Energy Diplomacy as a Tool of Soft Power: A Study of Intellectual Principles and Empirical Implications for Energy Security



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Abstract:

In an era defined by escalating global challenges and the emergence of the economic-technological interdependence syndrome, energy security has become a vital subject that shapes international policy trajectories and strategies for development and cooperation. Consequently, energy security—encompassing the guarantee and sustainability of supplies—converges with energy diplomacy, which focuses on how states leverage their energy resources as instruments to consolidate influence and safeguard national interests. Within this framework, soft power intersects as a pivotal factor in shaping international relations through the capacity to influence via values and policies rather than military coercion. These three variables (energy security, energy diplomacy, and soft power) constitute an integrated conceptual framework for understanding state interactions in pursuit of their interests, particularly within the energy sector, and how these dynamics impact global relations. By exploring this interplay, it becomes possible to discern the challenges and opportunities arising from sustainable trends and clean energy technologies. This article argues that understanding the strategic employment of soft power within the context of energy diplomacy serves as a critical starting point for enshrining energy security in international politics. It should be noted that this study does not delve into the theoretical debates surrounding the definition of soft power; rather, it focuses specifically on its praxis and practical application.

Keywords: *Energy Diplomacy; Energy Security; Green Diplomacy; Interdependence; Soft Power.*

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Introduction:

Energy diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal dimension of international relations, particularly within the context of energy security and the nascent transition toward sustainable sources. Consequently, this field encompasses the extensive deployment of diplomatic instruments to manage international cooperation aimed at securing energy supplies and addressing the geopolitical ramifications of energy production and consumption. As human society continues to expand within an increasingly energy-dependent global framework, the processes of importing and exporting energy resources foster mutual interdependence among states in their foreign relations. This interdependence serves to ensure energy security—a vital objective shared by all actors—due to its intrinsic links to broad sectors such as industry, transportation, and technology for enhancing opportunities and mitigating vulnerabilities within the matrix of comprehensive security.

Among the foreign policy tools available to bolster a state's energy interests, diplomacy stands as one of the most significant, manifesting in either bilateral or multilateral forms. Thus, the role of energy diplomacy is prominent in shaping energy equations through its security dimension, facilitated by a series of understandings with far-reaching implications. These effects may extend to parties not necessarily involved in the agreements, exerting a form of "soft" influence over them. This underscores the critical importance of energy diplomacy in delineating the contours of interstate relations. Accordingly, the following primary research question is posed:

Problematic of the study:

To study this topic, this article addresses a specific problem as follows:

Given that energy is a multidimensional issue, to what extent does energy diplomacy influence the configuration of soft power in foreign policy and the enhancement of energy security?

Research hypotheses:

The more energy diplomacy is activated as a strategic foreign policy tool through international cooperation mechanisms and diversification of partners, the more this contributes to strengthening soft power and achieving foreign policy goals.

Study Methodology:

This study uses a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the intersection between energy diplomacy and soft power due to the multidimensional nature of energy security, which requires a chronological (historical) description of energy transitions - albeit slow ones with the transition

from fossil fuels to hydrogen and a simultaneous analysis of the gradual shift towards "green diplomacy". Furthermore, the research integrates a comparative perspective to distinguish between traditional Western concepts of soft power, rooted in values and norms, and alternative models (such as the Chinese approach) that emphasize financial diplomacy and infrastructure investments. By leveraging systems analysis, the study evaluates how diplomatic inputs and energy resources are processed through bilateral and multilateral channels to produce more realistic outputs. Finally, the study adopts Joseph Nye's soft power framework as a theoretical lens to analyze the practical application of energy as a tool for intangible influence in the twenty-first century.

Objectives of the study:

This study aims to clarify the relationship between diplomacy as a soft and important tool in shaping and implementing foreign policy and efforts to enhance energy security. Hence, it is important to study the relationship between energy uses in foreign relations. For example, the European Union has advanced technology for producing renewable energy and a high demand for these sources, which is offset by a fragile geographical structure for their production. The role of energy diplomacy emerges as a crucial factor in pooling soft power on solid foundations and on a win-win basis.

Study Plan:

The article's structure follows the research problem, which was divided into the following sections:

1- Conceptual deconstruction of soft power and energy diplomacy in the context of international influence formation.

2- Uses of energy diplomacy in international contexts: soft power intertwined with interest.

3- Energy Diplomacy and Energy Transition: Towards New Roles for New Energy Actors.

1. Conceptual deconstruction of soft power and energy diplomacy in the context of international influence formation:

Before delving into the analysis of soft power and energy diplomacy, it is important to note how crucial these tools are for states in managing their international relations. Successive global transformations have produced new patterns of influence that are no longer based solely on coercion or direct domination but are also based on attraction, persuasion, and the proper use of strategic resources. In this sense, soft power and energy diplomacy fall within contemporary approaches to understanding how to build and expand international influence through less confrontational and more sustainable means.

a. In the concept of soft power:

Soft power is defined as the mechanism through which a state induces another to act in accordance with its desires, leveraging perceived legitimacy, ideological appeal, culture, and societal norms. In its essence, soft power pertains to influencing behavior without direct coercion **(NYE JR, 2004, p. 4)**. It implies that State (A) can utilize its intangible assets to persuade State (B) without threats or force, suggesting that soft power is inherently difficult to quantify or control due to the diversity of its sources **(ARIF, 2017, p. 96)**.

In this regard, Joseph Nye emphasizes that economic aid falls under the category of soft diplomacy, as it contributes to shaping the developmental agendas of recipients and persuading developing nations to align with the donor's objectives through conviction—distinguishing it from direct military or economic instruments **(Obeid, 2023, p. 16)**. Conversely, hard power signifies that State (A) compels State (B) to adopt or implement a specific policy in favor of State (A) through threats or coercion. This indicates that hard power encompasses not only military might but also other methods used by a country to force behavioral changes, including economic and political pressure **(ARIF, 2017, p. 97)**.

Ultimately, the purpose of both hard and soft power is contextually linked; both seek to achieve the same objectives by influencing the behavior and performance of others through means that may appear contradictory but target identical ends.

b. Mechanisms for Activating Soft Power Practices

Joseph Nye asserts that soft power is exercised "through the collaborative means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and eliciting positive attraction to achieve preferred outcomes." This implies a deliberate utilization of soft power to influence the behavior of others. Specifically, communication, dialogue, and diplomacy serve as essential instruments for mobilizing soft power resources to attain political objectives. Other scholars have identified "strategic narratives," alongside rhetoric and framing, as critical tools for this mobilization. As Nye suggests, narratives can be invoked to influence political conflicts by determining "whose story wins," particularly when such stories are characterized by greater attraction and a more compelling plot **(QUITZOW, 2022, p. 601)**.

In contrast to hard power, where a state "commands" others to do its bidding, soft power is understood as the capacity of a state to make "others want what it wants." In traditional Western conceptualizations, soft power is often predicated on values such as democracy, human rights, and individual opportunity. However, Custer et al. identify an "alternative understanding" in different contexts; for instance, financial diplomacy—as a soft power tool—is more paramount for China. This is reinforced by Chinese academic findings that include "business tools"

alongside (or instead of) traditional "cultural tools" to enhance China's soft power. Furthermore, they indicate that the most significant factor contributing to a positive image of China is its large-scale infrastructure investments **(NEDOPIL, 2022, p. 86)**.

In a related vein, many Chinese analysts diverge from Nye's foundational positions by assigning greater weight to the media. They argue that the capacity and efficacy of public communications are vital dimensions of a state's soft power. Consequently, they highlight the dominant role of Western media, noting that the "Big Four" news agencies—AP, UPI, Reuters, and AFP—produce four-fifths of the world's daily news, while the top 50 transnational Western media corporations control 90% of the global communications market. This Western hegemony over media and mass communications has culminated in what is termed "cultural hegemony" or "media imperialism" **(LI, 2008, p. 294).**

A primary challenge of soft power as a concept is that it may result from a state's diplomacy and foreign policy, yet it also constitutes "cultural property" acquired through the actions of independent societal actors. It is crucial to note that the mere enhancement of soft power or global standing does not inherently translate into increased influence. A state capable of bolstering its soft power through diplomatic efforts may utilize these geopolitical resources to achieve collective interests in communal endeavors, such as the global advancement of renewable energy sources. Alternatively, a state might exploit these resources to pursue national interests, such as expanding influence within international bodies like the United Nations. This final step—translating a state's enhanced standing into tangible influence—remains the most challenging **(SHIDORE & BUSBY, 2019, p. 2).**

Regarding the relationship between hard and soft power, contemporary analyses, particularly Chinese ones, emphasize the inseparability of the two concepts. This integrated approach to power is evident in the Chinese discourse on "Comprehensive National Power," which encompasses all material and moral sources of strength. In this framework, soft power can facilitate the growth of hard power, and vice versa. Thus, Chinese soft power manifests most prominently through its economic role and economic diplomacy.

c. The Concept and Classifications of Energy Diplomacy

Securing sustainable energy sources for economic growth and development represents a shared fundamental objective known as "security of supply**."** This concept acquires additional dimensions when applied to energy-producing nations; it necessitates "security of demand" alongside the requirement for continuous energy supplies for domestic consumption. Furthermore, it involves leveraging energy capacities as a foreign policy instrument to deter, mitigate, or eliminate threats and risks, extending to influencing or controlling the trajectory of

events to bolster national security and interests. Consequently, effective energy diplomacy seeks to define the course of a state's international relations in a manner that addresses specific energy sector objectives while enhancing both national and international security **(ADELI, 2010, p. 60)**.

This indicates that diplomacy utilizes energy as a strategic resource to conduct relevant diplomatic activities aimed at achieving political and security goals. In this sense, energy becomes a "negotiating card" or a weapon; energy serves and reinforces diplomacy. The oil embargo imposed by producers in the 1970s is a quintessential example. In the post-Cold War era, geopolitical competition over energy resources and their transit in the Caspian Sea also falls under energy diplomacy with political objectives **(Zhao, 2019, p. 122)**. This is similarly applicable to the Russo-European relationship, particularly following the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war.

Accordingly, diplomacy is one of the most vital tools for supporting a country's energy interests. Although a precise definition of energy diplomacy is lacking, it generally pertains to government-related external actions aimed at ensuring national energy security while maximizing commercial opportunities within the energy sector **(GRIFFITHS, 2019, p. 3)**. This implies that energy diplomacy consists of a framework of state-specific plans and policies seeking to achieve at least two primary goals: first, securing the energy sector’s objectives as detailed in national policy documents; and second, strengthening national security by attaining a superior position and playing a more influential role on the international stage **(ADELI, 2010, p. 59)**.

Energy-oriented diplomacy primarily refers to the diplomatic activities of certain countries to acquire or maintain energy interests, embodying diplomacy in the service of energy with a focus on economic interests. Energy diplomacy can be categorized into two levels:

1. Energy-Importing Countries' Diplomacy: The point of departure here is ensuring a stable energy supply and realizing energy-related goals through various diplomatic forms.
2. Energy-Exporting Countries' Diplomacy: The starting point is promoting energy exports and enhancing influence and competitiveness in the international market through diplomacy (Zhao, 2019, p. 126).

Beyond these two types, various diplomatic activities fall under this category, such as mediation regarding territorial boundaries or oil pricing, regional activities to promote energy integration, and dialogue within international organizations. These activities involve a broader scope of economic and political objectives, with an increasing focus on bilateral and multilateral interactions **(Zhao, 2019, p. 129).**

On the other hand, contracts are considered the most prevalent mechanisms for achieving the ends of energy diplomacy. Within bilateral or multilateral frameworks, joint committees and specialized working groups are typically established to coordinate cooperation, most importantly those addressing energy sector challenges. In this context, geopolitical factors play a decisive role; for example, gas is transported via pipelines—the most cost-effective and technologically feasible method. Thus, geopolitics acts as a regulator in innovating the methods and means of energy diplomacy **(ASSEF, s.d.)**.

d. The Historical Evolution of Energy Diplomacy: From Coal to Hydrogen

The discourse on energy diplomacy and its associated frameworks gained significant traction following the energy crisis of the 1970s. Consequently, many nations established specialized trajectories within their foreign policies to address energy-related issues directly, reflecting the paramount importance of this resource **(ASSEF, s.d.)**. However, the instrumentalization of energy dates back to the 19th century, driven by British and American petroleum companies through partnership agreements and the formation of cartels. The chronological evolution of energy diplomacy can be delineated into four primary stages:

1. First Stage: Spanning from the 19th century until the end of World War I, coinciding with the early discoveries of petroleum.
2. Second Stage: The interwar period, characterized by the emergence of "Supermajor" corporations and oil cartels. This era was marked by competition among the victorious powers to establish hegemony over oil rights within the territories of the dissolved Ottoman Empire in the Arabian Peninsula and Persia through their respective companies.
3. Third Stage: The maturation of energy diplomacy, evidenced by the formation of international organizations such as OPEC, representing exporting nations, and the International Energy Agency (IEA), representing importing nations.
4. Fourth Stage: The post-Cold War era, following the 1990 Paris Summit and the inception of the "New World Order" (ABDULKHALIQ & AQRAWI, 2019, pp. 1158-1159).

In pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "Green Diplomacy" has emerged as a specialized field. International trade agreements have shifted toward methods prioritizing sustainable technologies and the efficient utilization of resources with zero or minimal waste, aiming to reduce carbon footprints and adhere to environmental commitments. Accordingly, green diplomacy is not confined to a single state but is practiced as a global cooperative endeavor. Green policy has become a national priority; thus, in investment and trade operations,

states increasingly prefer partners with compatible "green objectives" to drive growth and enhance productivity **(HAMMAD & MOHAMMAD, 2022, p. 327)**.

From what was previously presented in this axis, it can be said that the integration of energy diplomacy and soft power represents a paramount shift in enhancing contemporary energy security. Although energy has been historically associated with hard power—characterized by military interventions, price manipulation, and the strategic securitization of pipelines—the current global transition toward sustainability has repositioned it as a cornerstone of soft power. A state's commitment to "Green Diplomacy" and renewable energy is increasingly perceived as a form of normative power. By leading the global climate agenda, nations bolster their perceived legitimacy and moral authority, effectively persuading international actors to align with their technological and environmental standards without the need for coercion. Consequently, states that successfully project themselves as pioneers in clean energy—such as hydrogen technology or solar power—acquire substantial soft power. This influence transcends mere energy production; it is about shaping the global discourse on the power of innovation. When a state provides technical expertise or sustainable infrastructure to developing nations, it constructs a reservoir of soft power, fostering long-term influence rooted in attraction and mutual progress.

2. Uses of energy diplomacy in international contexts: soft power intertwined with interest

Energy diplomacy, now a recognized instrument for executing political agendas, utilizes traditional organizational frameworks. An analysis of seminal documents in this field reveals the emergence of a new branch of international law: International Energy Law. This legal domain is predicated on the legal instruments of international energy security, including those pertaining to the structural development of the global energy architecture.

In this context, the "Right to Energy" was formally invoked in Paris in 2000, on the sidelines of an international summit regarding waste management. This right aims to empower all individuals with universal energy access. While academic perspectives diverge on whether to categorize it within the second or third generation of human rights, numerous international and regional conventions explicitly link energy to fundamental economic and social rights **(Ahmed, 2022, pp. 271-276)**.This gradual escalation—from viewing energy as a component of economic security to recognizing it as a pillar of human empowerment—underscores the critical importance of energy diplomacy within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

a. The Significance of Energy Diplomacy

In the midst of the profound interdependence among nations regarding energy resources—whether conventional or renewable—managing this dependency has become a decisive factor. Diplomatic action serves as the primary mechanism for maintaining the geopolitical stability associated with this strategic resource and for realizing mutual development goals. Consequently, energy diplomacy transcends mere negotiations over supply and export contracts; it encompasses the cultivation of long-term alliances and the mitigation of tensions arising from resource competition. Accordingly, its significance can be highlighted through the following dimensions:

1. **Facilitating Technology Transfer and Promoting Investment**

The transfer of technology constitutes a fundamental pillar of the global energy trade. Given that developed nations possess advanced technological capabilities relative to developing states, energy diplomacy acts as a vital catalyst for bridging this gap. This is effectively achieved through bilateral and multilateral agreements, wherein developed countries provide technical assistance and financial support to developing nations. Furthermore, energy diplomacy plays a crucial role in promoting investment—a primary driver for infrastructural development—by fostering a favorable investment climate. This involves negotiating robust investment treaties and offering strategic incentives to global investors **(fastercapital, 2025)**.

2. Diversification of Energy Sources and Market Expansion

The European Union (EU) serves as a quintessential case study in the strategic pursuit of market and source diversification. The EU aims to secure 60 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas from alternative regions to replace Russian imports, distributed between 10 bcm via pipelines and 50 bcm in the form of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). In this context, the resources of the Caspian Basin are indispensable; the EU has signed agreements to double gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027. While the exact volume of additional gas Azerbaijan can provide remains a subject of analysis, the potential establishment of a Trans-Caspian pipeline could facilitate significant imports from Turkmenistan as well **(MOGHANI, 2024, p. 2291)**.

b. The Role of Joint and Transnational Energy Projects in Constructing Soft Power

While academic discourse on energy cooperation has yielded significant insights, existing studies have predominantly focused on the drivers of regional energy projects. Conversely, the analysis of why such projects fail to materialize has remained a peripheral issue in contemporary literature. Much of the current focus centers on operational challenges, including financial constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and technical or social issues. However, a review of this literature reveals

that political impediments are far more consequential than other challenges **(HUDA M. S., 2016, p. 74)**, thereby underscoring the vital role of economic diplomacy in navigating these complexities.

On the other hand, the rapid economic expansion of many nations, particularly in Asia, has precipitated an unprecedented surge in energy demand. The "energy security dilemma" arises from the growing imbalance between supply and demand, necessitating a transition toward viable alternatives, specifically renewable energy. This energy transition is fundamentally reliant on diplomatic processes that incentivize international actors to cooperate on replacing fossil fuels with renewables. Currently, renewable energy accounts for 25% of global electricity generation, with continuous annual expansion. To limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, it is estimated that 90% of global electricity must be generated from renewable sources by 2050 **(HUDA M. S., 2024, p. 2)**.

In this context, several landmark agreements and initiatives exemplify this diplomatic shift, like the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which was launched jointly by India and France on the first day of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP21). The ISA aims to promote solar energy across the developing world **(JHA, 2023, p. 37)**. Headquartered in India—marking the first international organization of its kind in the country—the ISA serves as a strategic platform for emerging powers to bolster their global standing and achieve geopolitical gains. Nevertheless, membership is open to all UN member states. The alliance's primary objective is to mobilize $1 trillion in investment and achieve a solar capacity of 1,000 GW across all member nations by 2030 **(SHIDORE & BUSBY, 2019, pp. 6-7)**.

3. Energy Diplomacy and Energy Transition: Towards New Roles for New Energy Actors.

It is evident that the global energy landscape is undergoing transformative shifts, driven by the urgent necessity to address climate change. This transition imposes novel challenges, including the escalating demand for alternative energy sources and the geopolitical fluctuations inherent in the decarbonization process. Consequently, a new geopolitical map is beginning to consolidate, characterized by the emergence of nascent energy poles striving to monopolize the "strategic levers" of the future energy market. Among the most prominent of these shifts are the following:

a. China as a Global Energy Powerhouse

As a global economic titan and the world's preeminent oil importer, China is acutely aware of the existential link between energy resources, economic stability, and national security. Consequently, Beijing has embarked on an intensive

quest to fortify its energy security through a dual-track strategy: implementing robust domestic energy policies and conducting proactive energy diplomacy across bilateral and multilateral forums. Scholarly analysis suggests that the imperatives of energy acquisition serve as a primary determinant of China's foreign policy behavior **(LEE, 2019, p. 586)**. Central to this strategy is the "String of Pearls" initiative, designed to consolidate strategic relations with states spanning from the Middle East to the South China Sea. This geopolitical framework is predicated on fostering deep-seated ties with littoral nations along the maritime corridors that facilitate China's vital oil supplies **(GHAZAL, 2025, pp. 443-444)**.

In the context of the global energy transition, China is leveraging renewable energy as a cornerstone of its diplomatic endeavors to harmonize sustainable development goals with energy security. China currently stands as the world's leading producer of solar panels and wind turbines, extensively exporting these technologies globally. Furthermore, Beijing has integrated into the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and established specialized technological hubs to catalyze research, development, and infrastructural investment **(MOGHANI, 2024, p. 2284).**

At the heart of this grand strategy lies the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), unveiled by President Xi Jinping in 2013. In inflation-adjusted terms, the BRI's projected expenditure surpasses that of the United States' post-WWII Marshall Plan. Beijing promotes the BRI as a vehicle for stimulating regional development and economic integration between China and its neighbors—most notably in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe—with energy projects positioned at the vanguard of these investments **(ESTACHY, 2020, p. 82)**.

b. The European Union: Leadership in the Green Transition

At the European Union level, the "European Green Deal" serves as a strategic roadmap aimed at fostering economic growth decoupled from natural resource consumption. Through this initiative, the EU has assumed a vanguard role in the global fight against climate change, with European leaders aspiring to transform the region into the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Within this context, energy diplomacy has prioritized energy security and the imperative of source diversification. To facilitate this transition, the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) was launched in 2020 as a critical investment tool. This mechanism focuses on allocating financial resources to specific regions and sectors characterized by high vulnerability during the transitional phase, while simultaneously promoting employment opportunities and retraining programs within emerging sustainable sectors **(JOIȚA, 2023, p. 6)**.

In response to the Russo-Ukrainian war, the European Commission introduced the REPowerEU plan in March 2022. This ambitious framework seeks to terminate Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels well before 2030, beginning with natural gas. The REPowerEU project focuses on diversifying gas supplies, accelerating the deployment of renewable gases, and substituting natural gas in heating and power generation. It is estimated that these collective actions could reduce European demand for Russian gas by approximately two-thirds **(COMMISSION, s.d.)**.

The divergent models of China and the European Union illustrate the multifaceted nature of contemporary soft power. While China leverages its industrial supremacy and the "Belt and Road Initiative" to build a network of infrastructural interdependence, the European Union utilizes "Green Normative Power" to set global standards and lead the moral and legal agenda for climate action. Both actors demonstrate that in the 21st century, energy security is inextricably linked to the ability to provide global solutions, foster innovation, and build long-term cooperative alliances.

Conclusion:

In light of the preceding analysis, it is evident that the global energy landscape is no longer governed solely by the logic of hard power and resource nationalism. Instead, a sophisticated synthesis of energy diplomacy and soft power has emerged as a crucial instrument for international influence and the realization of foreign policy objectives. Given that energy is a vital strategic asset with a profound role in expanding geopolitical reach, certain nations have successfully employed flexible and formalized methods to secure energy resources. This is exemplified by China’s strategic maneuvers and Russia’s ability to navigate Western sanctions following the Ukrainian war by pivoting eastward to establish new markets beyond Europe.

As an essential tool for foreign policy execution, energy diplomacy demands heightened strategic attention. Policymakers must identify the key factors contributing to the attainment of desired outcomes through effective negotiation—a process that must integrate all available variables, with energy at the forefront.

Furthermore, the incipient transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources represents far more than a mere technological shift; it constitutes a fundamental redefinition of geopolitical standing. This underscores the necessity of expanding the conceptualization of diplomacy beyond the traditional act of state representation abroad. International relations must now seek more effective "inputs" by exploiting the soft dimension of strategic resources to secure lucrative investments and steer specific policy trajectories.

Footnotes:

- Note on the "String of Pearls": This strategy involves establishing naval bases and dual-use port facilities in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Djibouti. India perceives this as an encirclement tactic in the Indian Ocean, raising significant defense and energy security concerns. See: BHATTACHARYA, S., et al., *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Topics*, 2021, vol. 2, no. 11, pp. 105-108.

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