

Competing for Attraction and Influence in Thailand: China's Belt and Road, Connectivity, and Soft Power

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Abstract

What is the nexus between the growing connections among countries and soft power dynamics of attraction and influence in international relations? Despite claims of globalization retreat, most countries still value creating multidimensional linkages to improve their reputation while advancing their interests. Major actors like China can embrace these comprehensive strategies due to their attractive national features and capabilities. Beijing blends soft and economic power, promoting appealing sociocultural resources with financial incentives, as exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Other prominent actors, including Japan, the US, and the EU, have been eager to develop similar strategies. This has created a potentially constructive competitive environment, where each actor strives to outperform the others in this reputational race. How is this competition for prestige and influence taking shape in Thailand, a crucial node for Southeast Asian connectivity? This study investigates the multiple dimensions of connectivity – physical (i.e. infrastructure), digital, and sociocultural – emphasizing Thailand's responses in line with the need to balance external influencers, and the implications for regional and global soft power competition. Despite lingering concerns over trustworthiness, China appears to be the most proactive 'connector' across a variety of domains, especially when blending soft and economic strategies. More broadly, this article also emphasizes the reasons why this form of competition should be favored over or at least combined with 'harder' forms, especially in these turbulent times.

Keywords Soft Power, Thailand, Connectivity, Belt and Road

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1. Introduction

Is globalization in retreat? The literature has covered this matter extensively in recent times (Bedoya, 2023; Paul, 2023; Thomson, 2024), and Trump's 'America First' doctrine may well exacerbate its retrenchment (Bremmer, 2025), but not necessarily its demise. China, among others, still cherishes – and benefits from – global connectivity channels, especially via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing is not the only actor that still values strengthening international connections, but it is one of the most prominent, and its efforts are evident across Southeast Asia (Bharti & Kumari, 2024). The region is a battleground for influence, and Thailand's strategic location makes it an essential regional linkage with potential further connections to maritime ASEAN members. Competition for attraction – the realm of soft power – extends beyond cultural aspects (Carminati, 2022a). This paper investigates external actors' efforts to advance their interests through connectivity dimensions, focusing on physical, digital, and sociocultural aspects.

The article first reviews the literature and clarifies the nexus between connectivity and soft power. Making use of qualitative secondary sources, the study then investigates China's efforts, along with those of Japan, the US, and the EU, in Thailand, providing a preliminary evaluation of their achievements and challenges. The findings explore the broader implications of influence through connectivity channels, both in reputational terms and in tangible geopolitical and geoeconomic developments. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, theoretical and practical advancements, and limitations that could lead to future studies.

Overall, this article aims to investigate the nexus between connectivity and soft power – an emerging but overlooked phenomenon – through a limited but significant case study, to then evaluate the impact of this connection for other regions and its potential contribution to the Asian Century or the Rise of the Rest. (Mahbubani, 1992; Carminati, 2025a).

2. The Nexus between Connectivity and Soft Power Dynamics of Attraction

Power is one of the most debated terms in the social sciences and particularly in the field of political science and international relations. Power can more easily be understood as the ability to force or at least coerce someone to do something they might not otherwise do, but multiple manifestations of power exist (Janusch, 2024). The most common understanding generally revolves around the military and economic might of a country that can be used to threaten, deter, bribe or purchase to eventually obtain their preferred outcomes in a variety of contexts. Yet stopping at these two manifestations, generally recognized as hard power, may be limiting, as this is only the 'power to' do something or power 'over' someone generally against their will (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021). Joseph Nye, the scholar who coined the term soft power, defines it as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017, p. 1). This form can often

be seen as ‘power with’ as once other actors are charmed and attracted, persuasion and influence can ensue through cooperation (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021). The most optimistic scenario would see a win-win outcome, in which all involved actors would benefit from the interaction, although not necessarily on equal terms. This describes a non-zero-sum relation in which gains from one side do not equal losses for the other side.

How does this form of power relate to connectivity, intended as “all the ways in which states, organizations (commercial or else) and societies are connected to each other and interact across the globe” (Ries, 2019, p. 1)? In the realm of international relations, when two or more parties agree to construct a road, bridge, or modern railway, they are expected to cooperate towards mutually beneficial outcomes. These outcomes include increased flows of goods and people, leading to greater trade and business opportunities. The creation of sociocultural linkages can lead to win-win scenarios when a more capable country offers scholarships, traineeships, or language courses that could result in stronger intercultural understanding and beneficial ties, including financial ones. Yet, the ensuing gratitude and recognition are not financial, but reputational. If a foreign country has clearly assisted you, your family, and more generally a country’s people towards livelihood improvement, appreciation is likely to follow.

These are just some examples of what can be envisioned as soft power through the multiple dimensions of connectivity (see Table 1 below). The first dimension involves infrastructure and investments, acting as the physical and financial backbone that result in the construction of railways, roads, bridges, and ports. The second encompasses the digital realm, which includes infrastructure and standards like advanced telecommunications (e.g., 5G and beyond), technologies powering ‘smart cities’, and the media sphere. The third involves people-to-people interaction in various forms, such as through cultural, educational, and professional exchanges, often facilitated by cultural institutes and partnerships with universities and the private sector (Carminati, 2020, 2024, pp. 20-21, 2025a).

Although some studies have covered the soft power potential of China’s BRI (Rahman, 2019; Voon & Xu, 2020; Miao, 2021), and the impact of competition on regional connectivity (Charoensri, 2022), less attention has been given to the nexus between connectivity and soft power, with the former being a core enabler of attraction in international relations. This nexus could be seen as a more pragmatic understanding of dynamics of attraction (Carminati, 2025b), although this does not mean that ideological forms are not present, such as when countries promote certain (political) values and narratives. One approach does not exclude the other, but words are better assisted by tangible developments – blending soft attraction with economic incentives (Carminati, 2022a), while empty promises and hypocritical rhetoric may backlash, especially in the Global South (Mahbubani, 2022).

Table 1: The Multiple Dimensions of Connectivity and Soft Power

Dimensions → Attraction Phases	Physical	Digital	Sociocultural
<i>1. Resources</i>	Infrastructure such as railways, roads, bridges, ports, power plants, ...	5G and future iterations; smart city technologies; personal gadgets (hardware); apps and services (software); global media outlets	Culture in its multiple forms (lifestyle, fashion, food, movies and series, music); language; tourism; business exchanges
<i>2. Tools / Strategies ('Activation')</i>	Belt and Road Initiative (China); Partnership for Global Infrastructure (Japan); Global Gateway (EU)	Digital Silk Road (China); American tech giants (both hardware and software); international broadcasting	Cultural centers, cultural exchanges, events and conferences; educational exchanges and international students; traineeships
<i>3. (Expected) Reception</i>	Gratitude for much-needed infrastructure and the ensuing economic opportunities	Adoption of technological tools and standards to get economic benefits and develop / strengthen sociocultural bridges; embracing (media) narratives	Cultural awareness and appreciation for entertainment, or educational and professional opportunities
<i>4. Outcomes (Direct & Indirect / Specific & Generic)</i>	Goodwill; improved national image and reputation; long-term recognition if win-win scenarios are actually achieved, which can lead to even stronger bilateral ties → Soft Power More tourism; more international students; more trade; more investments (ODA, FDI), policy alignment		

That said, it should be noted that connectivity is a form of interdependence and does not ensure positive outcomes as it can be exploited and “weaponized” (Farrell & Newman, 2019), especially as it often occurs between capable and less capable countries. Hence, trust and legitimacy are crucial to forging connections that require collaboration through the creation of links, not the limitation or even severance of them. While ambiguity about China’s influence is still present in virtually all countries – including Thailand (Meesuwan & Setthasuravich, 2025) – especially when considering the long-term implications of infrastructure, it is in Beijing’s interest to develop what can be recognized as “co-optive interdependence, based on cooperative networks rather than exploitative ones” (Carminati, 2025e).

After all, in a world in which news is covered almost instantly and from multiple perspectives, the misuse and abuse of these channels – generally leaning towards hard power – will not pass unnoticed. That said, not all accusations are fair, such as in the case of China’s BRI being an instrument to entrap other countries into debt, a repeatedly debunked allegation that is nonetheless still present in the media (Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021; Himmer & Rod, 2022). Relatedly, as observed in the literature, Beijing keeps describing its endeavors as pursuing “politics of harmony” (Hagström & Nordin, 2020) to counteract lingering concerns over the growing power’s intents in the region and beyond.

To what extent are China’s efforts resulting in a more welcoming environment for its BRI, especially considering the Southeast Asian region’s great interest in the multiple dimensions of connectivity as exemplified by its Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 (ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan, 2025)? For the time being, Laos has obtained its long-awaited railway, and it is now serving its people and tourists while also boosting bilateral commerce (Thongnoi, 2025). Indonesian commuters and travelers, as much as visitors, are also enjoying a China-built railway (ANTARA News, 2025), and another one is being developed in Eastern Malaysia (Mahmud, 2025). What about the pivotal role of Thailand as the regional ‘missing link’? And are there any competitors, or is Beijing mainly competing against its own growing might?

To address these questions, and knowing that this is an initial exploratory study aimed at identifying theoretical and conceptual connections between soft power and connectivity through the Thai case study, readily available secondary sources were preferred. To ensure the most current and accurate information, a diverse range of reputable news sources were incorporated. These sources were used to corroborate or refute information through triangulation, involving academic studies and in-depth analyses from authoritative platforms, such as regional and international think tanks and official government portals. Although equal consideration was given to Thai, regional, and global authors, only English-language sources were selected, but future research should certainly consider additional voices in other languages.

3. The Role of Connectivity in the Competition for Attraction in Thailand

Thailand is crucial for realizing the ‘dream’ of a seamlessly connected Southeast Asia, particularly the mainland part directly linked to China, and that is probably why the top sector for official development assistance in the country is transport (Dayant et al., 2025, pp. 31-32), the fulcrum of connectivity. This vision includes a North-South corridor connecting Chinese cities in the south to Singapore via Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia, and an East-West corridor linking the South China Sea to the Bay of Bengal via Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The

former is more likely to be realized in the foreseeable future despite geopolitical and geoeconomic issues, while the latter is stalled by the ongoing civil war in Myanmar.

The successful completion of the Kunming-Vientiane railway has increased pressure on Thailand to proceed with its long-delayed section. The plan aims to connect Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast, eventually linking it to the border and Vientiane. This would create an uninterrupted corridor between the Chinese rail system and Thailand, passing through Laos, which has already benefited from increased commerce and tourism (Martinus & Lin, 2024).

So why does Thailand, a wealthier and more capable country than Laos, still lack a modern rail link despite its potential? Several factors contribute to this, including domestic and international politics, economics, sociocultural, and environmental concerns. Thailand's protracted political instability has hindered costly long-term agreements like a high-speed railway. Additionally, Thailand prioritizes control over various aspects of planning, construction, operations, and maintenance, unlike Laos, where Chinese companies play a significant role (Khonkhlong, 2022). However, careful consideration of pricing, planning, and social development suggests a win-win outcome for the Kunming-Bangkok high-speed railway project. Once completed, it would enhance infrastructure, establish Thailand as a transportation hub, share China's advanced technology and operational experience, and cultivate Thai talent in railway development. Collaboration is crucial for these projects due to the long-term commitment required, which necessitates stable bi- and multilateral relations, as exemplified by China, Laos, and Thailand (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018; Busbarat et al., 2023; Kokkhangplu, Koodsela, & Onlamai, 2024; Tangsathaporn, 2025). After years of investment, which country would be pleased to see valuable connections severed due to political clashes? Fair and transparent dialogue is crucial to enduring cooperation and mutual prosperity. This is a plausible scenario worth the risk for the agreeing parties. Thailand and Laos, though far less powerful and influential than China, expect fair treatment. All these developments are often referred to as 'rail diplomacy', led by China, but Japan is also a prominent competitor (Wu, 2024).

Beyond railways, another prominent macro-project that has been initially proposed over three hundred years ago and continues to be discussed regularly is the potential development of a land bridge in the southern part of Thailand, commonly known as the Kra Canal or Isthmus (Chirathivat & Tingsabadh, 2025). This project aims to establish a crucial trade route between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, providing an alternative to the congested Malacca Strait. However, securing private sector involvement poses a challenge due to investor concerns about the project's financial viability. Additionally, the land bridge would place Thailand at the center of strategic rivalry between China, India, and Western powers, and as mentioned before, Thailand is generally willing to compromise but while still being in control of the development. For instance, to mitigate dependence

on China, Thailand is exploring investments from Saudi Arabia and other partners. In the meantime, Singapore and Malaysia are advancing significant upgrades to the Tuas Port and Port Klang, respectively, posing major challenges to Thailand's aspirations (Mark, 2025). As of mid-2025, the project does not seem to be any closer to realization than it ever was, as financial viability concerns linger, further exacerbated by turbulent domestic politics (Wancharoen, 2025).

So far, the paper has investigated the most prominent and tangible manifestations of connectivity in Thailand and beyond, with a focus on infrastructure and particularly on China's efforts. But what about other, less straightforward dimensions? Thongsawang (2025) conceptualized "sociospatial relations through development projects" to explore the synergy between China's BRI and Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor. The two countries have also collaborated on establishing new digital economic standards for smart cities and solutions, co-developing efficient payment systems, smart logistics, intelligent warehousing, online and offline product exhibitions, the Internet of Things (IoT), and more (News Release, 2025). Relatedly, Suriyasenee (2025) claimed that "Huawei drives and dominates Thailand's digital ascent," while warning that greater diversification might be necessary to ensure leverage when negotiating. Tungkeunkunt (2016) observed cultural and economic influences, including the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the growing number of Chinese tourists, Thai students studying in China, the inauguration of the China Cultural Centre in Bangkok, and the permeation of Chinese media into Thailand.

These factors strengthen existing sociocultural and commercial ties between the two countries, which share historical and ethnic ties, like many other countries in the region. Confucius Institutes (CIs) are prominent manifestations of Chinese soft power expansion in Thailand, Southeast Asia, and beyond. While resistance has been observed in parts of the Global North, the institutes have been generally welcomed in the Global South (Gil, 2022). Described as "platforms to promote systematic connections along the [BRI] route" (Zhou, 2021), CIs foster Chinese culture and values, mutual understanding, friendship, and cultural cooperation at all levels, including government, educational, and individual (Klaitabtim, 2024). These developments further corroborate the multifaceted soft power-connectivity nexus enabling attraction and influence.

In 2025, China and Thailand celebrated 50 years of diplomatic ties, and both appear eager to further strengthen their cultural and commercial relations. Thus, the question is whether this seemingly thriving relationship leaves some space for other competitors. China's efforts are covered in the news more frequently, both positively and negatively, but this may be because of a deliberate strategy, especially considering Japan's quiet approach to leadership (Solis, 2023). Despite this, Japan's appealing features and conduct are appreciated abroad. Japan is one of the most visited and admired countries in the world because it masterfully blends traditional traits and technologically advanced elements. Despite alleged decades of

stagnation, it's been labeled a "soft power superpower" (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008) and may be experiencing a renaissance following the 2020 Olympics (Carminati, 2022b).

Japan's efforts towards connectivity share similarities with China's BRI. While not solely focused on connectivity and infrastructure development, the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) is often juxtaposed with the BRI to highlight strategic competition between the two powers in the region (Aroonpipat, 2024; Liu, 2024). The FOIP initiative aims to promote the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, and economic prosperity through physical connectivity and commitment to peace and stability. It aligns with Southeast Asia's "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025" and specifically involves constructing two corridors connecting mainland Southeast Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.). In the digital realm, Japan's efforts to respond to China's Digital Silk Road, primarily focus on cybersecurity to protect critical ICT components and regional security (Mochinaga, 2020). Socioculturally, while China's ethnic heritage permeates Thai society (Tungkeunkunt & Phuphakdi, 2018), Japan's appeal as a "cool" and fascinating actor is only rivaled by the Korean wave. Japan's popular culture, including music, movies, TV series, manga, anime, food, and fashion, contributes to commerce and attracts Thais traveling to Japan, potentially becoming ambassadors of the country (Boonlert, 2020).

Japan is arguably the major contender to China for soft power through connectivity in Thailand and the region. While the US and EU presence in these domains is not as strongly felt, their attempts to attract and influence should not be dismissed. After all, receiving countries generally welcome diverse offers to avoid overreliance on a single actor, as it could lead to "weaponized interdependence" (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

American culture, encompassing lifestyle, fashion, movies, and TV series, remains widely appreciated and consumed (Seah et al., 2025, pp. 71-73). However, geopolitical tensions and increased interest in Asian neighbors may lessen its appeal (Carminati, 2025d). American businesses and brands, like high-tech products, retain their attractiveness, but competitors, especially from China, are emerging and no longer considered cheap and unreliable (Chua, 2025). Competition in the digital realm centers on advanced digital connectivity, and both the US and EU recognize the long-term implications of these technologies for commercial and security reasons (Tortermvasana, 2025). The charm of European countries like Italy, France, Spain, and Switzerland persists due to historical and reputational factors, creating commerce and tourism opportunities. The EU also wields normative power in promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Whitman, 2011), potentially connecting like-minded people across Thailand and the region. Despite these factors, observers claim that the US lacks effective soft power, hindering the impact of its 'Pivot to Asia' strategy (Sutcliffe, 2025). Similarly, Europe, which has

generally shadowed American interests beyond cultural bonds, faces internal and external conflicts, and thus needs to prioritize specific issues and regions.

All competitors have cultivated social and economic ties, such as through cultural and educational exchanges and aid, to connect and gain soft power. But Japan first and China later have both stood out for the enduring provision of physical connections through infrastructure projects. However, over-reliance on infrastructure poses risks, such as weaponization of interdependence, and mutual trust must be nurtured consistently. What are the implications of these developments for the region and beyond, and which actors will benefit the most?

4. Discussion: Implications for the Region and Beyond

How do the multiple dimensions of connectivity affect regional soft power dynamics of attraction and influence?

The cultural dimension – what is commonly recognized as the domain of soft power – is more fluid and less contentious, with new competitors like South Korea emerging strong, and India potentially joining in the future. The digital dimension often overlaps with the physical one, as seen in America’s push to ban Chinese 5G, TikTok, and AI rivals like DeepSeek, which have become entangled in national security matters. Cultural connectivity, generally, has limited drawbacks while carrying the potential to forge the strongest hearts and minds’ ties, while digital connectivity is moving towards more competitive power dynamics.

China seems to dominate the physical dimension through its infrastructure masterplan, the BRI. Until recently, this might have been attributed to the media’s extensive coverage of China, while Japan and others advanced their connectivity interests more quietly (Solis, 2023). However, Chinese companies have led most major projects, such as modern railways in Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia’s East Coast Rail Link. Thailand may eventually follow as the long-awaited missing link (Reuters and Bloomberg, 2024). In the meanwhile, China is overhauling the BRI, focusing on smaller, more beautiful projects (Yeung, 2024), although ‘big budget’ infrastructure is reduced but still present (Xiangming, 2025), and any calculated success can still boost China’s reputation. Beijing has likely learned from past experiences and criticism, becoming more cautious (Parks et al., 2023). China’s connectivity efforts and achievements in Thailand, the region, and beyond have grown in absolute and relative terms, leading to some gains in trustworthiness. This is likely because Beijing’s “focus on transport infrastructure is closely aligned with the region’s development priorities” (Guild, 2025). That said, although data shows China’s presence is increasingly felt across the board in Southeast Asia, Japan has been the most trusted partner for years, followed by the EU and the US, with China coming only after (Seah et al., 2025).

China’s main competition appears to be against itself, as its growing presence and influence clash with lingering concerns about overdependence. Yet,

current geopolitical developments, driven by Trump's presidency and 'America First', may ultimately favor Beijing. The US is retreating and taken for granted, while alternatives to its 'cultural hegemony', such as (fast) food, fashion, music, and films are emerging. Sociocultural connections are still prominent but declining as competitors gain traction. Business ties remain, but trade wars, aid cuts, educational limitations, and visa restrictions erode and make existing connections less appealing. Japan may capitalize on this, aiming to become the trusted democratic partner of choice, but its 'quiet', more muted approach is unlikely to change anytime soon (Carminati, 2022b). The EU is present, but its efforts are limited by internal struggles and divisions, affecting its normative appeal. South Korea keeps focusing on the safest domain, its (pop) culture, while dealing with domestic political turmoil. For the time being, India appears to be lacking confidence in an ambitious soft power strategy. In short, nearly all potential global and regional charmers are dealing with a period of 'polycrisis' (Whiting & Park, 2023), which forces them to carefully prioritize certain interests over others. Although pragmatic choices rarely benefit soft power dynamics, favoring instead security and economic interests, some countries – notably China, Japan, and in a more confined cultural domain South Korea – are still managing to forge connections to boost their image and reputation in Thailand, the region, and beyond.

5. Conclusion: Lasting Connections Need Trust

This paper aimed to investigate and theorize the nexus between soft power and connectivity through the Thai case study. This should be seen as an initial investigation, mainly making use of qualitative sources, which could be supported by future quantitative studies, employing economic data, opinion surveys, and more, while also considering the inclusion of Thai-language sources. Although Thailand is clearly a pivotal case due to its location within mainland Southeast Asia, additional case studies within and beyond the region can shed further light on novel strategies of influence employing soft-economic strategies blending attraction and incentives.

For this initial research step, the core intent was to provide a framework to delve into the extensive research on China and other prominent actors' presence and strategies in Thailand and Southeast Asia, which encompasses various forms of attraction and influence through the multiple dimensions of connectivity. Recent studies show that, beyond government actors, private businesses and migrants significantly shape regional perceptions of external actors, particularly about China (Han, 2024). New and renewed connections indicate China's growing soft power, particularly in terms of Chinese language and popular culture (Suryadinata, 2024), though American, Japanese, and South Korean cultures are also widely appreciated. Overall, there seems to be a growing intra-Asia appreciation for cultural products and lifestyle developments (Carminati, 2025d). That said, English remains the

dominant language, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. However, Beijing's connections extend beyond culture, encompassing physical and digital infrastructure, and this could be seen as a relatively novel manifestation of attraction and influence, blending soft and economic power (Carminati, 2022a). The extent to which this combination could lead to a modern tributary-like system seems unlikely, but it remains uncertain. Yet, for the time being, it is hard to deny that "China is enhancing its influence in the [Southeast Asian] region through infrastructure connections" (Wong, 2025), while "US, EU, and UK aid cuts could see official development finance [for] the region decline by more than \$2 billion in coming years" (Dayant et al., 2025).

Regardless, trust is crucial to avoid tensions, limit concerns, and foster long-lasting cooperation through connectivity. Actors like Japan are aware of this but could potentially harness more leverage from their trusted status, while China is aiming to improve its trustworthiness. Overall, leaders and policymakers should take into account that hard power leads to division, while soft power aims to connect (Carminati, 2025c). Despite growing hard power displays, leading by example may be more effective in the long run, as the most powerful examples result in genuine attraction and co-optation.

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