

The Inversion of Soft Power: Narrative Authority, Civilizationism and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order.

Abstract

Dominant readings of the crisis of the international order have privileged material and institutional explanations. This article argues instead that its deepest core is the erosion of the narrative authority that allowed Western powers to define what counts as legitimate, modern and desirable on a global scale. Through a conceptual-analysis design, it revisits Joseph Nye's soft power and rearticulates it with Gramscian cultural hegemony and with the narrative turn in International Relations, characterising it not as attractive power but as a technology of order aimed at naturalising particular preferences in the guise of universality. The argument is examined through Chinese and Indian civilizationism and set against recent international perception data showing a partial decoupling between material capabilities and narrative authority. The article proposes three notions: the inversion of soft power, whereby narratives that once generated attraction come to produce rejection; conflictual narrative coexistence as the form of the emerging order; and a post-hegemonic soft power that may persuade episodically but can hardly found an order. The outcome of this transition will determine the very possibility of international cooperation.

Key words:-

soft power inversion; narrative authority; strategic narratives; cultural hegemony; liberal international order; civilizationism

Introduction:-

Over the past decade, the crisis of the international order has been one of the most recurrent and most contested themes in the field of International Relations. Dominant interpretations have generally privileged material and institutional explanations: the rise of China, the redistribution of economic and military power, the wearing down of multilateral organisations, or the return of great-power competition (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Allison, 2017). Necessary as they are, these readings remain insufficient. The depth and persistence of the present crisis suggest that what is at stake is not merely a reconfiguration of capabilities but a deeper erosion: that of the meaning, legitimacy and cultural authority that sustained the liberal international order.

This article proceeds from a different premise. It argues that the international order built after 1945 —and reinforced after the end of the Cold War— rested not only on the material power of the Western powers or on the institutional architecture of the post-war settlement, but decisively on their capacity to produce and naturalise narratives presenting certain values, institutions and ways of life as universal, desirable and progressive (Nye, 2004; Cox, 1983). In this sense, soft power did not operate simply as an instrument complementary to hard power, but as a technology of legitimation that made it possible to transform particular preferences into claims to universality (Nye, 2011; Lock, 2010).

The contemporary crisis of the international order must therefore be understood as a crisis of narrative authority. The powers and actors contesting the existing order do not confine themselves to challenging its material dimension; they actively question the Western monopoly over the production of meaning. Narrative battles —over modernity, sovereignty, human rights, historical memory or the future of civilisation— have become a central arena of international competition (Krebs, 2015; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). In this context, liberal soft power has ceased to generate attraction and consent automatically, and in not a few cases produces rejection or indifference (Nye, 2021; Acharya, 2017).

The aim of this work is to offer a theoretical-conceptual reading of this process. Drawing on a critical rereading of the concept of soft power formulated by Joseph Nye (2004, 2011), on its articulation with the narrative turn in International Relations (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019) and on the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1983; Gill, 1993), it argues that the erosion of liberal narrative capacity constitutes one of the deepest cores of the crisis of the international order. The article does not seek to offer an exhaustive geopolitical diagnosis or an empirical analysis of specific cases, but to contribute to a theoretical understanding of how an order decays when it loses the faculty of defining what is legitimate, desirable and universal.

The structure of the text is as follows. After setting out the research design, the concept of soft power is revisited as a technology of order, highlighting both its potential and its theoretical limitations. The article then examines the role of narrative battles in the contemporary dispute over the meaning of the international order, and illustrates the argument through an analysis of Chinese and Indian civilizationism. It subsequently analyses the erosion of liberal narrative authority and its implications for the configuration of a possible post-hegemonic order. The discussion situates the thesis against the realist, historical and reflexive objections that may be raised against it, and the conclusions recapitulate the contributions and delimit the research agenda thereby opened.

Methodology:-

Nature and design of the research

This work belongs to the tradition of theoretical-conceptual research in International Relations rather than to that of empirical-inferential analysis. Its object is not to measure the magnitude of the erosion of the liberal order or to establish causal relations between variables, but to reconstruct a concept critically —soft power— and to propose a respecification of its theoretical status in the light of the fragmentation of narrative authority. Making this nature explicit is no minor caveat: much of the confusion surrounding soft power arises precisely from its indiscriminate use as an analytical concept, as a descriptive category and as a magnitude operationalisable in commercial indices (Lock, 2010; Kearn, 2011).

The design corresponds to what the methodological literature calls conceptual analysis or concept reconstruction (Sartori, 1970; Collier & Mahon, 1993; Goertz, 2006). Its criterion of validity is not the representativeness of a sample or the robustness of an inference, but the internal coherence of the construct, its capacity to order phenomena that previous conceptualisations left unarticulated, and its heuristic yield for subsequent empirical research.

Analytical procedure

The argument unfolds in four successive phases. The first consists of a critical reconstruction of the concept of soft power as formulated by Nye (2004, 2011, 2021), attending to the ambiguity identified by his critics between a resource-based and a behaviour-based definition. The second proceeds to a theoretical articulation that situates the concept within the register of Gramscian hegemony as transposed into the discipline by Cox (1983) and Gill (1993), and cross-reads it with the analytical apparatus of strategic narratives (Krebs, 2015; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, 2017). The third submits the resulting construct to two plausibility probes —in Eckstein's (1975) sense— understood not as complete case studies but as preliminary tests that the proposed framework illuminates real cases before a larger investigation is warranted. The fourth derives the theoretical implications and delimits the scope of the proposal.

Selection of the illustrative cases

Chinese and Indian civilizationism are selected following a diverse-case logic (Seawright & Gerring, 2008): both share the feature relevant to the argument —the mobilisation of historical depth as a resource for delegitimising liberal universalism— yet they vary significantly in the relationship between civilizational discourse and order-

building project. The Chinese case articulates an alternative proposal for global governance, institutionalised in initiatives of multilateral reach; the Indian case combines a claim to international status with a first-order domestic identity function and a deliberately ambiguous regional projection. This variation makes it possible to examine whether the proposed mechanism operates independently of the specific form the counter-narrative takes. The exclusion of other relevant cases —Russian, Turkish or Western civilizationism— responds to constraints of length and is expressly recorded among the limitations of this work.

Corpus and sources

The corpus comprises three strata. First, the peer-reviewed academic literature published between 1990 and 2026 in the fields of soft power, theory of international order, the narrative turn and studies of civilizationism. Second, a delimited set of primary discursive sources: the formulation of the civilizational state in Zhang (2012), the Global Civilization Initiative announced by Xi (2023), the statements of the Indian Minister of External Affairs on India's civilizational condition, and the motto of the Indian G20 presidency in 2023. Third, secondary data drawn from perception indices, employed for strictly illustrative purposes. The treatment of sources is interpretive: attention is directed to the frames of meaning the texts mobilise, the oppositions they establish and the validity claims they advance, rather than to the frequency of their formal features.

The status of Table 1

Table 1 requires an explicit caveat. It constitutes neither a measurement nor the result of statistical treatment, but an ordinal heuristic synthesis produced by the author and intended to render the article's thesis visible at a glance. The hard power column reflects an interpretive reading of the specialised literature, cross-checked against indicators of material capabilities; it should be noted that the national capabilities series of the Correlates of War project end before the final period considered, so that the trend corresponding to 2024-2026 is a qualitative estimate rather than an observed datum. The soft power column synthesises the trajectory of two indices that are equivalent neither in methodology nor in case universe: The Soft Power 30, published by Portland Communications between 2015 and 2019, and Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index, published since 2020. The discontinuity between them precludes the construction of a homogeneous time series, which is why the table is presented in terms of trend rather than value.

Quality criteria and limitations

This work makes no claim to causal inference or statistical generalisation. Its limitations are of four orders. First, those deriving from case selection: two plausibility probes cannot rule out rival explanations, and choosing cases where the phenomenon is visible introduces a bias that subsequent research must correct. Second, those relating to the risk of reification: analysing civilizational discourses courts the danger of treating civilisations as given entities; here they are expressly approached as ideological constructs rather than as pre-existing cultures or identities (Bettiza, Bolton & Lewis, 2023). Third, those concerning the construct validity of the indices employed, which measure aggregate perceptions rather than effective power. Fourth, and theoretically most consequential, a reflexive limitation: the Gramscian framework from which the universalist pretension of liberalism is criticised is itself a product of the Western intellectual tradition, so that the analysis does not stand outside the field it examines. The choice has been to assume this position and make it explicit, rather than to simulate an exteriority that the article's own argument declares impossible.

Soft Power as a Technology of Order:-

The concept of soft power, originally formulated by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s and systematised in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), has become one of the most influential —and simultaneously most contested— terms in contemporary International Relations. Nye defines soft power as an actor's capacity to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than through coercion or payment (Nye, 2004, p. 5). This attraction,

according to the author, derives fundamentally from a state's culture, political values and foreign policies when these are perceived as legitimate or morally attractive by other actors (Nye, 2004, 2011).

A merely descriptive reading of soft power as the "power of attraction" is nonetheless insufficient to grasp its structural function in the production and maintenance of international order. Soft power does not operate solely through seduction or voluntary persuasion; more profoundly, it functions as a technology of order—that is, as a set of discursive, institutional and symbolic practices oriented towards naturalising particular narratives, producing desirability and colonising the global political imagination. In this sense, liberal soft power did not merely render Western values attractive: it helped present them as the natural horizon of modernity, progress and civilisation (Cox, 1983; Lock, 2010).

From this perspective, soft power articulates with the Gramscian notion of hegemony. As Robert Cox (1983) has argued, international hegemony cannot be reduced to material domination; it entails the capacity of a dominant group to project its conception of the world in such a way that it is accepted as common sense by subordinate groups. Liberal soft power operated precisely in this register: it transformed particular preferences—historically associated with the Western powers—into claims to universality. Liberal democracy, human rights, the free market and multilateralism were presented not simply as political options but as expressions of a superior moral order (Ikenberry, 2011; Parmar, 2018).

Nye's concept has, however, attracted numerous criticisms from scholars of diverse persuasions. A first line of questioning, of realist provenance, holds that soft power lacks analytical autonomy and depends ultimately on hard power. John Mearsheimer (2018) and other realists have argued that cultural or ideological attraction is effective only when backed by material capabilities; without that substrate, soft power rapidly dissipates. Along similar lines, Edward Lock (2010) has criticised the conceptual ambiguity of the term, noting that Nye oscillates between a definition grounded in resources (culture, values, policies) and one grounded in behaviours (attraction), which generates analytical confusion.

A second line of criticism, closer to constructivism and to critical approaches, questions the assumption of neutrality and universality underlying liberal soft power. Authors such as Inderjeet Parmar (2018) and Christopher Layne (2010) have shown that American soft power was not an innocent instrument of attraction but a deliberate tool of hegemonic projection tied to elite networks, foundations and apparatuses of cultural propaganda. From a postcolonial perspective, Amitav Acharya (2017) and others have noted that liberal soft power presupposes an implicit cultural hierarchy: the capacity to "attract" rests upon the prior devaluation of non-Western cultures and political systems.

A third criticism, particularly relevant to this work, comes from the narrative turn in International Relations. Authors such as Ronald Krebs (2015) and Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013, 2017) have argued that power resides not only in the attraction of cultural resources or abstract values, but in the capacity to impose narratives that structure the interpretation of international reality. From this vantage point, Nye's soft power is incomplete because it does not sufficiently problematise the process whereby certain narratives become dominant while others are marginalised or delegitimised. Soft power, on this reading, is not simply attraction: it is the capacity to define the narrative frame within which attraction becomes possible.

In sum, liberal soft power functioned historically as a technology of order insofar as it succeeded in naturalising a set of narratives about progress, modernity and political legitimacy. Its effectiveness lay not solely in seduction but in the colonisation of the global political imagination. Precisely for this reason, its present erosion cannot be interpreted as a simple decline in Western "attractiveness", but as the weakening of a specific way of producing meaning and legitimacy on an international scale.

Narrative Battles as the Terrain of Contestation over Order:-

If liberal soft power operated historically as a technology of order grounded in the naturalisation of particular narratives, its contemporary erosion can be fully understood only through an analysis of the narrative battles contesting the very meaning of the international order. Narratives are not mere superstructural accounts accompanying material power; they are constitutive practices that define what counts as legitimate, desirable, modern or civilised in world politics.

From a constructivist standpoint, international identities, interests and structures do not exist independently of the shared interpretations actors elaborate about themselves and about others (Wendt, 1999; Adler, 1997). The narrative turn in International Relations has taken this intuition further by holding that narratives do not merely reflect international reality but actively configure it. Ronald Krebs (2015) has shown that strategic narratives structure the perception of threats, opportunities and policy options, limiting the range of the thinkable and the actionable. Along similar lines, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013, 2017) have developed the concept of strategic narratives to explain how international actors seek to make sense of past, present and future in order to influence the behaviour of others. Narratives, on this view, are not ornamental: they are practices of power that produce order.

During the decades following 1945, and with particular intensity after the end of the Cold War, the liberal international order rested upon a narrative hegemony. That hegemony consisted not only in the military or economic superiority of the West, but in the capacity to impose a dominant interpretive frame: liberal modernity as universal horizon, human rights as shared moral language, linear progress, and liberal democracy as superior political form. As Amitav Acharya (2017, 2018) has argued, this narrative claimed universality while being profoundly particular, rooted in the historical experience of the Western powers and projected as the inevitable destiny of humanity. Liberal narrative hegemony operated, in Gramscian terms, as international common sense (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1993).

That hegemony has now fragmented. We are witnessing the passage from a relatively coherent narrative hegemony to a narrative multipolarity. Diverse actors —states, regional coalitions, transnational movements and media apparatuses— actively contest control of the story. There no longer exists a single dominant interpretive frame capable of defining, almost automatically, what constitutes progress, legitimacy or civilisation. In its place, rival narratives coexist and compete, mobilising symbolic, historical and emotional resources to claim moral and political authority (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2017).

This narrative multipolarity manifests itself with particular clarity in what may be termed the war over control of the story. Five axes are especially salient.

First, the contest over legitimacy. Traditional liberal narratives presented multilateral institutions and Western powers as guarantors of the rules-based order. Against them, counter-narratives have emerged denouncing the selectivity, hypocrisy and double standards of that same order, eroding its moral authority (Parmar, 2018; Acharya, 2017).

Second, narratives of victimisation and historical humiliation. Powers such as China and Russia have articulated accounts presenting their rise as a rectification of historical injustices inflicted by Western imperialism. These narratives do not merely mobilise resentment; they also legitimise projects of status restoration and disaffection from liberal norms (Wang, 2012; Tsygankov, 2016).

Third, the contestation of the concept of modernity. The liberal narrative associated modernity with individualism, secularisation, the market and representative democracy. Today, actors from the Global South and revisionist powers propose alternative conceptions of modernity —multiple, civilizational, or “with distinctive characteristics”— that reject the claim to uniqueness of the Western model (Eisenstadt, 2000; Acharya, 2018).

Fourth, the return of civilizational discourses. Although Samuel Huntington's paradigm has been widely criticised, the mobilisation of civilizational identities (Western, Chinese, Russian, Islamic, and others) has acquired renewed

vigour as a way of articulating difference and resisting the universalisation of liberal values (Tsygankov, 2016; Bettiza, Bolton & Lewis, 2023).

Finally, the contest over the future. Narratives do not only organise past and present; they project horizons of possibility. The crisis of the liberal order is also a crisis of future: the loss of credibility of the promise of universal progress has opened space for alternative visions —authoritarian, sovereigntist, civilizational or post-liberal— competing to define what kind of international order is desirable or inevitable (Krebs, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2017).

Taken together, narrative battles reveal that the international order rests not only on material capabilities or institutional arrangements, but on the capacity to produce and sustain shared accounts of legitimacy. The transition from liberal narrative hegemony to a conflictual narrative multipolarity thus constitutes one of the deepest processes of the contemporary crisis of the international order.

Chinese Civilizationism as a Counter-Narrative:-

Within contemporary narrative battles, Chinese civilizationism occupies a central place. It is not simply a cultural discourse or an identity claim, but a sophisticated narrative technology aimed at contesting the liberal order's claim to universality and at redefining the terms of international legitimacy.

The concept of the civilizational state (文明型国家) has been articulated with particular influence by the scholar Zhang Weiwei, especially in *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State* (2012). For Zhang, China is not an ordinary Westphalian nation-state but the fusion of a continuous five-thousand-year civilisation with a modern state of exceptional dimensions. This condition is expressed in what he terms the “four supers” (population, territory, historical tradition and cultural wealth) and the “four uniques” (language, politics, society and economy). The central argument is that Chinese modernisation consists not in the adoption of the Western model but in the revitalisation and updating of a distinctive civilizational trajectory (Zhang, 2012).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, this framework has been integrated —though not always with the exact terminology of the “civilizational state”— into the legitimization of the Communist Party and into China's external projection. Concepts such as “cultural confidence”, “Chinese-style modernisation” and, above all, the idea that China has created a “new form of human civilisation” (人类文明新形态) form part of official discourse. The Global Civilization Initiative, launched by Xi in 2023, constitutes the most elaborate expression of this narrative at the international level: it advocates respect for the diversity of civilisations, rejects the imposition of “universal” values of Western origin, and proposes an order grounded in dialogue and mutual learning among civilisations rather than in liberal homogenisation (Xi, 2023; Buzan & Zhang, 2024).

Chinese civilizationism operates across several strategic registers. De-universalisation of the liberal model. By presenting liberal values (electoral democracy, individual rights, Western-style rule of law) as historical particularities of one civilisation —the Western one— rather than as universal achievements of humanity, the moral claim of the liberal international order is eroded. What the West presents as “universal values” is reinterpreted as a form of particularism disguised as universalism (Acharya, 2017; Parmar, 2018).

Legitimation of the domestic political system. Five thousand years of civilizational continuity are invoked to naturalise the leadership of the Communist Party as heir to and renovator of a tradition of unitary, meritocratic governance oriented towards collective welfare, in contrast to what is described as the instability and short-termism of liberal democracies (Zhang, 2012; Xi, 2023).

Production of an alternative soft power. Civilizationism nourishes a cultural diplomacy no longer confined to exporting cultural products but aimed at projecting a non-Western model of modernity. Confucius Institutes, the promotion of (reinterpreted) traditional thought, narratives of “peaceful rise” and the reclaiming of classical

concepts such as *tianxia* (all under heaven) or harmony in diversity form part of this effort to colonise the global imagination with categories of its own (Chitty, Ji & Rawnsley, 2023; Buzan & Zhang, 2024).

In recent years a technological vector of growing importance has been added to this repertoire. Artificial intelligence has ceased to be a strictly technical matter and has become an instrument of geopolitical influence: through AI-driven platforms and practices of digital diplomacy, China possesses an increasing capacity to modulate global narratives on sensitive issues —human rights, economic development, or its role in world trade— and to project the image of a responsible, innovative and forward-looking actor (Valle de Frutos, Wang & Deng, 2025). Civilizationism thereby finds a channel of diffusion that widens its reach and lowers its cost, and that shifts narrative competition partly away from classical institutional supports towards algorithmic infrastructures whose governance remains contested.

Articulation of a narrative multipolarity. Chinese civilizational discourse presents itself not merely as a defence of Chinese difference but as a defence of the right of all civilisations to define their own paths to modernisation. In this sense it aligns with claims from the Global South and contributes to the fragmentation of liberal international common sense.

From a theoretical-conceptual perspective, Chinese civilizationism paradigmatically illustrates the passage from liberal narrative hegemony to narrative multipolarity. What is contested is no longer merely specific policies or institutions, but the interpretive frame itself from which judgements are made about what is modern, legitimate or civilised. By mobilising historical depth and civilizational singularity as resources of symbolic power, China participates actively in the war over control of the story, offering a counter-narrative that is coherent, emotionally potent and strategically oriented towards eroding the cultural authority of the liberal international order.

Indian Civilizationism as Counter-Narrative and Identity Redefinition:-

Indian civilizationism constitutes, alongside its Chinese counterpart, one of the most significant expressions of contemporary narrative multipolarity. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014, India has promoted a rereading of itself that transcends the identity of a postcolonial nation-state born in 1947 in order to claim the status of a civilizational state or civilizational nation with millennia of historical, cultural and spiritual continuity.

This discourse draws fundamentally on the ideology of Hindutva (the “Hinduness” of the nation), elaborated and disseminated over decades by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the constellation of Sangh Parivar organisations. Unlike the Nehruvian vision —secular, pluralist and centred on building a modern state from independence onwards— contemporary civilizationism presents India (Bharat) as the continuation of an ancient, predominantly Hindu civilisation that survived invasions, colonialism and partition (Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Mawdsley, 2023). Concepts such as *Sanatana Dharma*, the sacredness of territory and the idea of a shared culture preceding and transcending modern borders have moved from the cultural sphere to the centre of official political discourse.

Internationally, Indian civilizationism operates as a narrative of status claim and difference. India presents itself as one of the few civilisations to have endured throughout history and therefore as entitled to a prominent place in the world order. This self-understanding is often articulated by Indian policymakers in civilizational terms. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar remarked in 2026, “there are really very few ancient civilisations which have survived to become major modern nation states, and we are one of them”, emphasising the continuity between India’s civilizational inheritance and its contemporary statehood (Jaishankar, 2026). The claim serves to justify both the demand for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and the defence of a multipolarity accommodating diverse civilisations, against what is perceived as the historical imposition of Western norms.

Indian soft power has been deliberately reoriented towards civilizational resources. The global promotion of yoga (with the establishment of the International Day of Yoga at the United Nations in 2015), Ayurveda, Buddhism (reclaimed as the shared heritage of Asia), the diaspora and philosophical concepts such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (“the world is one family”) constitute pillars of this projection. During the Indian G20 presidency in 2023, the motto “One Earth, One Family, One Future” —a contemporary rendering of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*— illustrated the attempt to convert distinctive civilizational categories into languages of global governance, presenting India as a bridge between North and Global South and as the bearer of an ancient wisdom applicable to contemporary challenges.

Indian civilizationism nonetheless presents significant internal and external tensions. Domestically, the narrative tends to privilege a Hindu reading of Indian civilisation, generating accusations of majoritarianism and of the erosion of secular pluralism (Chacko, 2023; Sullivan de Estrada, 2023). In the neighbourhood, the evocation — though not officially adopted in foreign policy— of ideas such as *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) generates unease in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and other South Asian states, which perceive a potential claim to cultural or territorial hegemony (Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Haug & Roychoudhury, 2023). Unlike Chinese civilizationism, more oriented towards projecting an alternative model of governance and modernity on a global scale, the Indian variant combines a claim to civilizational greatness with a strong domestic identity dimension and an ambiguous regional projection.

From a theoretical-conceptual perspective, Indian civilizationism illustrates how contemporary narrative battles not only contest liberal universality but also reconfigure national identities in civilizational terms. As in the Chinese case, it mobilises historical depth as a resource of symbolic power, delegitimises the claim to uniqueness of the Western model and contributes to the fragmentation of international common sense. At the same time, it reveals the ambiguities of these narratives: while projecting an image of civilizational pluralism outwards (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*), internally they may operate as instruments of cultural homogenisation and of the consolidation of particularistic political projects.

Within the broader framework of the crisis of the international order, Indian civilizationism forms part of the transition towards a narrative multipolarity in which different actors claim the right to define modernity, legitimacy and the future from their own civilizational matrices, thereby eroding the cultural authority that sustained the liberal order for decades.

The Erosion of Liberal Narrative Authority:-

The crisis of the liberal international order does not manifest itself solely as a decline in material capabilities or institutional effectiveness. Its deepest core lies in the erosion of the narrative authority that for decades allowed Western powers to define what was legitimate, modern and desirable on a global scale. This erosion operates through interrelated mechanisms that turn what once functioned as soft power into a source of rejection, multiply counter-narratives and fragment the symbolic space in which consensus was produced.

The inversion of soft power

Liberal soft power rested on the premise that attraction generated consent. Culture, political values and foreign policies perceived as attractive were expected to produce emulation and legitimacy (Nye, 2004, 2011). In the present context, however, a phenomenon of soft power inversion is observable: the very narratives and practices that once generated attraction come to produce rejection, suspicion or active resistance.

This inversion is explained, first, by the growing perception of hypocrisy and double standards. When liberal powers invoke human rights, democracy or the rule of law selectively —applying them rigorously to some actors while relativising them for strategic allies— the narrative loses credibility and becomes an instrument of delegitimation (Parmar, 2018; Acharya, 2017). Second, the constant exposure of internal contradictions (democratic polarisation,

inequality, crises of representation) weakens the claim to moral superiority that sustained attraction. As recent analyses have noted, when the discrepancy between rhetoric and behaviour becomes structural, soft power turns into a toxic asset: instead of attracting, it repels (Kearn, 2022; Marlin-Bennett, 2022).

The proliferation of counter-narratives contesting universality

The second mechanism is the multiplication of counter-narratives that frontally question the liberal order's claim to universality. These counter-narratives are not confined to criticising specific policies; they attack the interpretive frame itself from which international legitimacy was adjudicated.

Chinese and Indian civilizationism constitute paradigmatic examples. Both reject the notion that modernity, democracy or human rights, as defined in the West, possess universal validity. In their place they propose multiple modernities rooted in distinctive civilizational trajectories, and they denounce liberal universalism as a form of historical particularism disguised as global norm (Zhang, 2012; Acharya, 2017, 2018; Mawdsley, 2023). Alongside them, narratives of historical victimisation and sovereigntist discourses reinforce the idea that the liberal order was never neutral or inclusive, but hierarchical and exclusionary (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1993).

The fragmentation of the global public and the loss of international “common sense”

The third mechanism is structural in character: the fragmentation of the global public. Liberal soft power operated on the basis of a relatively coherent international public space in which certain elites, institutions and media outlets shared a common interpretive horizon. That international “common sense” —in Gramscian terms— allowed liberal narratives to circulate as natural evidence rather than as particular constructions (Cox, 1983).

That space has now fragmented profoundly. The proliferation of digital platforms, media polarisation, the emergence of regional information spheres and the loss of centrality of traditional Western media have broken the unity of the global public (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2017; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). In this new environment, international public opinion ceases to be a relatively coherent sum of national opinions or a convergence mediated by traditional media, and becomes a complex, digital actor highly vulnerable to manipulation.

Sonia Valle de Frutos (2024) has analysed precisely this transformation in the context of what she terms the geopolitics of disinformative globalisation. Drawing on Rosenau's complexity theory and on low-information rationality, she argues that digital international public opinion emerges as a new actor in the virtual sphere, characterised by its nature as an accidental, non-deliberate aggregation and by publics with low levels of education and information. In this scenario, disinformation —through false news, memes, manipulated images, altered videos and the growing use of artificial intelligence— becomes one of the principal threats to the formation of a shared international common sense. The manipulation of international public opinion through social networks is not a marginal phenomenon but a structural tendency that generates divergent international publics and hinders the emergence of broad normative consensus (Valle de Frutos, 2024).

The loss of international common sense does not mean the end of all forms of order, but the passage to a scenario of conflictual coexistence of accounts. Narrative authority ceases to be the monopoly of a single cultural-political project and becomes the object of permanent dispute within a fragmented space of low informational rationality, highly permeable to disinformation. In this new landscape, liberal soft power can no longer operate as a technology of order grounded in the naturalisation of preferences; it is compelled to compete on terrain where attraction is contingent, reversible and increasingly difficult to sustain.

In sum, the erosion of liberal narrative authority results from the convergence of the inversion of soft power, the proliferation of counter-narratives and the fragmentation of the global public —deepened by the geopolitics of disinformation. These mechanisms not only weaken the legitimacy of the existing order but reconfigure the very conditions of possibility of any future international order.

Theoretical-Conceptual Implications:-

The erosion of liberal narrative authority compels a radical reconsideration of the theoretical status of soft power and, more broadly, of the conditions of possibility of any international order. Three implications are especially salient.

What remains of soft power once the monopoly over the production of meaning is lost?

Soft power as Nye formulated it presupposed an environment in which certain narratives could circulate with relative naturalness and generate attraction without constant coercion. That presupposition rested on a monopoly — never absolute, but certainly dominant— over the production of meaning. When that monopoly fragments, soft power does not disappear, but it mutates profoundly.

What remains is a soft power stripped of its capacity for naturalisation. It no longer operates as a technology of order able to convert particular preferences into international common sense, but as a competitive and contingent resource subject to permanent contestation. Attraction ceases to be an almost automatic effect of possessing cultural resources or projecting “attractive” values and becomes a fragile, reversible and contextual outcome (Nye, 2021; Lock, 2010; Kearn, 2022). In this new scenario, soft power more closely resembles a form of contested narrative power than a stable source of legitimacy.

Towards an international order of “conflictual narrative coexistence”

If the liberal order rested, in large measure, on the claim to a normative consensus articulated around narratives of progress, rights and universal modernity, its crisis gives way to an order of a different kind: one of conflictual narrative coexistence.

In this order there is no hegemonic interpretive frame capable of defining, in a widely accepted manner, what constitutes legitimacy or modernity. Instead, multiple accounts —civilizational, sovereigntist, postcolonial, residually liberal— coexist and compete, permanently disputing the meaning of world politics (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2017; Acharya, 2017; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Material multipolarity is thus reinforced and complicated by a narrative multipolarity. The result is not necessarily chaos, but a more unstable form of order, grounded in precarious equilibria of symbolic power and in the conflictual management of irreducible interpretive differences.

This conflictual coexistence does not eliminate the possibility of cooperation, but renders it more contingent and dependent on actors’ capacity to negotiate partial translations between distinct narrative languages, rather than to appeal to a presumed universal consensus.

Limits and potential of a post-hegemonic soft power

A post-hegemonic soft power —that is, a soft power that can no longer aspire to naturalise a single horizon of meaning— presents both severe limits and unexplored potential.

Among its limits, fragility stands out. Lacking the backing of a shared common sense, any exercise of attraction becomes vulnerable to narrative inversion, disinformation and the fragmentation of publics (Valle de Frutos, 2024). Moreover, post-hegemonic soft power loses much of its capacity to generate structural legitimacy: it may persuade temporarily, but it can hardly found an order.

At the same time, this mutation opens possibilities. Freed from the claim to universality, soft power could be reoriented towards more dialogical and less hierarchical forms of cultural influence: recognition of multiple modernities, cultural diplomacy grounded in translation rather than conversion, and the construction of legitimacy through respect for civilizational difference rather than the imposition of a single model. In this sense, a post-

hegemonic soft power would be more modest in its pretensions, but perhaps more realistic in a world characterised by irreducible narrative plurality.

In short, the crisis of liberal narrative authority does not announce the end of soft power but its transformation. What is at stake is whether this transformation will lead to a merely disordered competition of accounts or to the elaboration of new forms of symbolic power capable of sustaining, however precariously and conflictually, some kind of post-universalist international order.

Table 1. Relative evolution of hard power and soft power (1945-2026)

Period	Hard power (trend)	Soft power (trend)	Dynamics of the international order
1945-1991	Very high / dominant	Moderate (subordinate)	Bipolar order. Hard power preponderant.
1991-2008	High, in relative decline	Very high (rise of Nye's concept)	Unipolar moment. Liberal soft power at its peak.
2009-2014	Resurgent	Eroding	Transition. First fissures in liberal narrative authority.
2015-2023	High and rising	Contested; ascends	China Emerging narrative multipolarity.
2024-2026	High	Inverted and fragmented (China 2nd)	Erosion of liberal narrative authority and loss of the monopoly over the production of meaning.

Source: Author's elaboration. The hard power column reflects an interpretive reading of the specialised literature, cross-checked against indicators of material capabilities (Correlates of War, National Material Capabilities; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database); it should be noted that the Correlates of War series ends before the final period considered, so that the 2024-2026 trend is a qualitative estimate. The soft power column synthesises the trajectory of The Soft Power 30 (Portland Communications, 2015-2019) and the Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2020-2026), which are not mutually equivalent. The table is heuristic and ordinal in character and should not be read as a measurement.

Analysis of the table

Table 1 synthesises the central thesis of this work. During the Cold War, hard power was clearly dominant while soft power operated in a subordinate fashion. In the unipolar moment (1991-2008) this relationship was inverted: liberal soft power reached its maximum relative weight and became a central technology for legitimising the order. From 2009-2014 onwards, however, a process of erosion begins that accelerates over the following decade. Soft power ceases to be a resource almost monopolised by the liberal powers and becomes a field of contestation. China's emergence in the leading positions of soft power indices from 2024-2025 onwards symbolises precisely the loss of the monopoly over the production of meaning that characterised the liberal international order.

In this new scenario soft power does not disappear, but it loses its capacity to naturalise a single normative horizon. It becomes a competitive, fragmented resource susceptible to inversion, while hard power recovers centrality. The

table therefore reflects not merely a change in the distribution of capabilities, but the transition towards an order of conflictual narrative coexistence.

Discussion:-

A thesis and its interlocutors

The argument developed in the preceding pages can be stated in a single proposition: the crisis of the liberal international order is not primarily a crisis of capabilities or institutions but a crisis of narrative authority, and soft power —far from disappearing— mutates from a technology of naturalisation into a competitive and reversible resource. It now remains to situate this thesis in relation to the works with which it converses, to submit it to the most serious objections that may be raised against it, and to delimit how far it reaches.

The contribution is inscribed within a dense conversation. Bettiza, Bolton and Lewis (2023) have argued that the rise of civilizationism should be read as a counter-hegemonic ideological reaction to the globalisation of the liberal order after 1989, and that civilisations are best understood as ideological constructs rather than as cultures or identities. Buzan and Zhang (2024) have examined the Global Civilization Initiative as an expression of a civilizational pluralism that contests liberal universalism from a conception of multiple modernities. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2013, 2017) provide the conceptual apparatus of strategic narratives, and Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2014) had already observed that soft power functions as a straitjacket for understanding the relationship between power and communication in world politics. This article converges with all three, but shifts the focus. Whereas the literature on civilizationism analyses above all the ideological content of counter-narratives, and the literature on strategic narratives addresses their formation, projection and reception, the problem posed here is different: what happens to the concept of soft power when the structural conditions that made it intelligible disappear. The answer proposed —the notion of soft power inversion and the characterisation of an order of conflictual narrative coexistence— aspires to be a conceptual contribution rather than an additional description of the phenomenon.

The realist objection: is narrative authority epiphenomenal?

The most consistent objection comes from realism. If, as Mearsheimer (2018) argues and, in a different key, Layne (2010) and Kearn (2011) contend, cultural attraction is always parasitic upon material capabilities, then what this article describes as the erosion of narrative authority would be no more than the belated reflection of a redistribution of material power. The narrative variable would constitute, at best, a lagging indicator; at worst, an analytical illusion.

The objection deserves to be taken seriously, and it cannot be refuted by the means available to a conceptual study. It is nonetheless worth noting an anomaly that weakens it. The results of the 2026 Global Soft Power Index show that the United States retains first place worldwide in soft power perception while recording the steepest decline among the 193 nation brands assessed, with particularly pronounced falls in the reputation pillar; China, for its part, consolidates its second position and surpasses the United States in reputation for the first time, outranking it on nineteen of the thirty-five attributes considered (Brand Finance, 2026). If narrative authority were strictly derived from material capabilities, it would be difficult to explain why the power that retains considerable military and technological superiority simultaneously experiences the sharpest reputational deterioration in the system. What these data suggest is not the independence of soft power from hard power —a thesis this article does not defend— but a partial decoupling: conduct, coherence between discourse and practice, and the perception of reliability operate as variables with efficacy of their own, irreducible to the distribution of capabilities. This is precisely the mechanism identified by Kearn (2022) and Marlin-Bennett (2022) when they show that discrepancy between rhetoric and behaviour rapidly erodes credibility, and that soft power admits propagandistic uses capable of turning the instrument against those who wield it.

The limits of this counter-argument must be acknowledged: an index of perceptions measures aggregate opinion rather than power, and the temporal coincidence between reputational decline and narrative contestation does not in itself establish a causal relationship. The anomaly is suggestive, not probative, and its function in this argument is that of a plausibility probe rather than a proof.

The performative paradox of civilizationism

A second point opens what is, in our view, the most fertile line of enquiry. Chinese and Indian civilizationism contest liberal universalism by denouncing it as Western particularism disguised as global norm. Yet in order to articulate that contestation internationally, they must appeal to a principle that must necessarily hold for all: the right of every civilisation to define its own path to modernisation, respect for diversity, mutual learning between traditions. The Global Civilization Initiative is, in this sense, a second-order universalism: a universalism of pluralism (Buzan & Zhang, 2024). Civilizationism does not, therefore, escape the formal structure of the claim it combats; it displaces it.

This paradox has a significant theoretical consequence. If contesting liberal common sense requires producing a new language of general validity, then narrative multipolarity does not constitute a terminal state but a moment of transition whose outcome remains open: it may stabilise into a coexistence regulated by minimal norms of intercultural translation, or settle into a new narrative hegemony, different in sign but analogous in structure. The first possibility underlies the notion of post-hegemonic soft power outlined above; the second cautions against any complacent reading of fragmentation as emancipation.

The paradox sharpens when external projection is compared with internal practice. The Indian case is especially illustrative here: the motto *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* projects an image of cosmopolitan inclusiveness outwards, while domestically the *hindutva* reading of Indian civilisation operates in a majoritarian and homogenising register (Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Chacko, 2023; Mawdsley, 2023). The tension does not invalidate narrative effectiveness—narratives do not require logical coherence in order to function—but it constitutes exactly the kind of discrepancy between discourse and practice that, as argued in this work, erodes credibility over the medium term. Civilizationism thus proves vulnerable to the very mechanism of inversion it denounces in liberalism, which suggests that the mechanism is not a feature peculiar to Western soft power but a general property of narrative legitimization.

Was there ever a liberal narrative hegemony?

A third objection, historical in nature, questions the very premise of the argument. To speak of erosion presupposes a prior state of relatively coherent narrative hegemony. Did such a thing exist? The Non-Aligned Movement, the claims of the New International Economic Order, dependency theory, the debate over the New World Information and Communication Order within UNESCO, and non-Western traditions of international thought all show that liberal common sense was contested continuously from its very formation. To claim that contestation is a new phenomenon would amount to the Eurocentric reading of international history that Acharya (2018) has rightly criticised.

The argument defended here is compatible with this objection, provided it is stated with precision. What is claimed is not that the liberal order lacked challengers, but that it possessed the capacity to set the terms of the debate: even the most radical critiques were formulated, in large measure, in the language of sovereignty, development, rights and progress that the order itself had universalised. What characterises the present moment is not the existence of contestation but the fact that it is articulated from alternative interpretive frames that explicitly reject that shared vocabulary. The difference is not one of intensity but of grammar. Even so, the objection compels a caveat regarding the periodisation set out in Table 1, which must be read as a heuristic simplification rather than as the faithful description of a hegemony that was never, strictly speaking, total.

The reflexivity of the measuring instrument

There is a difficulty that should be made explicit, because it bears on the internal coherence of the argument itself. This work documents the erosion of Western narrative authority by drawing, among other sources, on indices produced by Western consultancies and constructed around attributes —ease of doing business, quality of governance, international reputation— that incorporate normative assumptions of liberal provenance. That China should rise in a British index is at once evidence in favour of the thesis and a reminder that the measuring instrument forms part of the object measured. The indices are themselves, in the terms of this article, artefacts of the narrative hegemony whose erosion they purport to register. These data have accordingly been employed for strictly illustrative purposes, and future research is advised to triangulate them with regional opinion surveys and with reception studies conducted among non-Western publics.

Implications for diplomatic practice

The analysis yields implications extending beyond the academic. If attraction is no longer an almost automatic effect of possessing cultural resources, then public diplomacy grounded in the export of content —the model of cultural institutes, image campaigns and the promotion of creative industries— is insufficient on its own. The decisive variable becomes the observable coherence between declared principles and effective conduct, which shifts the centre of gravity of soft power from communication towards substantive foreign policy: in a low-credibility environment, incoherence is not offset by more communication but amplified by it. A second implication concerns language. In a space of conflictual narrative coexistence, the relevant competence is not the capacity to persuade but the capacity to translate —that is, to render one's own positions intelligible within frameworks that are not one's own, without demanding the interlocutor's conversion. This suggests that diplomatic training should accord considerably greater weight than it currently does to intercultural competence and to knowledge of non-Western traditions of international thought.

Research agenda

The analysis opens at least four lines of work. The first is comparative extension to other civilizationisms —Russian, Turkish and also Western, since civilizationism is a phenomenon peculiar neither to the Global South nor to revisionist powers (Bettiza, Bolton & Lewis, 2023)— which would allow testing whether the inversion mechanism operates symmetrically. The second is the empirical study of reception: the discipline knows a great deal about the production and projection of narratives and very little about how they are actually appropriated, resignified or rejected by specific publics. The third concerns the articulation between algorithmic disinformation and narrative fragmentation, along the lines opened by Valle de Frutos (2024) and Valle de Frutos, Wang and Deng (2025), with particular attention to the role of generative artificial intelligence in producing counter-narratives at scale and at low cost, as well as to the governance of the algorithmic infrastructures that carry them. The fourth, methodological in nature, consists in developing indicators of narrative authority that do not depend on existing commercial indices and that are applicable symmetrically to Western and non-Western actors.

Conclusions:-

This article has argued that the crisis of the contemporary international order cannot be fully understood through the material and institutional explanations that have dominated debate over the past decade. Without denying the pertinence of those readings, it has contended that the deepest core of the crisis lies in a phenomenon of a different nature: the erosion of the narrative authority that for decades allowed Western powers to define, almost automatically, what was to count as legitimate, modern, desirable or civilised in world politics.

Three conceptual contributions follow from this argument. The first is the respecification of soft power as a technology of order. Against the conventional reading that understands it as a capacity for attraction, the proposal here is to conceive it as a set of discursive, institutional and symbolic practices oriented towards naturalising particular narratives and transforming particular preferences into claims to universality. Its historical effectiveness

lay not so much in seduction as in the capacity to convert a political project into international common sense, in the register that Gramsci (1971) and, following him, Cox (1983) reserved for hegemony.

The second contribution is the notion of soft power inversion: the process whereby the very narratives, symbols and practices that once generated attraction come to produce rejection, suspicion or active resistance. Inversion is driven principally not by the loss of cultural resources but by the structural perception of a discrepancy between discourse and conduct. When the selective application of invoked principles becomes visible and repeated, the same repertoire that sustained legitimacy turns into the most effective instrument of its delegitimation. As discussed above, this mechanism is not peculiar to liberalism: it also affects the civilizational counter-narratives that today contest it.

The third contribution is the characterisation of the emerging scenario as an order of conflictual narrative coexistence. The loss of the Western monopoly over the production of meaning leads neither to chaos nor to the disappearance of soft power, but to its mutation: stripped of its capacity for naturalisation, it becomes a competitive, contingent and reversible resource, subject to permanent contestation within a fragmented global public space highly permeable to disinformation (Valle de Frutos, 2024). This post-hegemonic soft power may persuade episodically, but it can hardly found an order. Its potential, if it has any, lies in a dialogical reorientation: in translation rather than conversion, and in the recognition of multiple modernities rather than the imposition of a single model.

It is worth delimiting precisely what this work does not claim. It does not hold that material capabilities have ceased to matter, or that narrative authority operates independently of them; it holds, more modestly, that the two dimensions have partially decoupled and that the second possesses an efficacy of its own which materialist explanations tend to underestimate. Nor does it announce the disappearance of the liberal order or predict the configuration the coming order will adopt. Being a theoretical-conceptual inquiry supported by two plausibility probes, its conclusions have the status of grounded hypotheses rather than tested findings: they call for systematic empirical verification, particularly regarding the reception of counter-narratives among specific publics and the extension of the analysis to cases not considered here.

There remains, in any event, an open question that exceeds the scope of this article and defines the interest of the research programme it inaugurates. The transition towards narrative multipolarity may issue in an unregulated competition of accounts incapable of sustaining any normative agreement, or in the elaboration of new forms of symbolic power capable of articulating —necessarily precariously and conflictually— some kind of post-universalist international order. Which of these outcomes prevails will largely determine the very possibility of international cooperation in the decades ahead. And that possibility, as this article has sought to show, is decided not only in the distribution of capabilities but in the contest over meaning.

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