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MANUSCRIPT

Multilateralism and Soft Power Made-in-China: (re) Adjusting Role Conception to Meet International Expectations

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Abstract
This article addresses the specificities of the new multilateralism made-in-China under Xi Jinping. We argue that China has been investing in a combination of Soft Power and Multilateralism to foster a friendly worldwide environment whilst promoting China's geopolitical reemergence. Drawing on role theory, we assess whether there has been a shifting trend on China's soft power and multilateralism, to cope both with international expectations on China's new role and China's own role conception. We conclude that China's gradual turn towards multilateralism and soft power is a complementary strategy to China's longstanding use of bilateralism. It provides China with new institutions and ways to prosper as Chinese interests are no longer effectively fulfilled within the old Bretton Woods system. This article aims to deepen the existing literature on China's soft power, whilst highlighting the novel developments in China's multilateral initiatives and soft power including the impact of EU's de-risking approach toward China – not yet addressed by current studies.

Keywords China · Soft power · Multilateralism · Institutions · Role theory

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Introduction

Despite already being a great power, China is perceived as well as a superpower in the making according to authors, such as Shambaugh (2016) [66] and Naarajarvi (2017) [52]. After a period of isolation and economic chaos that characterised Mao Zedong's rule, Deng Xiaoping contributed to opening China to the world by launching the so-called Special Economic Zones and the formula 'one country, two systems'. This shift in China's foreign policy has relied, since 2007, on the potential of using soft power as a complement to China's economic and military might [58, 81, 33]. In light of this, Chinese soft power has been the object of increasing attention by scholars such as Mitter (2021) [49] and Yan (2021) [89]. One of the main differences between Chinese and EU or US soft power draws on the essence of its source [41], while in the US and EU cases, soft power presents a down-top essence, in the Chinese case it is literally imposed through a top-down process. In other words, it is the Chinese government, as the source of soft power, that uses the media and the Confucius Institutes to spread the 'right Chinese story' worldwide [45].

In contrast, the US and EU's soft power enshrines individual's aspirations, and dreams at the forefront, and at the same time unveils the negative aspects of reality [1, 24]. In this sense, Chinese soft power can be comprehended as a form of sharp power, which forges and adapts the message in order to hide the negative aspects of the country. This is the case with the Chinese narrative of the Community of Common Destiny [42, 81, 82, 84] which is forged to mitigate the Sinophobia spread all around the world, while China has been building, at the same time, artificial islands and militarising the ocean [74].

In addition, another characteristic of Chinese soft power lies in its reactive stance, as it aims to globally decrease and correct the negative perceptions of the country [50]. While struggling to build a friendly environment in which Chinese progress only makes sense if shared with the rest of the world (as Beijing puts it), the way China uses soft power is, thus, not purely altruist [23]. Instead, it seems to be calculus-oriented, in that it aims to support China's political regime and to consolidate its international influence.

In so doing, China has been upgrading old institutions or even creating new ones, whenever Beijing believes that existing institutions serve the West's power agenda and interests, rather than reflecting China's rising status [20, 38]. This is why, according to Buzan (2010) [5], China can be considered as a reformist revisionist. In other words, China keeps just the institutions that do not pose difficulties to Chinese aspirations worldwide and builds new institutions, for example the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), when it believes that its interests are no longer effectively fulfilled within the old Bretton Woods system [16].

Among the authors who have been writing on Chinese multilateralism, one could stress the work of Yuan Feng (2020) [83], who analyses China's political ideas regarding the international order and their reflection on China's engagement in multilateralism. Moreover, while Xie Liyan (2009) [87] has depicted the difficult course of China's turn toward multilateralism, Fang Changping (2004) [28] has underlined that after the Cold War, China has been resorting to the use of multilateralism for the purpose of safeguarding its national interests. This resulted in the creation of

a new Chinese security concept that materialised, for instance, in the implementation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, an important revelation of Chinese multilateralism at the regional level. Finally, Chen Dongxiao (2009) [10] sheds light upon the existing gap between China's role conception and the pressure to assume international responsibility that arises from the international community. Thus, the author urges China to constantly adapt to its changing national identity in multilateral diplomacy to develop a harmonious world.

This article will contribute to improving the existing literature, by highlighting the novel developments and impact that China's soft power and Chinese multilateral initiatives have introduced in China's role conception to meet external expectations. While providing an analysis of the evolution of China's soft power and multilateralism, this article aims to respond to the following research question: in which ways have China's soft power and multilateralism contributed to help (re)adjust its role conception to meet international expectations? The time frame spans from 2012, when Xi Jinping was officially confirmed as China's new president, until 2023, when Ursula von der Leyen suggested (on 30 March 2023) that the EU should start derisking from China. Notwithstanding the tensions in EU-China relations, Chinese economic diplomacy (as part of China's soft power) still proved to be effective, as we shall see.

The investigation of the contours of China's multilateralism and soft power will be complemented by the role theory, which claims that social systems, such as cultures, societies, and groups are structured on, and guided by, roles [55, 84]. This article rests on a qualitative analysis of secondary and primary sources to understand China's role performance in terms of soft power and multilateralism. These sources include relevant Chinese official documents, Chinese and non-Chinese news agencies, survey data from the Pew Research Centre, and indicators provided by the Soft Power 30 Index which combines "objective data and international polling to offer what Professor Nye has described as the clearest picture of global soft power to date" [76].

This research begins by providing the major connections between role theory, soft power, and multilateralism. The following sections outshine some practical evidence of Chinese soft power as well as of Chinese multilateral achievements under Xi Jinping. Finally, it discusses the pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia War, and the Taiwan Issue, as they have important implications for the Chinese soft power. The conclusion summarises the main findings to answer our research question.

Connecting the Dots: Role Theory, Soft Power and Multilateralism

In this article, we have chosen the role theory as a conceptual lens, since its variables - role conception, role performance, role expectations and role adaptation - allow us to assess in which ways Chinese soft power and China's multilateralism have contributed (or not) to shift the international community's perception of China. Insofar the role theory variables are concerned, they are an added value as they help us understand not only how China perceives its identity and role in the world, but also how it produces and adapts its soft power and foreign policy (which has been traditionally based on the use of bilateralism) to better fight Sinophobia at the global level. Hence,

the role conception can be understood as "an actor's perception of his or her position vis-à-vis others" [31]. In practice, China's role conception (in the making) under Xi Jinping has been, to a large extent, an attempt to revisit China's role conception from an earlier era.

This was based on the *Tianxia* (all under heaven[1]) model that provided millennial China civilization with momentum in the world [64, 79]. In other words, Xi Jinping's China is not just more pragmatic, but also more nostalgic of the millennial golden era that was characterised by a hierarchical relationship between the centre (i.e. Chinese Emperor) and the periphery (i.e. tributary states). This understanding of the *Self* has been recently revisited by the Chinese political elite in search of building an alternative role that contrasts to the markedly Western vision conditioning contemporary international relations [24]. Another component of role theory is role expectations, which are defined by Harnisch, Frank and Maull (2011) [31] as the "appropriate behaviour" that both a domestic and an external audience expect a certain actor to adopt. Thus, while domestically, Chinese people expect the Chinese Communist Party to improve economic development and living standards, as well as fight against corruption, abroad in turn, role expectations are linked to the international community's calls for a more responsible China [24]. Finally, the remaining components of role theory are role performance, which designates "the actual policy behaviour of the actor in [a] social context", and role adaptation which refers to "the changes of strategies and instruments in performing a role" [31]. In addition, one can deduce that the adaptation of China's historical role conception as a leading developing country to that of a responsible stakeholder in global affairs has led China to design a strategy based on a combination between soft power and multilateralism, whose methods comprise diplomacy and a more active role in multiple multilateral *fora* and within regional organisations [24]. In practice, role theory sustains our analysis by advocating that identity and the way in which it is expressed (in this case through soft power and multilateralism) is a dialectical process in which the *self* (in this case, China) interacts not only with its own vision of itself and the world but also with the international community's idealisation of China's role at the regional and global levels.

Having presented the premises of our conceptual lens, the article intends to introduce and describe the concept of soft power, contrasting it with what it is not. As a matter of fact, soft power differs from hard power in that it is not a power of threat, sanction, or physical and/or economic coercion. In this sense, a state that possesses heavy weapons (tanks and missiles, *inter alia*) is not necessarily a state with soft power, since according to Nye (1990) [53], soft power consists of the ability of a given state to get other countries to want what it wants and to shape others' preferences through persuasion rather than coercion.

This means that unlike hard power, where one of the parties passively accepts (given its condition of inferiority) the imposition of the other (stronger) party, in soft power both parties are active. And herein lies one of the most valuable contributions of the role theory, when this argues that "the expectations and values of the self may clash with or reject the other's attempt to exert influence", thus meaning that "soft

[1] Tianxia (all under heaven) refers to the millennial era when the Chinese Emperor (whose role one believed to be assigned by heaven) ruled a world divided into concentric circles (all under heaven).

power only works if a certain role or model generates identification and acceptance by others" [24]. In the case of China, since Hu Jintao soft power was adopted both as a component of the country's global power and as a foreign policy instrument to help construct an acceptable narrative depicting China as a benign country. Xi Jinping would then pursue this path by further contributing to the construction of a positive image of China abroad in order to mitigate Sinophobia while promoting multilateralism with Chinese characteristics. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would become the hallmark of Xi Jinping's attempts to shape external expectations by creating a narrative that the BRI is China's great project for humankind as both are interdependent.

China is nostalgic about the glorious era of the Ancient Silk Road that once enabled the Chinese emperor to rule a world that was structured in concentric circles. This being said, China's New Silk Road (known as BRI) is inspired to a great extent by the traditional practice of *Tianxia* for today's' BRI is similar to what happened in the past with the former Silk Road where all paths were intended to connect China to the world (with some major differences nonetheless). Goods traded between China and other regions and countries no longer travel by camels or mules across deserts. Nowadays, goods are actually shipped by increasingly sophisticated means, such as air, land, maritime, and even digital corridors. Another important difference between the Old and the New Silk Road is that contrary to the past, there is no longer a Chinese emperor whose mandate was assigned by heaven, but a new strongman who modifies the Chinese constitution to perpetuate himself in power. Finally, unlike the Old Silk Road, while the world no longer pays tribute to millennial China, in the BRI many poor countries have become indebted to life to China (seen as a new form of tribute adapted to new times) as they cannot repay the loans contracted with China [9, 68].

Finally, how to connect multilateralism to role theory and soft power? First of all, one cannot fully grasp the meaning of multilateralism for China without first referring to the shifting Chinese foreign policy, which comprises the emergence of both multilateralism and multilateralism *à la carte*, in addition to the already established and long-standing bilateral approach. By revisiting China's history, one sees that Beijing's preferred instrument of foreign policy has been bilateralism. This is particularly the case with high-politics which touches upon issues such as sovereignty or borders. That is why China is usually viewed as a Westphalian country, in contrast with most advanced Western states that have entered already a post-Westphalian era, in which borders tend to be less relevant (i.e. the Schengen Space).

Bilateralism is strictly associated with a certain period of China's history, when the country was closed to the rest of the world, whilst guided by the principle of self-sufficiency. Later, however, with Deng Xiaoping, China became increasingly more dependent and interconnected with other economies, thereby gradually embracing multilateralism [40, 51]. And yet, despite China being a latecomer to multilateralism [72], it has made significant advances in building several Chinese *fora* (we will come back to it later), which are also a remarkable source of soft power. The BRI itself could be seen in this vein, as the hallmark of a new era in Chinese foreign policy where multilateralism with Chinese characteristics, aims to escape the Western attempts to circumvent China's reemergence in world affairs.

In other words, while bilateralism remains active in China's foreign policy, multilateralism provides China with a complementary tool to achieve three important

goals. Firstly, to forge an alternative order to the so-called Bretton Woods institutions (while attempting to reformulate the World Bank´s functioning and achieve market economy status), in which the US influence prevents China and other developing countries from performing a greater role in world affairs [83, 86].

Secondly, multilateralism enables China to develop international cooperation and facilitate international trade under the so-called label of the Beijing Consensus, which seems to be an alternative for many countries that do not identify with the Washington model of development, also referred to as the Washington Consensus.

Finally, multilateralism seems to be a tool to help China dissipate Sinophobia worldwide, promote a multipolar world while forging the narrative of an active country in South-South cooperation, and be a prominent actor for Global Governance [44], which preaches a 'win-win solution' to foster collective security and durable peace. China's multilateralism can sometimes take the shape of a more selective multilateralism, which Ferreira-Pereira and Duarte (2021) [29] call "multilateralism à la carte".

This is the case with the EU-China Strategic Partnership (SP), whose effectiveness has been questioned by Maher (2016) [46], who argues that the latter has been more a normal and common partnership than a strategic one. Hence, this leads China to opt for a different strategy despite still being in the realm of multilateralism, to deal with many EU countries. In Europe, "multilateralism à la carte" has produced the so-called 14+1 forum that China set up in 2011, to which we will come back later. Such a unique multilateral approach was only possible because the EU lacks consensus on many issues, such as in coping with China's BRI, thereby explaining that in the same EU China can use either bilateralism (in the case of Portugal and Greece, often seen as case studies in the EU given their good receptiveness toward the BRI), or multilateralism (EU-China SP) and multilateralism à la carte (16+1).

In light of this, one may argue that soft power and multilateralism are two complementary and interdependent variables that assist China in its endeavours to increase influence worldwide, whilst adjusting its role conception to meet external expectations.

That said, examining the connection among the variables listed below assists in comprehending how the Chinese historical concept of "self" within the Sino-centric *Tianxia* order – which has been reconstructed in the "China Dream" propagated by Xi - has led to a transformed role for China on the global stage. On the one hand, the construction of China's historically based national identity, with CCP's calculus of legitimising China's ascending status vis-à-vis the US, can be treated as an independent variable. On the other hand, China's revised role conception and its role adaptation under Xi Jinping can be seen as the intervening variables that help explain the shifting trends of China's soft power and multilateral initiatives - the dependent variables - which are used to adjust the role expectation of China's role performance by Western powers.

China's soft Power: Signs and Evidence

In this section, the article will provide practical evidence of the development of a distinct soft power by China. We shall see that soft power helps China to (re)adjust its role conception of a millennial power to meet international expectations that the country be a more responsible player in global governance [56, 86]. In recent years we have witnessed a flourishing debate on the nature and characteristics of China's rising soft power both by Western scholars [4, 50, 41] and by Chinese researchers [12, 30, 85].

Revisiting the roots of China's interest in the concept of soft power, Nye's book *Bound to Lead* (translated into Chinese in 1992) represents a stage, spanning from 1992 until 2003, in which the concept of soft power first attracted Beijing's attention [77]. Later, mainly due to the fall of the US' positive international image after the invasion of Iraq, where the overuse of US hard power weakened its soft power abroad, Chinese study of the concept increased and entered a second stage (2004–2006). Indeed, Beijing's elites recognised the potential of soft power as a concept at the service of the comprehensive power of a state, but they criticised the 'instrumental nature' and 'dominating purpose' of US soft power, as well as the limits of Nye's theory [30]. More precisely, Chinese scholars started to view soft power as a tool that enabled them to focus on non-material power resources that could offer a more comprehensive approach to analyse the role of power in international politics. This explains the transition of the study of soft power to a third stage, which spans from Hu Jintao's speech, at the 17th CCP Congress 2007, when the idea of developing a 'cultural soft power' whilst adopting the concept as a political strategy emerged.

In light of this background, given that the third stage of soft power development in China is still ongoing [21], it deserves some specific remarks. One of them is the different use that Chinese authorities give to the concept, compared to how soft power is viewed and developed in Western countries. For instance, President Xi Jinping's understanding that "[Beijing] should increase China's soft power, develop a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" [17] is often associated with what has been called telling the 'right Chinese story' [19, 26, 80].

However, the problem with 'telling the right Chinese story', is that in so doing CCP's censorship - and its manipulation of Chinese media - proposedly omits the negative aspects of China's domestic and foreign policy, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, or the assertive stance in the South China Sea. Focusing only on the positive aspects of China's regime and society is different from soft power to the extent that soft power captures reality as it is, with all its positive and negative aspects, instead of masking it. Consequently, China's soft power is not actually soft power, but instead a type of sharp power. Coined by Juan Pablo Cardenal in 2017, "sharp power is wielded by authoritarian regimes to manipulate and co-opt culture, education systems, and media" [70]. Current examples of the use of sharp power can be seen in Russia's manipulation of the media regarding the war with Ukraine as well in China's narrative about the Hong Kong protests, Uyghur camps, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic [54].

Contrary to Russia's narratives which sometimes intend to raise fear among adversaries (the constant threat of using nuclear bombs is an example), China's narratives tend to project "a confident, inspirational image of the country and its leader, Xi Jinping" [78]. Indeed, the CCP uses "Facebook, YouTube and Twitter", among other global networks as well as "paid commenters and fake accounts to spread disinformation" [78]. According to Lee (2023) [36], Chinese narratives' success can be seen in the way "they condition weaker states to tolerate Chinese policies even if these seem to be against their national interests". Another evidence of China's success in building inspirational and civilizational narratives lies in the extraordinary acceptance (more than 150 countries) to take part in China's BRI [36].

Another characteristic that differentiates Chinese soft power from that of the US and the EU is the top-down essence of Chinese soft power underlying the promotion of a 'discourse power' based on the assumption that discourse matters in shaping internal and external audiences' perception towards China [47]. This contrasts with the US and EU's bottom-up approach to soft power, which springs from civil society (and its various organisations on the ground), and from a plethora of people-to-people contacts [24].

As evidence of China's top-down approach to soft power, one could stress the attempt to shape citizens' behaviour inside China, through the so-called Social Credit System (SCS). The latter aims to mitigate the negative effects of Western-led globalisation, which according to China, has been undermining Chinese virtues and values. Therefore, through the millennial teachings of Chinese philosophers (such as Confucius), China nowadays intends to restore the ethics of its people by implementing a system of rewards and punishments. In this sense, the citizen with low ethics - e.g. who smokes in places not designated for it, who writes false news on social networks, who has debts and does not pay them - loses social score. This brings the citizen several obstacles, such as being denied an airline ticket, or even being allowed to enrol one's child in a better educational institution [6]. The virtues, however, are rewarded and encouraged by the SCS, as the 'good' citizen is granted discounts on electricity bills, or even benefits from an enhanced profile in online chats to find his soulmate.

Lastly, one should add that when describing the Chinese soft power in the modern context it may be more relevant to take the writings of the English scholar E.H. Carr into consideration since he moves beyond the limitations as materialised by Nye's definition of the phenomenon. Nye's (1990) [53] description of the phenomenon is essentially one that applies to liberal democratic states but Carr's definition of soft power, which he called the power over public opinion, was more inclusive as it included non-democratic states and even non-state actors. Carr (1949) [7] wrote about the power of opinion and saw it as being as important as the military and economic instruments of power in the realm of international relations. Carr showed the power over international opinion that an organisation like the Catholic Church had, as well as the influence the Bolsheviks had over revolutionary and workers' groups across both Europe and the colonised world. Carr's use of the term "to shape opinion" is more value-neutral than that of Nye, whose version of soft power has liberal-democratic values and society as its foundation. In fact, Carr (1949) [7] suggested that the Catholic Church was the world's first totalitarian state, and if one uses his analysis then the soft power enjoyed by Nazi Germany in the interwar period

Table 1 Developing countries' perceptions on China from 2005–2023

Countries	Unfavourable	Favourable
Argentina	33	57
Brazil	48	39
India	67	26
Indonesia	25	26
Kenya	23	72
Mexico	33	57
Nigeria	15	80
South Africa	40	49

Source The authors, adapted from pew research center, 2023

makes sense for the totalitarian state had admirers in both Europe as well as North and South America. If, therefore, we view the Chinese soft power through the lens of Carr's work, it becomes clear that Beijing has been able to create its own version of a positive global image.

In terms of the power over global public opinion, China's role conception as a state that seeks to reform a structurally unequal international system, and one that does not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of states it interacts with, makes it an attractive alternative to the western world order. The West has yet to successfully include non-western states in the decision-making structures of international institutions and it is still perceived as taking an interventionist approach towards the internal affairs of a nation. China's strategies of creating new international *fora*, providing investments to states like Pakistan and Sri Lanka - with whom both EU and US are less willing to invest - and a vision for global development, suggest China's role is that of a revolutionary-reformist state.

When evaluating China's soft power effectiveness in meeting the expectations of the international community, data from Soft Power Index 30, which combines "objec-

Table 2 Developed countries' perceptions on China from 2005–2023

Countries	Unfavourable	Favourable
Australia	87	12
Canada	79	14
France	72	22
Germany	76	18
Greece	51	40
Hungary	50	42
Israel	50	48
Italy	58	36
Japan	87	11
Netherlands	77	19
Poland	67	21
South Korea	40	49
Spain	66	28
Sweden	85	12
United Kingdom	69	27
United States	83	14

Source The authors, adapted from pew research center, 2023

tive data and international polling to offer what Professor Nye has described as the clearest picture of global soft power to date" [76] reveals that from 2015 until 2019 (the latest data available) China has progressed from the 30th position to the 27 place in the soft power ranking. This is not a negligible shift especially considering that the BRI - the cornerstone of Xi Jinping's foreign policy and public diplomacy - was initiated by the end of 2013. Since then, it has consistently enhanced how both external and domestic audiences perceive China's role conception. The latter has been shaped by the win-win narrative inherent in the Community of Common Destiny [82], which is conveyed through the BRI. Nevertheless, despite the noted increase in China's soft power, it is important to acknowledge that perceptions of China among developed countries (refer to Table 1) are generally more favourable than those observed in developing countries (refer to Table 2).

The presented data covers the period from 2005 to 2023, spanning the launch of the BRI and a decade of its implementation. One potential explanation for the more positive perception of China by developing countries is linked to the nations' collective recognition that the Bretton Woods system no longer aligns with their needs or the current global power dynamics. Consequently, China is viewed as a pivotal actor in global governance and a spokesperson of the developing world actively advocating for changes to the system [73, 79].

Additional evidence that facilitates an assessment of whether Chinese soft power has met external expectations can be found in the following examples. For instance, Chinese universities, along with other Asian counterparts, have emerged as compelling alternatives in an academic landscape traditionally dominated by the US and the EU [43]. Indeed, a rising number of young individuals have expressed interest in pursuing their studies at Chinese universities [35]. Furthermore, numerous foreigners, including one of the authors of this article, have been recipients of thousands of scholarships annually through the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) to pursue studies in China. According to CSC data (2018) [13], approximately 279 Chinese universities offer grants to international students each year. This serves as an exceptional means to garner support and goodwill globally, contributing to the enhancement of Chinese soft power. Beyond students, Beijing extends invitations to diplomats, technicians, and foreign experts to experience life in China for a period before returning to their home countries. Another noteworthy approach employed by China to mitigate levels of Sinophobia in its regional periphery involves compensating local experts, (such as those in Kazakhstan), to comprehend and address the reasons behind the fear of China [47].

Other avenues of Chinese soft power include both Chinese TV and radio, broadcasting in numerous languages to reach audiences worldwide. This serves as a crucial method for moulding external perceptions of China, prompting Chinese media to adapt their strategies by broadcasting in the language of the Other. One may take as an example the state-owned China Radio International broadcasts content in 65 languages, and China Global Television Network reaches audiences in 140 countries. China recognises the significance of empowering its media to compete globally with well-established Western TV channels such as CNN or Sky News. Simultaneously, China is also attempting to control foreign media outlets by buying stakes in them [62]. As Reporters Without Borders (2019) [62] stress,

> Beijing is lavishing money on […] investing in foreign media outlets, buying vast amounts of advertising in the international media, and inviting journalists from all over the world on all-expense-paid trip visits to China. The regime even organises its own international events as an additional way of promoting its repressive vision of how the media should function.

Nonetheless, the efforts to influence and oversee what domestic and foreign journalists convey regarding China are unrelated to soft power. Instead, the promotion of the 'Right Chinese story' narrative actually mirrors a form of sharp power, as discussed earlier. In certain instances, as highlighted by Reporters Without Borders [62], "foreign journalists are even fired for writing about China in a negative way". This dynamic has led to a form of self-censorship in media outlets worldwide where China holds significant influence.

Remarkably, the Chinese film industry represents a significant effort to generate soft power with distinct Chinese characteristics [18]. These characteristics are crafted through a well-funded strategy by the Chinese government, aiming to cultivate a positive global image through various active measures. These measures include establishing Confucius Institutes in hundreds of universities worldwide, investing in Hollywood movie production, pursuing the hosting of major sporting events, and fostering the growth of China's own film industry. In fact, in 2020, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest film market [27]. Around 800 movies are produced in China every year, and "as of November 2021, China accounted for 34% of global box office revenue, with the US claiming just 22% in 2021" [27]. While the Chinese government has been expressing its intention of becoming a global film power by 2030, "Chinese production studios like Alibaba Pictures and Tencent Pictures have begun to take a significant role funding films in Hollywood" [39, 63]. In fact, according to Erich Schwartzel, who has been writing on Hollywood's relationship with China, "[Hollywood] studios [have been tailoring] their movies to please the Chinese government" [67]. This is particularly telling not only about the role of the film industry in building a Chinese soft power, but also of the ability of Chinese economic diplomacy to mould (not to say buy) such a remarkable symbol of US soft power which has been Hollywood.

The Chinese Government's efforts to meet international expectations - while decreasing Sinophobia - also encompass football. Xi Jinping has already declared his ambition to convert China into a "world sports power", by "participating in the World Cup, hosting the World Cup, and being the World Cup champions" [24]. In this sense, the 2018 World Cup in Russia shows how important football can be in uniting people from different countries, even though China had not qualified for this event [82]. Nevertheless, China was not hindered back but instead it mobilised a strong 'team of sponsors' for the 2018 World Cup. The Government has realised the need to build from scratch an effective national football team. This has been done by sending Chinese football players and coaches to countries where football is highly developed as a sport, like Portugal, so that Chinese players learn the necessary skills and use them later in China [22, 23]. The Chinese have also bought teams in the European football leagues like Inter Milan, West Bromwich Albion, and Birmingham City, to establish visibility in the European markets. Likewise, Chinese leaders have been

trying to attract the world's most important football players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar, Mbappé among others, by offering them outstanding economic incentives and rewards.

China's Multilateralism: Signs and Evidence

Having examined the contours and implementation of Chinese soft power in the preceding section, the article unfolds concrete evidence of the utilisation of multilateralism as a complementary tool. This approach aims to assist China in (re)adjusting its role conception to align with the expectations of the international community vis-à-vis China's global role.

While Beijing traditionally favoured bilateralism in global affairs, in recent years China has actively embraced multilateralism, primarily as a strategy to counterbalance US unipolarity and overcome perceived US encirclement of China [69]. On the other hand, bilateralism remains China's preferred approach for dealing with sovereignty and other issues associated with what is commonly referred to as high politics. Despite entering the multilateral arena relatively late, China has established numerous *fora*, highlighting the sophistication of Chinese multilateral institutions. This is evident with the case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation where China, alongside with Russia seeks to ensure that Asia is exclusively for Asian states and peoples. Despite differing priorities and mutual suspicions, this shared objective aims to limit US influence in the region [48]. Another practical manifestation of China's commitment to multilateralism is reflected in the establishment of the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum in 2011, which aims to create a dialogue platform, nurture cooperation, and encourage academic exchanges among Chinese and African.

Another effective multilateral institution created by China in the 2000s, is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), whose objective consists of promoting equal consultation, improving understanding, expanding consensus, and strengthening friendship and cooperation among all member nations [37]. While FOCAC has been an effective forum in advancing Chinese interests in Africa, in Latin America, where the Chinese diaspora and interests are significant, China has established the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States. Equally illustrative of China's multilateralism is the Boao Forum for Asia, whose main goal is to contribute to the peace, prosperity, and sustainable development of Asia and the world [65]. Additionally noteworthy is the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and the Portuguese-speaking Countries, commonly referred to as Forum Macao. Another example is the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, which seeks to enhance cooperation in oil extraction, transport, and refining. Given that Arab states have become China's primary crude oil supplier and its seventh-largest trading partner, this forum holds strategic importance [3].

More recently, the official launch of the One Belt One Road in September 2013 (later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative) by China can be regarded as one of the most sophisticated multilateral and comprehensive platforms. It aims to foster economic, social, political, and even military cooperation with its member states, a group that has continually expanded over time. As by-products of the BRI, one could

highlight the establishment of the New Development Bank (known as the BRICs Bank), the Silk Road Fund, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) — all launched in 2014. These institutions provide compelling evidence of China's commitment to multilateralism [34]. Whether coincidental or not, as noted by Wihtol (2019) [85] "2014 marked the 70th anniversary of the Bretton Woods conference, and it was a turning point for the global financial architecture".

In recent times, and intrinsically linked to the BRI, it is crucial to highlight the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, launched in 2017. This multilateral platform is designed to bolster China's foreign policy discourse on regional and international cooperation. It also serves the purpose of providing clarification on the forms of financing, aiming to dispel the notion held by some countries that criticise the BRI for being a project seeking Chinese domination through debt in other nations. Two important points should be emphasised here: first, China is not driven solely by market concerns since it is investing where Western nations are reluctant to invest, for example, in Pakistan. Secondly, as demonstrated by Brautigam and Rithmire (2021) [2], the Western concern about the Chinese debt trap, as seen in the case of Sri Lanka, may not be factually accurate.

The AIIB stands as a significant milestone for Chinese multilateralism, representing China's successful endeavours to establish a complementary institution to the World Bank [59]. In essence, China perceives that Western powers are unwilling to accommodate its interests within the World Bank, leading Beijing to create the AIIB. While the latter provides China with financial support for the logistical implementation of the BRI globally, the AIIB has also revealed the fragility of transatlantic cohesion. Despite the Obama Administration's vehemently discouraging EU Member States from joining the AIIB, to Washington's surprise, 14 EU Member States ultimately became part of the institution [11]. Moreover, the process of joining the AIIB also exposed Brussels' lack of coordination and vision concerning the BRI. Finally, the AIIB unfolds the paradoxical side of history. China, which had previously been unsuccessful in advocating for the reform of Western institutions, ultimately garnered the sympathy of a considerable number of Western states. In addition to several EU countries, other Western chose to join the AIIB [29].

Another remarkable Chinese multilateral initiative is evident in the creation of the 16+1 platform, which facilitates China's engagement with countries from Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, Beijing realised that the EU-China Strategic Partnership (SP) has failed to produce substantial outcomes so far [46]. As a response, Beijing adjusted its strategy by establishing a specific mechanism to advance its interests within a group of countries that perceive advantages in cooperating with China outside the framework of the EU-China SP. The 16+1 platform can be viewed as a form of "multilateralism *à la carte*" [29], shedding light upon China's extraordinary ability to adapt to diverse realities and simultaneously explore the diverging views among European countries to effectively maximise its goals. In summary, leveraging the EU's lack of cohesion in numerous geopolitical matters, China employs a strategic approach that prioritises multilateralism when engaging with the EU as a whole through the EU-China Strategic Partnership (SP). Simultaneously, China resorts to a "multilateralism *à la carte*" strategy with Central and Eastern European countries *via*

the 16+1 platform. Additionally, China tends to favour bilateral frameworks when dealing with individual countries such as Portugal [29] or Greece.

EU's Divergences on China's soft Power Effectiveness: The Post-Pandemic Trends

Despite Chinese soft power and multilateralism lagging behind the Western states' expectations given the top-down nature of China's soft power, it is legitimate to ask how China's projection of soft power and its creation of "multilateral *fora*" adjust international expectations. Or also to what extent China's "sharp power" achieved its purpose, namely how the state-centric "right Chinese story" won the minds and hearts of external audiences. It is worth emphasising that while admiration for the Chinese model is more prominent in non-Western countries, there are nonetheless certain EU countries that acknowledge the merits of Chinese economic diplomacy. The latter cannot be dissociated from China's overall soft power, as per Nye. What is striking is that despite the new post-pandemic trend to relocate goods production away from China, what Ursula von der Leyer called "de-risking" instead of "decoupling" [25], the fact is that at least three important EU member states decided to prioritise geo-economics over geopolitics, against the advice of both the US and Brussels. The first one was made by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on 4 November 2022 to Beijing, accompanied by several German businessmen. Scholz's visit - the first by a G7 leader to China in nearly three years - came at a time when Germany was sliding into recession and sparked concerns that the interests of Europe's largest economy are still closely linked to those of Beijing [14]. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the strength of Chinese economic diplomacy, or what some refer to as "soft power with hard cash" [8], was the German decision to approve "the purchase of a stake in the port of Hamburg, Germany's largest, by China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) right before the trip" [71].

Later on, on 30 March 2023, the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez took the initiative to travel to China to meet with Xi Jinping and attended the annual session of the Boao Forum for Asia. This forum is often compared to the Davos World Economic Forum, serving as a platform for discussions on economic, political, and social issues relevant to the Asia-Pacific region. This visit occurred at a time when Spain and China were on the brink of celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations [60]. The geoeconomic dimension was certainly evident, with Sánchez setting aside the traditional EU struggle for human rights in China and bringing along several businessmen to finalise significant contracts for Spain. Once again, this economic dimension, a component of Chinese soft power, proves appealing not only to so-called third-world countries but also to developed Western nations.

Finally, French President Macron's visit to China from 5 to 7 April 2023, accompanied by a business delegation of 50 individuals, including executives from Airbus, luxury giant LVMH, LVMH.PA and nuclear energy producer EDF EDF.PA [15, 75] further underscored the strength of Chinese soft power, especially in its economic diplomacy dimension. Indeed, Macron's visit also demonstrated how strong EU countries could afford to deviate from the Human's Right and De-risking rhetoric to

maximise economic benefits. Even though Macron travelled with EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [61], there was a noticeable difference in the reception each leader received in China. This episode highlights a return to bilateralism when major EU states seek to advance their economic relations with China, even if it means downplaying multilateral arrangements such as the EU-China Strategic Partnership, which according to Maher (2016) [46] has been rather "illusory" instead of "strategic".

Conclusion

Drawing on role theory, this article has sought to investigate whether there has been a shifting trend in China's soft power and multilateralism, aimed at addressing both international expectations of China's new role and China's own role conception. In doing so, China aims to achieve two objectives. Firstly, it expects to decrease the worldwide spread of anti-Chinese sentiment. Secondly, Beijing hopes to shape international institutions to better align with China's interests and re-emergence as a global actor. In this context, role theory serves as a conceptual lens that unveils a noticeable, albeit gradual, shift in China's role conception to meet international expectations of a China positioning itself as a supporter of a more sustainable world. Consequently, Beijing's Global South agenda and its win-win rhetoric under the BRI have been accompanied by an outstanding use of soft power as a means to garner support and positive perceptions.

This links to our second finding, which suggests a departure from China's traditional preference for bilateralism in advancing its interests abroad (especially those related to the so-called high politics). Instead, there has been a notable shift towards a more complementary approach drawing on a combination between soft power and multilateralism. This has been particularly effective in soft balancing US-led globalisation as well as forging a non-Western alternative to the long-standing Bretton Woods institutions. Indeed, China views the combination of multilateralism and soft power as a compelling strategy that can attract support from a wide range of countries, (including Western countries). The success of the AIIB serves as a remarkable example of this approach.

This leads us to our third finding: the speed and effectiveness through which China is building its multilateral institutions may create in the long term a parallel and redundant order composed of Chinese *fora* that can potentially overlap with Western (namely US) led *fora*. Furthermore, the lateness with which the G7 reacted to China's BRI could help bring momentum to Chinese soft power in world affairs at the expense of Western influence worldwide. Nonetheless, recent developments related to the pandemic, China's geopolitical alignment with Russia against NATO on the war in Ukraine, and China's assertive stance following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan (2 August 2022), may not help decrease the gap of perception abroad between a China that preaches peace and behaves in a calculus-oriented and assertive way.

One can observe that China's multilateralism and soft power are based on different role conception, role expectation and role performance, which do not coincide with Western views on democracy, human rights, sovereignty, multilateralism as well as

development aid policies to countries in need. Moreover, China's soft power presents a top-down approach which is precisely the opposite of the EU's and US soft power that favour the individual above the collective. China is a collectivist society (according to Geert Hofstede); therefore, individual freedoms and wishes should be sacrificed for the sake of the whole society [32]. Consequently, one may conclude that the so-called Soft Power with Characteristics could be perceived as a way of sharp power.

As we have previously highlighted, while soft power relies on the ability to influence without imposing, sharp power, in turn, is achieved by controlling the media and forging an official narrative to legitimise a certain pattern of action. As a matter of fact, in the case of China, the party decides what the citizens are allowed to know, in order to spread the 'right Chinese story', composed only of a positive image of China. But even if Chinese soft power has contours of sharp power, how to explain the receptiveness in many countries such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Panama, and many others in shifting allegiances to the Beijing Consensus? This is an important question that deserves further research in the future. Indeed, some countries are turning to China not necessarily because they admire the Chinese way of living, but because they need Chinese economic assistance. Overall, if this is a possible answer, one should pay attention to whether China's multilateralism is creating a truly win-win and inclusive order, or instead a new indebted order, in which poor countries become dependent in the long-term on Chinese money and inherently to Chinese influence.

Another important conclusion is linked to the post-pandemic dynamics - further compounded by the war in Ukraine - that threatened to harm Chinese soft power. How to justify to the international community that China backed Russia's 'special operation in Ukraine' while China's BRI narrative is full of pacifism? In essence, China's role conception of a country that aims to achieve peace for the world does not seem to match the ambiguous stance it has taken since the war began. Despite the EU's more assertive stance on China, which followed the so-called De-coupling versus De-risking rhetoric raised by Ursula von der Leyen, one should have expected a further distancing from the EU toward Chinese soft power. It is interesting to realise that it did not happen. Instead, one has even witnessed some EU-strong member states, like Germany, France, and Spain deviating from von der Leyen's de-risking recommendation vis-a-vis China. These states' bilateral attempts to strengthen economic relations with China amidst EU tensions vis-à-vis Beijing actually showed how effective Chinese economic diplomacy (as part of China's soft power) is. In other words, this demonstrates that despite there is an overall Western rejection to relate to China's role conception of itself and of the world order, some EU strong states are not afraid to show that their sole expectations toward China are geoeconomic-oriented. It thus follows that they are implicitly voicing that they wish to seize opportunities stemming from Chinese multilateralism, even if they criticise the very top-down essence of China's soft power that oppresses human rights.

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