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Opinion – The Global South Contest for Soft Power and Influence

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NIA DELIANA, JUL 28 2025

In an increasingly shifting global order, great powers and emerging powers strive not only for economic growth and military might, but also for influence and recognition in leading the soft power arena. This quest often manifests through what is commonly referred to as 'soft power' - the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. As the Global South states navigate the complexities of the 21st century, history and civilization have emerged as potent tools in the soft power arsenal, providing strategic foundations that can ultimately support their hard power objectives. This article explores how countries like India, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia use state-centric foreign policy to leverage their rich historical narratives and cultural heritages to compete for global influence and recognition.

India, with its millennia-old civilization, has a vast reservoir of cultural and historical wealth to draw upon. The Indian government has been increasingly capitalizing on this historical narrative through initiatives like the 'project Mausam', which seeks to revive ancient maritime routes across the Indian Ocean. By emphasizing its historical maritime connections with countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, India positions itself as a central node in a network of shared history and culture. This initiative not only strengthens India's cultural ties with these regions but also strategically aligns with its economic and geopolitical interests, providing a soft power platform that enhances its regional influence.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often viewed primarily as an economic venture, but it also serves as a potent soft power campaign. By referencing the ancient Silk Road, China evokes a shared history of trade and cultural exchange that underscores its historical role as a global connector. The BRI is not just about infrastructure and investment, it is a civilizational campaign that projects China's historical narrative onto the global stage.

In addition, through Confucius institutes, cultural exchanges and historical diplomacy, China seeks to shape international perceptions and establish itself as a benevolent leader in global affairs. This historical narrative complements its economic and military aspirations, creating a comprehensive strategy that enhances its soft power while simultaneously laying the groundwork for strategic global influence. By framing its modern ambitions within the context of storied past, China effectively uses history and civilization to bolster its quest for global leadership.

The rising race on soft-power foreign policy led to increased competition. China and India witnessed the dispute surrounding the Silk Road legacy. India has repeatedly refused to join China's BRI, the modern Silk Road initiatives, allegedly not only because the infrastructure routes pass through Kashmir, an element China dismisses as a pretext, but also due to the conviction that India plays a more significant role in shaping the Silk Road legacy. Chinese state media accused India of ideological bias, framing the initiatives as geopolitical contests rather than mere infrastructure cooperation. This competition shows not only that heritage and development narratives become strategic tools, but also, each country seeks legitimacy over ancient trade and cultural exchange, reflecting competing visions for Asian leadership.

Malaysia, on the other hand, showcases a distinct confluence of civilisation. Situated at the crossroads of major maritime routes, boasts a rich tapestry of cultures and histories. This diversity is central to Malaysia's soft-power

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strategy, which promotes the country as a confluence of civilization. By highlighting its multicultural heritage, Malaysia positions itself as a bridge between different regions and cultures, fostering a narrative of unity and cooperation.

This approach is evident in Malaysia's cultural diplomacy efforts, which include international festivals, educational exchanges, and heritage tourism. By showcasing its historical and cultural diversity, Malaysia not only attracts global attention and tourism but also enhances its diplomatic standing. This soft-power strategy aligns with Malaysia's broader geopolitical goals, providing a foundation for regional influence and collaboration.

Similarly progressing with its neighbour, Indonesia's global maritime fulcrum vision is deeply rooted in its historical identity as a maritime nation. Drawing on its historical role in regional trade and cultural exchange, Indonesia seeks to reassert its position as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region. This vision is not just about economic development and maritime security. It is a strategic use of history and civilization to enhance Indonesia's soft power.

Through initiatives that promote its historical maritime culture as festivals, educational programs and international collaborations, Indonesia projects an image of a nation with a rich and influential past. This historical narrative supports Indonesia's contemporary aspirations, strengthens its regional influence and positions itself as a pivotal player in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific.

However, there has been a long list of heritage dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia. From ownership dispute of Wayang Kulit, the Reog Ponorogo dance, Rasa Sayang folksong to the disownership of Malay heritage in Indonesia, Malaysian and Indonesian relations experienced a significant flow of tensions that hinder cooperation, although there was an exception with the recent development of joint cooperation on intangible heritage efforts, nominating Kebaya and Reog Ponorogo jointly to UNESCO and Malaysia backing Indonesia's bid to inscribe Gamelan. While collaborative gestures reduced frictions, past viral outrages show how cultural symbolism can stir nationalism and bilateral complexities.

The strategic use of history and civilization relations highlights an emerging trend of state-centric global history. As countries like India, China, Malaysia and Indonesia draw on their historical narratives to enhance their soft power, they simultaneously reinforce their strategic positions on the global stage. However, this trend also underscores a realist perspective, where states increasingly view history as a battleground for influence and competition.

While the promotion of historical and cultural narratives can foster international cooperation and understanding, it also carries the risk of heightening global insecurities. As nations compete for recognition and influence throughout history, the potential for conflict and rivalry increases. In this context, the interplay between soft power and hard power becomes even more pronounced, as states leverage their historical narratives to secure strategic advantages in an uncertain world. Thus, the competition for global influence through history and civilization not only shapes contemporary international relations but also highlights the enduring relevance of realism in a world marked by insecurity and competition.

About the author:

Nia Deliana teaches Politics and International Relations at Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. Her recent publications, titled *Indians in Indonesia* (BRILL, 2025) and *Ethical Governance and Geopolitical Peace* (JLP, 2025) explore Indian Diasporic Network and maritime international law in the Archipelago.