

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-58763.

Title: *“The Inversion of Soft Power: Narrative Authority, Civilizationism and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order”*

Recommendation:

Accept as it is

Accept after minor revision..... yes ...

Accept after major revision

Do not accept (*Reasons below*)

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		Yes		
Techn. Quality		Yes		
Clarity	Yes			
Significance	Yes			

Reviewer's Name: Dr.Feroze Ahmad Mir

Detailed Reviewer's

1. Overall Assessment

The manuscript presents a theoretically ambitious and intellectually engaging examination of the contemporary crisis of the liberal international order through the concepts of **soft power, narrative authority, cultural hegemony, civilizationism, and narrative multipolarity**. Rather than explaining the transformation of the international order primarily through changes in material capabilities or institutional structures, the author argues that an important dimension of the current crisis is the erosion of the Western capacity to define what is considered legitimate, modern, desirable, and universal in international politics.

The manuscript's principal theoretical proposition is that soft power should be reconsidered not simply as the ability to attract but as a **“technology of order”** through which particular political and cultural preferences can be presented as universal. On this basis, the author develops three central concepts: **“soft power inversion,” “conflictual narrative coexistence,”** and **“post-hegemonic soft power.”**

The manuscript is particularly noteworthy for bringing together Nye's conception of soft power with Gramscian cultural hegemony and the narrative turn in International Relations. It then uses Chinese and Indian civilizationism as plausibility probes to illustrate how alternative civilizational narratives challenge liberal universalism.

The manuscript is clearly positioned as **theoretical-conceptual research rather than empirical-inferential research**, and the author is appropriately transparent about this distinction. The study explicitly avoids claiming causal inference or statistical generalisation and recognizes the limitations arising from case selection, measurement, and the use of perception indices.

In my assessment, the paper has **good scholarly potential and a meaningful conceptual contribution**. Its main limitations concern the empirical substantiation of several broad claims, the operational precision of some newly introduced concepts, the use of heterogeneous soft-power indices, and the need

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for additional clarification concerning the distinction between narrative authority, soft power, legitimacy, and hegemony.

These are addressable through revision and do not undermine the manuscript's overall contribution.

2. Significance and Relevance of the Study

The topic is highly significant within contemporary International Relations scholarship. The crisis and transformation of the liberal international order have generated extensive debate, much of which has concentrated on material power redistribution, the rise of China, great-power competition, and institutional weakening. The manuscript usefully shifts attention toward the **symbolic and narrative foundations of international order**.

The paper's central proposition—that international order depends not only upon material capabilities and institutions but also upon the capacity to establish shared interpretations of legitimacy and modernity—is theoretically important.

The manuscript is particularly relevant because it connects this argument to the emergence of **narrative multipolarity**, whereby multiple actors increasingly contest the authority to define international legitimacy and the meaning of modernity. The discussion of Chinese and Indian civilizationism provides contemporary examples through which the proposed theoretical framework can be explored.

The subject is therefore appropriate for publication in a journal addressing international relations, political science, international political theory, global governance, strategic studies, or contemporary geopolitical transformations.

3. Major Strengths of the Manuscript

3.1. *Strong and original research problem*

The manuscript identifies a significant theoretical problem: whether the conventional understanding of soft power remains adequate in an international environment in which the previously dominant narrative framework is increasingly contested.

This is a worthwhile research question because it moves beyond asking whether particular states are becoming more or less attractive and instead asks **what happens to soft power when the broader narrative environment in which attraction operates becomes fragmented**. The author explicitly identifies this as the central conceptual problem of the article.

3.2. *Effective integration of major theoretical traditions*

One of the strongest aspects of the manuscript is the integration of three important strands of scholarship:

- Joseph Nye's theory of soft power;
- Gramscian theories of cultural hegemony; and
- the narrative turn in International Relations.

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The manuscript does not merely mention these perspectives but attempts to establish a conceptual relationship between them.

This interdisciplinary theoretical construction is one of the manuscript's principal scholarly strengths.

3.3. Clear conceptual contribution

The proposed concepts of **soft power inversion**, **conflictual narrative coexistence**, and **post-hegemonic soft power** provide the paper with a distinctive conceptual identity.

The concept of soft power inversion is particularly interesting. The author proposes that under certain conditions, narratives and practices that previously generated attraction may instead generate suspicion, rejection, or resistance, particularly when there is a persistent discrepancy between declared principles and actual conduct.

This is a potentially productive concept for future empirical research.

3.4. Appropriate methodological self-positioning

The manuscript deserves credit for clearly identifying itself as a **conceptual-analysis/concept-reconstruction study** rather than presenting itself as a quantitative or causal investigation.

The author also explains the analytical procedure in four stages: reconstruction of soft power, theoretical articulation with Gramscian hegemony and strategic narratives, plausibility probes through selected cases, and derivation of theoretical implications.

This methodological transparency is a significant strength.

3.5. Rational case selection

The selection of China and India is reasonably justified. The author treats both as cases in which historical and civilizational depth is mobilised to challenge liberal universalism, while also recognizing important differences between them.

The decision to treat these as **illustrative plausibility probes rather than complete case studies** is methodologically appropriate given the conceptual purpose of the paper.

3.6. Strong discussion of Chinese civilizationism

The Chinese case is effectively connected to the theoretical argument. The discussion of the "civilizational state," Chinese-style modernisation, the Global Civilization Initiative, cultural confidence, and alternative conceptions of modernity demonstrates how civilizational discourse can challenge the universal claims of liberal modernity.

The author also appropriately recognizes that China's civilizational narrative is not merely defensive but can function as a mechanism of external projection and international legitimacy.

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3.7. Valuable treatment of Indian civilizationism

The treatment of Indian civilizationism is another important strength. The manuscript distinguishes India's civilizational narrative from the Chinese case and identifies its relationship with domestic identity, international status, and the projection of civilizational resources such as yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.

The manuscript also recognizes tensions between external claims of civilizational pluralism and internal debates concerning majoritarianism and pluralism. This provides useful analytical balance.

3.8. Engagement with counterarguments

The discussion section is particularly strong because the author does not simply defend the central thesis but explicitly considers several serious objections.

These include:

- the realist objection that narrative authority may merely reflect material capabilities;
- the historical objection that liberal narrative hegemony was never complete;
- the performative paradox of civilizationism; and
- the problem of relying upon Western-generated indices to measure the erosion of Western narrative authority.

This reflexive engagement considerably strengthens the manuscript.

3.9. Explicit acknowledgment of limitations

The author appropriately recognizes that the study does not establish causality or statistical generalisation. The limitations concerning case selection, possible reification of civilizations, construct validity of indices, and the theoretical position of the researcher are explicitly acknowledged.

This level of methodological self-awareness is commendable.

3.10. Policy and diplomatic relevance

The discussion has implications beyond theoretical scholarship. The manuscript argues that in a fragmented narrative environment, effective diplomacy requires not merely persuasive communication but the ability to **translate one's position into frameworks understandable to different cultural and civilizational audiences**.

This is a useful practical implication and provides additional relevance to the study.

4. Weaknesses and Areas Requiring Improvement

Despite its strengths, the manuscript would benefit from several substantive and editorial improvements.

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4.1. The central concepts require sharper operational distinction

The concepts of:

- soft power;
- narrative authority;
- cultural hegemony;
- narrative power;
- legitimacy;
- attraction; and
- soft power inversion

are closely related throughout the manuscript.

At some points, the boundaries between these concepts become insufficiently clear. For example, the manuscript describes soft power as both attraction and a technology of order, while narrative authority is treated as a broader capacity to define legitimate interpretations.

The author should more explicitly establish:

What is the relationship between soft power and narrative authority?

A concise conceptual framework or table distinguishing these concepts would substantially improve theoretical clarity.

4.2. "Soft power inversion" needs clearer criteria

The concept is promising, but the manuscript would be stronger if it established more explicit criteria for determining when inversion has occurred.

For example, does inversion require:

1. measurable decline in international attractiveness?
2. increasing negative perceptions?
3. rejection of a state's values?
4. distrust caused by inconsistency between rhetoric and conduct?
5. active counter-narrative mobilisation?

At present, the concept is theoretically persuasive but not yet sufficiently specified for empirical testing.

The author itself recognizes that the conclusions are grounded hypotheses requiring systematic empirical verification.

4.3. The empirical basis is relatively limited

The paper is appropriately conceptual, but some of its claims regarding the contemporary international order are broad and could be supported with a wider range of empirical evidence.

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The two cases are useful as plausibility probes, but they cannot demonstrate that the proposed mechanism applies across the international system.

The author acknowledges this limitation, but it remains the principal substantive weakness of the study.

4.4. Table 1 requires further methodological clarification

Table 1 is useful for communicating the argument, but its construction is inherently subjective. The author appropriately states that it is an ordinal heuristic rather than a statistical measurement.

Nevertheless, terms such as “very high,” “high,” “moderate,” “eroding,” “inverted,” and “fragmented” may give readers an impression of measurement precision that the methodology does not support.

The author should either:

- provide clearer criteria for assigning these categories; or
- present the table explicitly as a conceptual chronology rather than an empirical indicator.

4.5. Heterogeneity of soft-power indices is a significant limitation

The manuscript combines the **Soft Power 30** with the **Global Soft Power Index**, while correctly acknowledging that the two are methodologically different and do not constitute a homogeneous time series.

This caveat is commendable, but the problem remains important because the table uses these indices to support a historical narrative extending from 1945 to 2026.

The author should avoid giving the impression that a continuous empirical series exists across this entire period.

4.6. The claim concerning a “liberal narrative hegemony” needs careful qualification

The manuscript itself recognizes an important historical objection: liberal internationalism was contested throughout the post-1945 period by the Non-Aligned Movement, dependency theorists, New International Economic Order advocates, and other intellectual traditions.

This is an important issue.

The paper would be more convincing if it consistently referred to **relative or dominant narrative authority** rather than implying an uncontested liberal narrative hegemony.

The author's later clarification—that the claim concerns the capacity to set the terms of debate rather than absolute monopoly—is persuasive and should be incorporated earlier in the theoretical framework.

4.7. The relationship between material and narrative power needs further development

The manuscript does not claim that material capabilities are irrelevant. Indeed, it explicitly acknowledges partial rather than complete decoupling.

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Nevertheless, the theoretical relationship between material and narrative power remains somewhat underdeveloped.

The paper could benefit from explicitly presenting a model in which:

material capabilities → institutional capacity → narrative production → narrative reception → legitimacy/attraction → international influence

with feedback effects in the opposite direction.

Such a framework would help distinguish the manuscript from arguments that simply replace material explanations with ideational explanations.

4.8. Greater attention to audience reception is necessary

The manuscript is particularly strong on the **production and projection** of narratives but relatively limited on **reception**.

The author acknowledges this limitation and identifies reception studies as an important future research agenda.

Nevertheless, because soft power fundamentally concerns attraction and influence, audience reception is central to the concept. Greater discussion of how Chinese, Indian, Western, and Global South audiences actually receive these narratives would strengthen the theoretical argument.

4.9. Some claims regarding digital platforms and AI require stronger empirical evidence

The manuscript argues that artificial intelligence and digital platforms increasingly facilitate the modulation of international narratives.

This is an important contemporary issue, but the claim currently moves somewhat quickly from technological capability to geopolitical influence.

The author should distinguish between:

- capacity to disseminate information;
- actual control over information environments;
- narrative persuasion;
- algorithmic amplification; and
- demonstrated changes in audience attitudes.

4.10. Certain formulations are rhetorically stronger than the evidence permits

Expressions such as “**colonise the global political imagination**,” “**war over control of the story**,” and “**toxic asset**” are conceptually interesting but rhetorically strong.

For a scholarly article, such formulations should either be explicitly defined as analytical metaphors or replaced with more neutral terminology where appropriate.

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5. Originality and Contribution

The manuscript has a meaningful conceptual contribution to the literature on soft power and international order.

Its strongest original contribution is the attempt to move the discussion from “**how attractive is a state?**” to “**what happens to soft power when the narrative environment itself becomes contested?**”

The concept of **soft power inversion** provides a potentially valuable framework for explaining circumstances in which the projection of supposedly attractive values produces distrust or resistance rather than attraction.

The concept of **conflictual narrative coexistence** is also useful because it avoids the simplistic conclusion that the decline of liberal dominance necessarily produces disorder. Instead, the paper proposes that multiple narratives may coexist in a more unstable but still structured international environment.

Finally, the idea of **post-hegemonic soft power** offers a productive avenue for future research by suggesting that soft power may continue to operate without being capable of establishing a single universal normative framework.

These contributions justify publication after revision.

6. Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of the paper is substantial relative to its conceptual design.

The manuscript effectively challenges the conventional interpretation of soft power as primarily a resource of attraction and instead emphasizes its relationship with **meaning production, legitimacy, and hegemony**.

The integration of Nye with Cox/Gramsci and strategic-narrative scholarship is theoretically productive. The author also recognizes that this reconceptualisation does not imply that material power becomes irrelevant.

This is an important qualification and should be retained prominently in the final version.

7. Discussion and Interpretation

The Discussion section is one of the strongest portions of the manuscript.

The author demonstrates awareness that the central thesis faces serious theoretical objections and addresses these systematically. In particular, the realist challenge is treated with appropriate caution rather than being dismissed. The author openly states that the conceptual study cannot definitively refute materialist explanations.

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The discussion of the **performative paradox of civilizationism** is also particularly interesting. The argument that civilizationist challenges to Western universalism may themselves require a second-order universal claim—the right of each civilization to define its own path—is theoretically stimulating.

This section represents a genuine strength of the paper.

8. Literature Review and References

The manuscript demonstrates strong engagement with relevant literature. It includes foundational works by Nye, Gramsci, Cox, Wendt, Ikenberry, Mearsheimer, Acharya, and others, alongside more recent literature on civilizationism, strategic narratives, soft power, and digital communication.

The literature selection is generally appropriate and academically relevant.

However, the author should conduct a final reference audit to ensure:

- every in-text citation appears in the reference list;
- every reference is cited in the text;
- publication details are complete;
- DOI and URL formats are consistent;
- dates of online sources are verified; and
- the journal's prescribed citation style is followed consistently.

9. Structure and Presentation

The manuscript is well structured and progresses logically from:

1. Introduction;
2. Methodology;
3. conceptual reconstruction of soft power;
4. narrative contestation;
5. Chinese civilizationism;
6. Indian civilizationism;
7. erosion of liberal narrative authority;
8. theoretical implications;
9. empirical illustration through Table 1;
10. discussion and counterarguments;
11. implications and future research;
12. conclusions.

This structure supports the central argument effectively.

The manuscript would nevertheless benefit from minor stylistic editing, particularly with respect to sentence length, punctuation, subsection formatting, and consistency in terminology.

10. Specific Recommendations to the Author

I recommend the following revisions:

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Major/Moderate revisions

1. **Clarify the conceptual distinction** between soft power, narrative authority, narrative power, legitimacy, and cultural hegemony.
2. Provide **explicit criteria for “soft power inversion.”**
3. Clarify the precise meaning of **“narrative multipolarity”** and distinguish it from conventional political or material multipolarity.
4. Qualify the claim concerning liberal narrative hegemony by emphasizing that it was **dominant but never uncontested**.
5. Strengthen the explanation of the relationship between **material capabilities and narrative authority**.
6. Clarify the methodological status and evidentiary limits of Table 1.
7. Avoid presenting the Soft Power 30 and Global Soft Power Index as a continuous comparable series.
8. Strengthen the distinction between **narrative production, dissemination, reception, and actual influence**.
9. Where possible, provide additional evidence concerning audience reception of Chinese and Indian narratives.
10. Moderate or define highly rhetorical expressions where necessary.

Minor editorial revisions

11. Conduct a comprehensive language and grammatical review.
12. Standardize headings, punctuation, quotation marks, and terminology.
13. Check all references and URLs.
14. Ensure consistency in the presentation of dates and institutional names.
15. Consider adding a concise conceptual diagram showing the relationship between soft power, narrative authority, civilizationism, and international order.

11. Final Evaluation

The manuscript is **intellectually ambitious, theoretically informed, and relevant to current debates in International Relations**. Its principal strength is its effort to reconceptualize soft power in the context of an increasingly fragmented international narrative environment.

The manuscript's treatment of China and India provides useful illustrations of how civilizational narratives challenge liberal universalism, while the discussion of soft-power inversion and post-hegemonic soft power provides potentially original conceptual contributions.

The main weaknesses relate to conceptual operationalisation, limited empirical verification, the heterogeneous nature of the indices used, and the need to more clearly distinguish between narrative authority and soft power. These issues are significant enough to warrant **minor revision**, but they are not sufficiently serious to justify rejection.

The author has already demonstrated considerable methodological reflexivity by openly acknowledging the limitations of the study and by presenting the conclusions as hypotheses requiring future empirical testing.

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12. Recommendation to the Editor

Recommendation: ACCEPT FOR PUBLICATION – MINOR REVISION

Decision: Accept subject to minor revision

The manuscript makes a worthwhile theoretical contribution to the study of soft power and the changing international order. The conceptual framework is promising, the literature engagement is strong, the cases are appropriately selected for illustrative purposes, and the author demonstrates good awareness of the study's methodological limitations.

I therefore recommend **publication after the authors address the above-mentioned conceptual, methodological, and editorial observations.**

Overall Assessment

Reviewer's Final Comment:

The manuscript is a substantial and thought-provoking contribution that successfully shifts attention from the material distribution of power toward the increasingly contested production of international meaning and legitimacy. With minor revisions to conceptual precision, methodological clarification, and evidentiary presentation, the paper is suitable for publication.