

THE EROSION OF AMERICAN SOFT POWER IN PAKISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH JOSEPH NYE'S SOFT POWER THEORY

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Abstract

This study examines the decline of American soft power in Pakistan in the 21st Century through the theory given by Joseph S. Nye, which emphasizes attraction through culture, political values, and foreign policy. Since the Cold War, the U.S. has been continuously struggling to make the world on its side using soft tools like cultural exchange, promotion of democratic values, and financial aid. Both superpowers were working hard to take the South Asian countries, especially Pakistan and India, into their blocs. The world witnessed these efforts turning fruitful through the disintegration of the Soviet Union and turning the U.S. into the sole superpower of the world. The dominance of American media, technological superiority, and top-notch educational institutions all contribute to its global projection. Through initiatives like the Fulbright Program the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the United States promote global connectivity and ideological resonance. However, sustaining this influence necessitates robust funding, diplomatic engagement, and policy coherence to counter emerging strategic rivals, especially China, who make efforts to weaken the U.S. credibility worldwide. However, this influence is gradually declining in the 21st century in Pakistan. The study looks into how this decline has been caused by both external issues, like China's expanding regional presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, and internal factors like inconsistent foreign policies and the rise of protectionist rhetoric. Using qualitative analysis of academic sources, extraordinary historical events, and surveys, the paper makes the case that the internal factors, like the U.S support to the undemocratic institutions, strategic objectives policies as well as external factors like China's soft power rise in Pakistani people, are diminishing the U.S. soft power in Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has sided with the United States since the 1950s to receive military and economic assistance, but this strategic alliance has rarely resulted in long-lasting interpersonal or cultural soft power relationships (Cohen, 2004). According to (Fair, Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Armys Way of War, 2014) the U.S. aid during the Cold War constructed educational and

infrastructure projects in Pakistan, but the absence of sustained cultural engagement resulted in limited U.S. soft power. The United States' soft power suffered from its sudden post-war disengagement, which Pakistanis saw as betrayal, despite cooperation against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. (Haqqani, 2013). The United States attempted to

resurrect soft power through media projects and educational exchanges, but these efforts were overshadowed by contradictory policies and inconsistent messaging. (Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, 2014) (Joseph S. Nye, 2004). The United States made a great deal of its soft power tools through strategic alliances, financial support for development, and educational exchange (Kurlantzick, 2008). Despite significant aid inflows, American drone strikes and perceived disrespect for Pakistan's sovereignty damaged the U.S. image after 9/11, making it less appealing as a soft power.

In contrast to China's consistent investments and cultural diplomacy through CPEC, Pakistanis increasingly saw the U.S. as hegemonic rather than benign. Although the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is still pragmatic today, China's non-interventionist development model has an even greater appeal to Pakistani youth and elites, which has changed the soft power influence. (Small, 2015). As the century advances, however, it is evident that American soft power in Pakistan has steadily lessened. This lessening influence within and outside of the United States can be explained by consistent foreign policy strategies, growing anti-American sentiments in the masses, and the simultaneous emergence of China's alternative model of influence, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative.

This study aims to investigate the American soft power trajectory in Pakistan during the twenty first century. The following central questions direct this research:

- How has American soft power declined in the Pakistani masses since the 21st century?
 - Has American credibility been undermined by the U.S. foreign policy choices themselves?
 - What are the causes behind this decline and its impact on Pakistan's masses?
 - How has China's soft power changed the U.S. soft power's influence among Pakistan's masses?
 - What measures could America adopt to revive its deteriorated image among Pakistani people?
- Drawing on scholarly works, books, foreign policy documents, and surveys, this study provides a critical evaluation of U.S. soft power strategy in the region

through Nye's theoretical framework. According to the paper, the United States' influence in Pakistan may keep declining unless it renews its dedication to multilateralism, people-to-people diplomacy, supporting democratic values, increasing trade, and promoting human rights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of the 'U.S. soft power' in the twenty-first century has been examined by a number of academics. (Melissen, 2005) emphasized the importance of academic outreach initiatives, cultural exchanges, and public diplomacy as tools of American influence. In a similar vein, (Nye, *The Future of Power*, 2011) reiterated that American media, higher education, and innovations in technology all contributed to the country's better standing globally. Initiatives such as USAID, the Fulbright program, and people-to-people relationships played a crucial role in advancing American partnerships along with principles in South Asia (Schneider, 2006)

However, there has been an evolving misconstrue about these tools' functionality. The United States' reputation as a stable and moral global leader suffered from the unpredictable nature of its foreign policy, particularly under the Trump administration. (Shambaugh, 2021) additionally indicates that the U.S.'s growing nationalism and withdrawal from multilateral institutions caused a disconnect between its ideals and actual practices.

The rise of China as a soft power actor has drawn more attention from academics than the relative decline of U.S. soft power. (Kurlantzick, 2008) first proposed the idea of China's "charm offensive," emphasizing how it strategically uses foreign aid, scholarships, state-funded media, and Confucius Institutes to increase its appeal in the developing world. (Zhou & Esteban, 2018) observe that governments leery of Western criticism on matters such as democracy and human rights find solace in China's emphasis on non-interference and mutual development.

Certain U.S. policy choices and their effects on soft power have been the subject of recent research. For instance, (Markey, 2013) describes how the strategic alliance between the United States and India has

weakened its appeal in the region by alienating longstanding allies like Pakistan. Similarly, (Akbar, 2015) note that America's credibility was severely damaged by its withdrawal from Afghanistan and its alleged inability to stabilize the area.

RESEARCH GAP

The decline of American soft power in Pakistan, using Joseph Nye's theoretical framework, has received relatively little scholarly attention, even though a sizable body of literature analyzes.

U.S.-Pakistan relations through the lenses of hard power and security cooperation. Current research frequently focuses on U.S. foreign policy failures or strategic alliances (Haqqani, 2013), but it does not adequately examine how changes in public opinion, cultural engagement, and normative appeal have weakened U.S. soft power in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, few analyses place this decline in the context of new global dynamics like China's increasing influence through CPEC, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Pakistan's changing media narratives (Small, 2015). Additionally, even though opinion polls show that Pakistanis' perceptions of the United States are deteriorating regarding soft power instruments like diplomacy, education, civil society partnerships, and cultural exports (Pew Research Center, 2012). This study contributes by providing a comprehensive, multidimensional analysis of the decline of US soft power in Pakistan through theorybuilding and empirics unfolding in the 21st century, which fills a vital lacuna.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Joseph S. Nye's theory of soft power serves as the main theoretical basis in this paper. Soft power, Joseph S. Nye's concept that soft power has been particularly critical in shaping the strategic debate of international relations in the 21st century. That is, "the ability of a state to influence the actions of others by appeal and attraction, rather than coercion or payment – soft power flows from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies" (Joseph S. Nye, 2004). States that are successful in bringing these sources into line with international standards typically have more credibility and clout in international relations. For

much of the post-Cold War era, especially in the early years of the 21st century, the United States was seen as the leading soft power actor, advancing democratic values, worldwide cooperation, technological leadership, and cultural dominance.

Historically, American soft power in Pakistan has been utilized through diplomatic engagement, educational exchange programs, development assistance, and cultural exports. Nonetheless, (Nye, *The Future of Power*, 2011) recognizes that soft power is brittle and dependent; it may wane when a state's actions are inconsistent with its declared ideals. This theoretical approach is especially helpful in comprehending how the United States' declining power is influenced by the country's perceptions of American hypocrisy, the emergence of alternative power centers like China, and inconsistencies in its foreign policy. Nye's framework serves as the foundation for this study, which critically assesses the decline of U.S. 'soft power' in Pakistan with an emphasis on the interaction between strategic conduct and normative appeal. A nuanced examination of the region's alterations in structure as well as agency-driven reactions is made feasible by this perspective.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

THE DIMINISH IN SOFT POWER LED TO THE RISE IN ANTI-AMERICANISM AMONG PAKISTAN'S MASSES:

The significant evolution in the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan came with the 9/11 attacks. Pakistan aligned itself with the U.S.-led global war against terrorism under the leadership of Gen. Musharraf. The United States provided Pakistan with economic and military assistance due to the cooperation, but also positioned Pakistan at the center of a life-threatening and polarizing conflict (Fair, *U.S Pakistan relations after a decade of the war on terror*, 2012). Targeting terrorist organizations, the United States carried out numerous drone strikes in Pakistan's northern regions, killing civilians in the process. According to (Boyle, 2013), These drone strikes were regarded as an assault on Pakistani sovereignty. Young people developed an anti-

American sentiment as a result of the collateral damage those attacks (Ahsan & Khan, 2019)

Pakistani youth's anti-American sentiment has been influenced by a number of factors. The idea that the United States is meddling in Pakistan's domestic affairs is one of the main causes. The fundamental premise that America shapes Pakistani politics by endorsing strong leaders or regimes has made young people in the nation feel resistant. Many young people's perceptions have been altered by the claim that America was responsible for Imran's removal. Additionally, they view it as an assault on national sovereignty.

Furthermore, it is impossible to undervalue American military meddling in the nation, particularly drone strikes. These attacks caused sorrow and rage because they killed innocent civilians in addition to targeting terrorist organizations (Boyle, 2013). Furthermore, a significant contributing factor to the development of anti-American sentiments is the influence of American culture, particularly through media, entertainment, and consumerism. The majority of young people see it as a danger to their religious and cultural beliefs.

People's perceptions of anti-Americanism are also greatly influenced by economic factors. The majority of young people in Pakistan experience underdevelopment, poverty, and unemployment. There is a widespread belief that the country's economic structure is greatly impacted by U.S. loan and trade policies, leading to economic difficulties. Youth anti-Americanism has also been exacerbated by American foreign policy in the Muslim world, including its support for "Israel and military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan".

The public in Pakistan is becoming increasingly critical of the United States. 74% of Pakistanis view the United States as an enemy, compared to 69% three years ago and 69% last year. Additionally, there is a very low regard for President Obama. In fact, of the 15 countries polled by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2008 and 2012, Pakistan is the only one where Obama's ratings are no higher than those of President George W. Bush in his last year in office. (Pew Research Center, 2012)

From 2004 to 2018, drone attacks killed 424 to 969 civilians, including 207 innocent children. It has a

great impact on public opinion (The Bureau Of Investigative Journalism, 2019). In 2012, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that 66% of Pakistanis were against drone attacks because they thought it was dangerous and inhumane (Pew Research Center, 2012). Similarly, meddling with the politics of Pakistan, the United States was alleged by the former prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan. He had also spoken against military intervention and drone attacks launched by America in the tribal areas. His supporters believe that he was ousted for this reason (Latif & Ali, 2024), which ultimately impacted and diminished the soft power of the U.S of democratic values.

Imran Khan and his followers expressed their disapproval and hatred for the current political system by tweeting the phrase "Imported Hakumat Na Manzoor." Although America refuted the claims of a regime change in Pakistan, the general public's opinion, particularly among young people, remained unchanged. According to a Gallup poll, 37% of Pakistanis thought this conspiracy theory was real (Latif & Ali, 2024). In contrast, 72% of Pakistanis at the time believed that America was their enemy (Latif & Ali, 2024). Although the idea of anti-Americanism is not new, people under 30 have held this belief since the 1990s. Additionally, when Imran Khan spoke to young people, 49% of them joined him for a rally, according to a different Gallup poll (Latif & Ali, 2024). According to a Gallup poll, "only" 36% of Pakistanis agreed with the foreign conspiracy theory. However, according to the same survey, 72% of Pakistanis believed that the US was an enemy of their country rather than a friend. Over the previous 20 years, this number has stayed largely stable. Today, two-thirds of Pakistanis are under 30 and have experienced the most intense anti-American sentiment in the country since 1990. Today, two-thirds of Pakistanis are under 30 and have experienced the most intense anti-American sentiment in the country since 1990 (Stimson Center Organisation, 2022).

When U.S. leaders support human rights overseas while imposing sanctions on friends like Pakistan's military or carrying out drone strikes that result in civilian casualties, this collapse reflects views of hypocrisy. Nye contends that a country loses its

normative appeal when its behavior deviates from its declared ideals (Joseph S. Nye, 2004).

The irony is that Americans have a similar type of viewpoint. Nearly four out of ten Americans consider Pakistan to be an enemy country, and twice as many Americans consider India to be a friend (56%) as they do Pakistan (28%), according to a recent survey measuring American perceptions of Pakistan that was commissioned by the Gilani Research Foundation and carried out by Leger USA, a US-based opinion polling firm. Omni USA, an online panel by Leger USA, was used to administer the survey. Approximately 1000 men and women made up the survey's sample size. The survey participants were from various regions of the United States and varied in terms of gender, age, education, and ethnicity. (Gallup Pakistan, 2023)

In the context of Joseph Nye's theory, emphasis is also on cultural strength. Traditionally, American academic institutions, music, and movies have been the sources of cultural appeal. The number of Pakistani students who were granted U.S. visas, however, decreased by more than 40% between 2001 and 2020, reducing educational exchanges that previously promoted goodwill (U.S Department of State, 2022). At the same time, regional entertainment and Chinese-funded channels have progressively replaced Hollywood and American media content, widening the audience for American culture (Small, 2015). Nye argues that a nation's soft power reserves are directly reduced when cultural affinities decline (Nye, *The Future of Power*, 2011).

In this way, America is losing its soft power influence in Pakistan and contributing to rising anti-American sentiments in the masses through their own policies and deviating from 'Joseph Nye's concept of Soft power', which seems to be largely replaced by China.

THE FACTOR OF CHINA IN REPLACING THE AMERICAN SOFT POWER INFLUENCE:

Using all three of Nye's soft power assets—culture, political values, foreign policy, and legitimacy (Joseph S. Nye, 2004) China has been steadily increasing its soft power in Pakistan since the early 2000s, shifting the balance of regional influence away from America. By setting up several Confucius Institutes and Mandarin language centers in significant Pakistani

cities, China has broadened its cultural influence and is expected to have 10,000 students enrolled by 2020 (Panda, 2022). The cultural festivals, exhibitions, and exchange programs held by these institutions directly compete with U.S. educational outreach, which saw a 40% decrease in Pakistani student visas between 2017 and 2020 (U.S Department of State, 2022). (Nye, *The Future of Power*, 2011) emphasizes that maintaining attraction requires consistent cultural engagement; China's steady investment has stepped in to cover the gap created by U.S. budget cuts in public diplomacy. With the aid of international media and local roots of engagement through Chinese language teaching institutions, access to Chinese media in Urdu, educational exchange, and media, China has recently replaced its elite-centered policy with a people-centered one (Safdar, 2021).

China's principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty are appealing in the political values arena because they strongly align with Pakistani views of national autonomy. Chinese investments through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are positioned as mutually agreed development projects with no political strings attached, in contrast to U.S. assistance programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact, which come with governance reform requirements and were criticized in Pakistan for encroaching on domestic policymaking. This disparity increases China's normative appeal because Beijing strengthens its soft power by matching its actions with Pakistan's desire for autonomy and developmental cooperation. According to (Joseph S. Nye, 2004), a state's soft power increases when its actions continuously reflect its declared values, such as respect for partner autonomy and noninterference; China's strategy thus directly challenges the US, whose values-conditional approach is seen as hypocritical. Similarly, by presenting itself as a reliable and devoted ally, China has greatly outperformed the US in Pakistan in terms of foreign policy legitimacy, which is a fundamental component of soft power as defined by Joseph Nye (2004). Even though the United States has long been an ally of Pakistan, its interactions with the country have frequently been viewed as transactional, especially in the wake of 9/11. According to Pakistani elites and the general public, U.S. legitimacy has been undermined by U.S. policy

changes, including aid cuts, public accusations of terrorism, and the sudden military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 (Haqqani, 2013). America's capacity to project soft power has been undermined by this contradiction because, as (Nye, *The Future of Power*, 2011) highlights, soft power is dependent on credibility and moral authority in addition to attractiveness.

On the other hand, China has a reputation for dependability due to its long-term strategic commitments, especially through the CPEC. China's legitimacy has been bolstered by its rhetoric of "iron brotherhood," its willingness to finance infrastructure without overt political meddling, and its diplomatic backing on delicate issues like Kashmir (Small, 2015). China is seen as a reliable actor whose interests coincide with Pakistan's development goals, giving it more legitimacy in the twentyfirst century than the United States, whose engagement is frequently viewed through the prism of conditionality and short-term interests.

THE WAY AHEAD FOR AMERICA:

The United States needs to change its approach to bilateral engagement to stop the gradual decline of its soft power in Pakistan. Washington needs to adopt a model of diplomacy based on long-term development cooperation, policy consistency, and cultural affinity rather than transactional diplomacy based on security goals and crisis-driven alliances. According to (Joseph S. Nye, 2004), soft power is derived from a country's capacity to draw in rather than compel; the United States has jeopardized this capacity in Pakistan because of contradictions between its declared principles and its foreign policy initiatives. The cultural and educational exchanges that once served as the foundation of America's influence in the region must be revived if its appeal is to be restored. A generation of Pakistanis with a positive perception of American society was shaped in the early 2000s by academic collaborations and scholarship programs supported by the United States. But since 2011, trust has been eroded, and younger audiences have become disenfranchised due to the rise in securitized engagement and the reduction in interpersonal relationships (Haqqani, 2013).

The United States needs to align its policies with the democratic values it promotes in order to restore its reputation. American credibility has been harmed by acts like drone strikes on Pakistani territory, an alleged disrespect for national sovereignty, and the selective use of human rights rhetoric (Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Armys Way of War*, 2014). Legitimation will be restored with the support of a values-based foreign policy that emphasizes inclusive governance, freedom of expression, and the empowerment of civil society. This strategy should be combined with a focus on non-intrusive development assistance. The U.S. can assist in areas like public health, education reform, climate change mitigation, and digital inclusion—fields where observable, people-centered outcomes foster goodwill, in contrast to China's infrastructure-driven projects under CPEC. These development initiatives must be ongoing and unrestricted to prevent the impression of US meddling or moving the geopolitical chessboard.

In a time when public opinion is dominated by digital communication, the United States must also refocus its public diplomacy initiatives. American cultural institutions and embassies in Pakistan must actively work to create narratives that highlight respect for local culture, common values, and shared interests. Rebuilding familiarity and trust can be facilitated by increased participation through youth forums, cultural festivals, and digital storytelling. Crucially, as Islamabad fortifies its ties with Beijing, the U.S. should be cognizant of Pakistan's changing geopolitical position. The United States should position itself as a complementary partner by providing an alternative vision based on pluralism, accountability, and individual freedoms rather than challenging China's expanding soft power influence. This well-rounded strategy might enable the United States to regain a respected public space while enabling Pakistan to sustain diverse partnerships. Ultimately, patience, humility, and a sincere desire to comprehend the local context are necessary for the restoration of U.S. soft power in Pakistan. Soft power is acquired gradually via mutual respect and credible action rather than being imposed. The United States needs to make investments in the relationships and values that genuinely serve as the basis of influence, in addition to policy instruments, if it hopes to restore

its position as a reliable ally and inspiration for the Pakistani people.

CONCLUSION

A complex interaction between strategic blunders, erratic foreign policy, and the shifting regional balance of power is reflected in the decline of US soft power in Pakistan over the twenty-first century. The American image in Pakistan has suffered because of a perceived discrepancy between U.S. rhetoric and action, which is rooted in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (Joseph S. Nye, 2004), which is based on attraction through culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy. Longterm military interventions, the use of drone strikes inside Pakistan's borders, and the exploitation of aid for strategic ends have damaged U.S. credibility, even though many Pakistanis have historically identified with American ideals of democracy, education, and freedom.

A different model of cooperation that places a higher priority on non-intervention and longterm investment has also been brought about by China's emergence as a strategic and economic friend, especially through the CPEC. China's strategy has been seen as more considerate of Pakistan's sovereignty and more sensitive to its developmental requirements than the conditional and security-focused U.S. engagement. Nye's claim that credibility and consistent values are necessary for the sustainability of soft power is reflected in this change in preference and perception. In addition, Pakistani policymakers and the general public now have more reason to question the dependability of American commitments due to U.S. foreign policy decisions, such as the country's sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and its erratic positions on regional conflicts. The reliability of American 'soft power' has declined as a result of these actions, which have further alienated the country from the public's imagination.

As a result, internal conflicts in U.S. foreign policy are to blame for this decline rather than just external competition. The United States needs to take a more cogent and moral stance in order to restore its reputation and power; this includes investing in long-term cultural, educational, and developmental

relationships, encouraging respect for one another, and refraining from coercive diplomacy. The United States can only hope to restore soft power based on true attraction rather than strategic expediency by undergoing this realignment.

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