



The Digital Silk Road in Europe: China's Soft Power Maneuvers at Euro 2024

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Abstract

In recent years, China has intensified efforts to expand the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with particular emphasis on its digital corridor, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), in Europe. Despite the presence of giants such as Huawei, the DSR has faced various challenges due to the security concerns of European states, further influenced by the positions of the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA). In this article, the authors argue that one of Beijing's responses lies in the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship (Euro 2024), where Chinese technology companies are among the main sponsors. Viewing this action as a tactic of soft power and public diplomacy, this article examines how these sponsorships can contribute to the expansion of the DSR in Europe. Accordingly, the authors' investigation revolves around the following research question: How has China employed diplomacy and soft power to promote the DSR during Euro 2024? Using a predominantly qualitative approach, the study concludes that China, through its companies, seeks to attract European consumers, making them more receptive to the potential expansion of its digital corridor into European territory.

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Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping as a project capable of logistically connecting more than 60 countries and 4 billion people (Ahmed and Lambert 2022; Benvenuti et al. 2022). In 2015, the initiative's action plan was introduced, highlighting its objective to “uphold the global free trade regime and an open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation” (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). In 2017, the BRI was incorporated into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the same year that the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held (*Xinhuanet* 2017d, 2017a). Initially planned with two corridors—the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—the BRI quickly expanded into new areas of cooperation, including additional corridors such as the Digital Silk Road (DSR).

In recent years, the BRI has been the subject of study by various scholars (Fallon 2015; Ferdinand 2016; Huang 2016; Wang 2016), who have primarily focused on the Silk Road Economic Belt (Dave and Kobayashi 2018; Tracy et al. 2017) and the Maritime Silk Road (Blanchard and Flint 2017; Chang 2018; Wang et al. 2019). Research on the DSR, on the other hand, is not as developed, possibly because it is a more recent project. Regarding the security and geopolitical impacts of the DSR in Europe, there is also a scientific gap, with the exceptions of the works by Paulo (2018), Caridi (2023), and Szunomár (2024).

Acknowledging the scarcity of literature on the expansion of the DSR in Europe and recognizing that not all states in this region formally participate in the BRI, this article aims to contribute to the understanding of China's digital dynamics in Europe, as well as their geopolitical and security impacts. The authors argue that China has faced significant skepticism in Europe towards the BRI and DSR. As a result, its soft power strategy has struggled to gain the anticipated traction for these initiatives in the region. In response, China has turned to sponsoring major sporting events, such as the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship (known informally as “Euro 2024”), in an effort to reshape perceptions and promote a more positive image of itself, its companies, products, and technological services, thereby encouraging European populations to embrace the DSR. This study will support this argument by analyzing the case of Euro 2024, where China's sponsorship activities serve as a key example of how the country has adjusted its diplomatic and marketing strategies to better engage with the European public and promote the DSR. This article, therefore, seeks to explore these aspects as part of Beijing's broader strategy to build a “community of shared future for humanity.” In this context, the article will address the following research question: How did China employ diplomacy and soft power to promote the DSR during Euro 2024?

This article adopts a predominantly qualitative methodology, with the use of descriptive and exploratory methods. The descriptive approach will be employed to outline the contours of DSR and its expansion across Europe. The exploratory method, in turn, will primarily be used to investigate the obstacles to DSR's expansion in Europe and China's response through sports diplomacy. This approach aims to explore a relatively underexplored area, deepening the analysis of topics that remain insufficiently developed, thereby contributing new insights and generating hypotheses. The authors' research design centres on a case study approach, focusing specifically on China's sponsorship activities during Euro 2024 as a tangible example of its broader efforts to expand the BRI and DSR. This study draws on primary sources, such as official documents and news, as well as secondary sources, including academic articles and reports from think tanks, notably the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC). The data collected has been

analyzed using techniques including a literature review, document and content analysis. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis is structured around the operationalization of the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy, which have a long-standing tradition in the discipline of International Relations (Nye 2008; Sun 2008; Tsvetkova and Rushchin 2021; Xifra 2009; Yiwei 2008a). To this established framework, the authors add the concept of sports diplomacy, expanding the scope of analysis of the phenomenon under study.

The article is structured as follows. The first section connects theory with practice by presenting a brief introduction to the DSR and the theoretical framework used in the analysis (soft power, public diplomacy, and sports diplomacy). This section also explains and justifies how these frameworks are applied to address the research question. The subsequent sections focus on the analysis of the study's subject: the DSR in Europe, with particular emphasis on the case of Euro 2024. The conclusion summarizes the findings, highlighting the interplay between the BRI and DSR and the diplomatic and marketing strategies employed by Beijing during Euro 2024.

Bridging Theory and Practice: Digital Silk Road, Soft Power, and Public Diplomacy

The BRI was first announced through two separate proposals by Xi Jinping: in September 2013, during a visit to Kazakhstan, he proposed the creation of a “new Silk Road” linking China and Central Asia (China Daily 2013a), and in October of the same year, during a visit to Indonesia, he introduced the idea of a “Maritime Silk Road” connecting China and Southeast Asia (China Daily 2013b). In the following years, the initiative began to take concrete shape, establishing itself as a project aimed at financing the construction of logistical infrastructure around the globe, fostering trade and development (Ahmed and Lambert 2022; Ferdinand 2016).

The BRI is associated with the proposal to build a “community of shared future for mankind,” an idea grounded in the establishment of a “new type of international relations” (National Development and Reform Commission 2015, 2017b, 2017c). In advocating this idea, Beijing envisions a more peaceful and stable world, characterized by harmonious coexistence, respect, and the exchange of cultures and experiences (*Xinhuanet* 2017c). In this vision, states must cooperate to tackle global challenges while upholding principles such as justice, mutual benefit, and sovereignty (*Xinhuanet* 2017c). Nevertheless, while some authors argue for the benevolent or at least beneficial nature of this community, others contend that it is linked to China's aspiration for a more prominent role in the international system and even the proposal of a new international order and a new model of global governance (Nathan and Zhang 2022; Silva 2024; Yan 2021; Zhang 2018).

Although originally launched with two corridors—the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—the BRI has since expanded into new domains of cooperation, including the digital sphere. The first mention of a digital corridor came with the presentation of the action plan for the BRI in 2015, which proposed the creation of an “Information Silk Road” (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). A few months later, during the China-EU Digital Cooperation Forum, the first official reference to the “Digital Silk Road” was made, a challenge that was reiterated during the 15th Forum on Internet Media in China, where Chinese companies and media operating online were urged to assist in expanding international trade and digital banking services along the Belt and Road (China Daily 2015). In 2017, during the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi Jinping called for the establishment of a “21st Century

Digital Silk Road” aimed at “intensifying cooperation in frontier areas such as the digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and quantum computing, and advancing the development of big data, cloud computing, and smart cities” (*Xinhuanet* 2017b).

Given that the main objective of the BRI is global connectivity, the DSR, as its digital corridor, is conceived as a project capable of creating technological and digital infrastructures worldwide, thereby linking all states along the economic corridors of the Belt and Road (Hussain et al. 2024). The DSR involves 5G technology, quantum computing, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, big data, and cloud computing, aiming to connect peoples and assist “other countries to build digital infrastructure, construct transnational platforms for e-commerce, generate QR codes, promote exports, conduct financial transactions, and develop mechanisms for internal security surveillance” (Chung 2023, 124–25). Another crucial element of the DSR is digital currency. In this regard, Beijing has developed the renminbi—a digital currency aimed at replacing the dominance of the dollar in e-commerce (Aysan and Kayani 2022).

Complementary to the economic corridors of the BRI, the DSR operates to enhance the expansion of Chinese industrial companies, providing them not only with physical infrastructures but also digital ones that support the internationalization of their businesses. Through the DSR, China supports the export of technological infrastructures, reinforcing the transnational influence of its companies and promoting the establishment of new standards (Chung 2023; Hussain et al. 2024). Consequently, the DSR is recognizable as a geo-economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic instrument related to the control of Internet infrastructures, particularly the fibre optic cables that interconnect continents and through which a significant amount of digital information flows. By controlling these cables, China can manage data traffic and digital information, granting it greater international power (Shen 2018). As Hussain et al. (2024, 242) argue, the DSR is not just “a project of infrastructure development but also a strategy for China to promote a worldwide China-centric digital order opposite to the US-centric one.” As highlighted by Ghiasy and Krishnamurthy (2020), through the DSR, China aims to shape cyber governance and norms, exporting its system of values by influencing the content that reaches the public through investments, partnerships, and the acquisition of media and social networks.

As an integral part of the BRI, the DSR is also a key element in advancing the construction of a “community of shared future for mankind.” Due to its distinct, digital-focused nature, the DSR contributes to this project, in part, by promoting a “community of shared future in cyberspace.” While the BRI evokes a new model of global governance, the DSR envisions a similar framework specifically for cyberspace, advocating for shared governance of this domain to ensure that it benefits all of humanity while upholding principles such as cyber sovereignty, cooperation, peace, and security (*China Daily* 2022).

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that the BRI serves as an instrument of Chinese soft power (Dinh et al. 2024; Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2022; Voon and Xu 2020; Zhu et al. 2024). On the other hand, the DSR appears to exhibit this element to a lesser degree, although it still seeks to contribute to promoting a more favourable narrative for China. Through this article, the authors argue that Beijing not only uses the BRI and the DSR as instruments of its soft power but also employs both soft power and public diplomacy to facilitate the expansion of these initiatives. Given that, in the Chinese context, soft power and public diplomacy are closely interconnected, the authors aim to employ these theoretical frameworks, alongside the concept of sports diplomacy, to interpret and understand the strategies developed by Beijing during Euro 2024 to promote the DSR.

Soft power is a concept introduced by Joseph Nye in his work *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power*. In this work, Nye (1990) argued that certain states, particularly the United States of America (USA), could achieve their objectives without resorting to coercion and typical hard power tactics, instead relying on attraction and persuasion. Soft power extends beyond the conventional notion of power as the imposition of will and control over another actor (Bakalov 2019). According to Nye (2004), soft power is characterized as the state's ability to shape the preferences of others, achieving desired outcomes not through threats or payments, but simply because other states want to follow suit. The success of soft power lies in the appeal of a state, influenced by its values, culture, political system, and international conduct (Nye 2004, 2008). Therefore, the resources that generate soft power are the values and culture expressed internationally by a country. Public diplomacy, on the other hand, is the tool "that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments" (Nye 2008, 95). In this sense, Tuch (1990, 3) describes public diplomacy as "a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to foster understanding of its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies." Although predominantly associated with public entities, the evolution of public diplomacy has introduced new actors, such as transnational corporations or non-governmental organizations, leading governments to utilize them to project their international image (Ordeix-Rigo and Duarte 2009).

Associated with the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy, the notion of sports diplomacy also warrants consideration. Sports diplomacy can be defined as "the conscious, strategic use of sportspeople and sporting events by state and non-state actors to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign publics and organisations" (Murray 2018, 3). This concept may be interpreted in a traditional context, where governments employ sport as a diplomatic tool or, alternatively, in a context where non-state actors engage in communication and negotiation through participation in international sporting competitions (Abdi et al. 2018; Murray and Pigman 2014). It is the former sense that will be the focus of this article. In practice, as Murray and Pigman (2014) argue, if diplomacy serves as a means of advancing the foreign policy objectives of states, then sports diplomacy can be regarded as a form of diplomacy. It is worth highlighting that, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), sport constitutes one of the cultural foundations of soft power. Thus, through the use of sports diplomacy, states can enhance their attractiveness, thereby improving public perceptions of their diplomacy, strengthening their soft power, and shaping the preferences of others (Abdi et al. 2018; Murray and Pigman 2014).

In China, soft power was introduced in 1993 by Wang Huning, an academic close to political circles. However, it was only in 2007, during the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, that soft power was identified as a crucial part of Chinese foreign policy (Sayama 2016). Chinese soft power is based on the conception presented by Wang (1993, 91), associating it with national culture, considering that "only when a culture is widely spread can soft power produce strong power." Chinese soft power is thus distinct from American soft power, focusing not so much on the attractiveness of the political model and popular culture, as proposed by Nye, but rather on the diffusion of traditional culture and the Chinese development model, relying on state action rather than civil society (Michalski 2012; Zheng and Chi 2013). By primarily relying on state action and the dissemination of values, including through propaganda, Chinese soft power aligns

closely with public diplomacy. This serves as a tool to reinforce and enhance Chinese soft power by making China and its values more attractive abroad, thereby conveying a narrative more conducive to Chinese interests (“right Chinese story”²) and improving China’s international image (Yiwei 2008b).

One of the tools serving Chinese diplomacy and soft power has been sport. Numerous examples and studies underscore China’s use of sport as a means of projecting its power and pursuing its objectives. For instance, Jeong et al. (2024) demonstrate that Beijing has sought to use sport to convey a more positive international image, citing examples such as investments in Olympic disciplines and the hosting of events like the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics. Similarly, Niu (2024) showed that the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics functioned as a soft power strategy designed to promote China’s international image. These games also served as a form of “diplomatic activity” (Niu 2024, 2) aimed at improving relations with certain states, particularly in the Middle East. Finally, Hernández-Correa and Gúdel (2024) identified a similar pattern in China’s diplomatic strategy over recent decades, highlighting investments in domestic football and European football clubs. They emphasize the link between these sports diplomacy efforts and the BRI, with the aim of strengthening ties between China and European peoples (Hernández-Correa and Gúdel 2024).

Against this backdrop, and with a particular focus on the use of sport as a tool for diplomacy and soft power, this article analyzes China’s sponsorship of Euro 2024. Through this, the authors aim to substantiate the argument that China seeks to utilize such sponsorships as a form of sports diplomacy and soft power to promote a favourable image not only of itself but also of its technology companies, fostering greater receptiveness among Europeans to Chinese technology and digital services. In turn, this facilitates the expansion of the DSR into European markets.

The Digital Silk Road in Europe: EU Constraints and Security Implications

Europe is one of the priority regions of the BRI. Today, more than twenty countries have cooperation agreements signed with China under the BRI, although not all have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) (Wang 2021). Among the countries with MoUs, notable examples include Albania (2017), Croatia (2017), Portugal (2018), Romania (2015), Serbia (2015), Slovakia (2015), the Czech Republic (2015), and Greece (2018), among others. Additionally, noteworthy is the MoU signed between the Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Investment Bank (Nedopil 2023; Wang 2021).

Regarding the DSR, China has aimed to expand its digital corridor into European territory, utilizing key tools such as 5G technology, e-commerce, and digital currency. However, alongside the USA, the European Union (EU) stands as a significant geopolitical opponent to both the BRI and the DSR. In 2020, the European Commission introduced a digital strategy focused on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital education, climate change mitigation, and democracy, titled “Shaping Europe’s Digital Future,” with the goal

² The expression “right Chinese story” refers to Beijing’s effort to promote a favourable image of itself abroad, countering the “China threat” narrative and discouraging the discussion and dissemination of ideas and discourses linked to sensitive topics that may harm China’s international reputation. Essentially, it denotes the version of China’s story that the Chinese leadership seeks to have projected globally.

of positioning the EU as the global leader in technology (European Commission 2020). The EU further launched two white papers—one on data and another on artificial intelligence—and initiated a cybersecurity program linked to 5G (EU Toolbox for 5G Security), as well as a recent program for a Digital Decade. Thus, the Union demonstrates its desire to assert itself as an international digital powerhouse, competing with China, and moreover, providing its member states with an alternative to the DSR.

Prior to the launch of this strategy, the European Parliament had already issued a resolution on the security risks associated with the use of technology of Chinese origin in the EU (European Parliament 2019). Based on this, the European Commission issued a recommendation, urging member states “to assess the cybersecurity risks affecting 5G networks at national level [sic] and take necessary security measures” (European Commission 2019, 45). The European Commission’s recommendations, along with the perception of risks associated with Chinese technology, led around ten European countries to ban Chinese companies from installing 5G infrastructure (Kroet 2024). Examples include Estonia, which in 2021 banned its operators from using Chinese technologies; Lithuania, which decreed in 2021 that only suppliers authorized by the government could provide technology for the installation of the 5G network (Reuters 2023b); Portugal, where the operators themselves initiated the decision not to use Chinese technology, which was later supported by the Superior Cyberspace Security Council (*Jornal Económico* 2023; *Rádio Renascença* 2020). Other countries, such as Germany, continue to consider the possibility of banning companies like Huawei and ZTE, even though they have not yet implemented a ban on the use of Chinese technology (Nienaber 2024). Given this scenario, the EU has even considered prohibiting member states from using technologies from companies that pose a risk to the Union’s cybersecurity in their 5G networks, especially Huawei (Reuters 2023a). In fact, the EU’s Strategic Compass, launched in 2022, considers China as “a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival” (European Union 2022, 18), demonstrating a more assertive and cautious stance toward Beijing, its interests, as well as its products, services, and companies.

Outside the EU, other states have also expressed security concerns regarding China’s 5G technology. One example is Kosovo, which has committed to excluding Chinese companies from the deployment of its 5G network (Vladisavljev 2021). Moreover, the situation of the BRI and the DSR in the Balkans has benefited from the China-CEEC cooperation forum. However, this forum has faced challenges, with some countries opting out (Plevnik 2022). In this domain, the USA has implemented the “Clean Network” initiative aimed at excluding Chinese firms from the 5G network deployment in this region. Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania have joined this initiative, contributing to a distancing from Beijing (Vladisavljev 2021).

Despite obstacles, the digital corridor of the BRI has achieved significant advancements in Europe, both within and outside the EU. In 2021, Huawei inaugurated a 5G and artificial intelligence laboratory (5GAIner) in Aveiro, Portugal, in collaboration with the University of Aveiro and the Portuguese Telecommunications Institute (*ECO* 2021). In Bosnia, the Ministry of Communications and Transport signed an agreement with Huawei in 2018 aimed at developing smart city and safe city projects (*Xinhua Silk Road Information Service* 2018). Additionally, in Bosnia, alongside Serbia and North Macedonia, Huawei’s “Seeds for the Future” project is being implemented, focusing on training in 5G, AI, and cybersecurity (Vladisavljev 2021). In 2021, Serbia, a candidate country for EU accession, installed a video surveillance and facial recognition system in

Belgrade developed by Huawei (Pascual 2021). The year before, Huawei had inaugurated an Innovation and Development Center in Belgrade aimed at accelerating Serbia's digital transformation. Serbia is one of the most engaged European countries in the BRI and DSR, with prospects for cooperation with Huawei in various fields such as artificial intelligence, 5G, and smart cities (*Xinhuanet* 2020). Serbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2017 on Strengthening the Development of the Information Silk Road for Information Connectivity and has been the focal point of Huawei's activity in the region, with numerous projects extending to data centers (Vladisavljev 2021).

Beyond telecommunications, AliExpress, a branch of the e-commerce giant and competitor of Amazon, Alibaba, has been implementing its "Local to Global" strategy in Europe. In this regard, in 2019, it began allowing retailers from Spain and Italy to use its platform to sell their products (*Ecommerce News* 2019). On the other hand, Alipay has established partnerships with digital payment services across Europe, including Bluecode (Austria), Pagaqui (Portugal), ePassi and Pivo (Finland), and Momo Pocket (Spain), among others, resulting in agreements for the adoption of a unified QR code provided by Alipay. This indicates "a systematic integration that enables China to strategically position itself for future dominance of overseas markets" (Ghiasi and Krishnamurthy 2020, 13), thereby also contributing to the formation of new standards.

China's Soft Power Strategy at Euro 2024: Leverage Sports Marketing for DSR Expansion

Despite the agreements of the BRI, both this initiative and the DSR have encountered challenges in expanding into European territory. Pressures from the EU and the USA, along with security concerns from various states, have not contributed to Chinese interests in the region. As a result, Chinese soft power appears to have faltered. In fact, as a report from the Clingendael Institute indicates, China's image in Europe began to deteriorate after 2006, despite diplomatic maneuvers like the 2008 Beijing Olympics (d'Hooghe 2010). A subsequent 2021 report from the European Think-tank Network on China concluded similarly, noting that China's soft power has faced difficulties in Europe (Dams et al. 2021).

In response, Beijing appears to have strengthened its strategy, resorting to public diplomacy and soft power. The authors argue that, through these tools, China seeks to promote its values and narrative, making itself more attractive to the European public and thereby facilitating its penetration into the European market. This strategy is not new, having been employed by China for many years, primarily through state-owned and private companies (Yiwei 2008b; Zheng and Chi 2013). However, it is important to note that the actions promoted by Chinese companies, whether state-owned or private, are aligned with the interests of the Chinese Communist Party (Walker 2018).

Chinese soft power and public diplomacy take many forms, one of which involves the use of sports. As previously analyzed, sports diplomacy is a powerful tool for states' foreign policy, enhancing attraction and acting as a catalyst for cooperation (Qingmin 2013; Murray 2018). China's investment and sponsorship in sports are not new strategies in its efforts to attract and engage European populations. They have frequently been used by Beijing to promote its image as well as its companies and products (Chadwick et al. 2022; Hernández-Correa and Gúdel 2024; Junior and Rodrigues 2020). With these sponsorships, China ultimately seeks to improve its image, as well as the image of its companies (Chadwick et al. 2022; Connell 2018; Xue et al. 2020). In doing so, it conveys

a narrative aligned with its interests, countering the narrative of the “Chinese threat” propagated by the EU and the US.

For a time, there was even a wave of acquisitions of major European sports clubs by Chinese investors, including giants like Atlético de Madrid, Associazione Calcio Milan, and Football Club Internazionale Milano (Lim 2024; Xue et al. 2020). Similarly, several European football teams prominently displayed sponsorships from Chinese companies on their jerseys (Reale 2021). However, both of these dynamics appear to have slowed down, with Chinese companies selling their clubs and terminating their sponsorships (Lim 2024; Reale 2021). Currently, Western companies such as Heineken, Lay’s, FedEx, and Mastercard dominate the sponsorship list for major European sports events, like the UEFA Champions League, while Amazon and Visa take center stage in the UEFA Women’s Champions League (UEFA 2024a). A similar trend is observed with clubs. However, Chinese companies are now seeking to reverse this trend through major football platforms in Europe.

A notable example is the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship (held in 2021 due to the pandemic), which was sponsored by four Chinese tech companies: Hisense, Vivo, TikTok, and Alipay (Dan 2021). By capitalizing on a competition that reaches millions of viewers across Europe and beyond, these Chinese firms aimed to position themselves as viable alternatives to Western products and services. Their objective extended beyond market expansion, striving to cultivate a positive image both for themselves and for China. Through this public diplomacy initiative, Beijing’s soft power stands to gain greater influence and outreach, appealing to European audiences and potentially fostering greater receptivity towards initiatives like the BRI and DSR. This strategy continued with the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship, where Chinese sponsors accounted for over a third of the total sponsors (5 out of 13) (UEFA 2024a).

One such case is the e-commerce company AliExpress, the international branch of the giant Alibaba, which aims to surpass the American Amazon in e-commerce. AliExpress is a digital retail marketplace that has been growing in Europe, recently opening its platform to merchants from several European countries. Through this partnership, UEFA and AliExpress aim to enhance fans’ digital experience by connecting them with digital commerce and linking consumers to football (UEFA 2024b). As part of this collaboration, AliExpress has also offered various discounts on products sold on its platform, including providing tickets to games for some of its customers (AliExpress 2024). Simultaneously, AliExpress has launched several physical events in cities across Germany, where the tournament is held, notably featuring David Beckham as the face of the “Score More with AliExpress” campaign (Utleay 2024).

Through this partnership, which includes naming rights for the tournament’s top scorer award (Euro 2024 Alipay+ Top Scorer) and involves UEFA making Alipay available as a payment option for purchasing tickets digitally, Alipay aims to expand its presence in the European market. Concurrently, Alipay has expanded the number of European merchants accepting mobile payments through its technology. Additionally, through a partnership with the European company Bluecode, Alipay now provides payment services to customers of over three hundred banks in Germany and Austria, with similar agreements established in France, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy (*The Paypers* 2024).

The technology company Vivo is another sponsor of the UEFA European Football Championship, continuing its sponsorship from the previous edition (UEFA 2020). The brand aims to promote its smartphones in a region where Samsung, Apple, and Xiaomi

dominate. Similarly, the electric vehicle manufacturer BYD (Build Your Dreams) has joined as a sponsor, with the expressed aim of competing globally with Tesla and European car manufacturers. In this way, the company assists Beijing not only in projecting a more positive image but also in establishing new international standards. Finally, the last sponsor is the television brand Hisense (UEFA 2024a).

Chinese companies appear to hold a dominant position among the sponsors of a tournament that, in its previous edition, attracted a cumulative audience of approximately five billion viewers—over 300 million of whom watched the final alone (UEFA 2021). Through these sponsorships, which provide leisure opportunities and prominently feature Chinese characters in on-field advertisements, Chinese companies aim to allure and attract European consumers. Since the beginning of the competition, not only has Alipay seen a notable increase in the number of transactions in Germany, but the AliExpress app has also experienced a 100 percent growth in downloads (Ferreira 2024; Ludlow 2024). Overall, there is a noticeable trend towards using marketing as a form of public diplomacy through the sponsorship of major events in Europe. In this way, Beijing not only ensures the conquest of new markets for itself and its companies but also facilitates the dissemination of a more positive narrative aligned with its interests, captivating European populations, ensuring the success of its soft power, and thereby enabling the gradual expansion of the DSR. This reality is particularly observable in the realm of e-commerce, specifically within the Alibaba Group, which includes both AliExpress and Alipay.

Conclusion

Through this article, the authors aimed to explore the use of tools such as soft power and public diplomacy by China to promote the DSR. The article began by developing the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis, which consists of the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, and sports diplomacy, all adapted to the Chinese context. In the same section, the context for the DSR was also provided. In the following section, the presence of the BRI digital corridor in Europe was discussed, highlighting the obstacles imposed by the EU and Western skepticism. Finally, the authors analyzed how China has sought to use sports diplomacy to overcome these challenges and promote the expansion of the DSR.

This article contends that China has sought to bypass obstacles to the expansion of the BRI and DSR across European territory by sponsoring major sports events, with particular emphasis on the most recent case: the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship. Aware of the difficulties in expanding the DSR into European territory, China, through its companies, decided to become one of the main sponsors of the largest sporting event in Europe. In this way, China aimed to familiarize Europeans with its brands, products, and technological services, enticing them and thus facilitating the penetration of the DSR into the region.

Acknowledging that the sponsorship of the event by Chinese companies falls under the categories of public diplomacy, soft power, and sports diplomacy, and recognizing that this is a strategy China has been employing in the promotion of the BRI, the authors conclude that Beijing has sought to attract and engage European consumers with the services provided by its companies. This strategy challenges the “Chinese threat” narrative, promoting a story that appeals to European populations and is beneficial to China’s interests. By convincing Europeans that its companies care about their well-being and offer services that are as sophisticated as, or even more so than, those of Western

companies, China is able to regain public trust and expand the geographical reach of its products and services, thus enabling the gradual penetration of the DSR in a region where the EU and the US have worked hard to counter Chinese investment projects at all costs.

Through this study, the authors contribute to the understanding of the role sport can play in the dynamics of international relations. More than that, the article demonstrates China's ability to utilize diverse instruments and complex, heterogeneous tactics to achieve its objectives on the international stage. The analysis, however, has some limitations, which future studies should address. These include quantifying the European public's perception of Chinese sponsorship of sports events, as well as their views on Chinese technological and digital products and services.

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