). China flexes its media muscle in Africa – encouraging positive headlines as part of a soft power agenda. *The Conversation*.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Mills, G., & Onyango, O. (2018). *The US should focus on soft power and China cooperation in Africa—not rivalry*. The Brenthurst Foundation.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Mongae, M. (2025). SA's balancing act with the US: Diplomacy and strategy. *Good Governance Africa*, 12(4).
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Muller, M. (1998). *Current developments in South African diplomacy*. Diplo Foundation. <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/current-developments-in-south-african-diplomacy/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Ngundu, M. (2025). South Africa's trade-deficit dilemma with China. *Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa)*, 30(6), 118–130.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Psaki, S. (2025). U.S. soft power: Next steps after the foreign aid withdrawal. *Think Global Health*, 24(7), 35–48.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Resolution, C. R. [Center for Conflict Resolution]. (2009). Assessing South Africa's strategic options of soft power application through civic interest groups. *ACCORD – African Journal on Conflict Resolution*.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- USIP [United States Institute of Peace]. (2023). *America must now build the partnership it offered Africa*. United States Institute of Peace.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)