Can Public Diplomacy Repair Reputation?

Evidence from Chinese-sponsored Infrastructure in Indonesia and Kenya

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December 2025

PRELIMINARY DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT SHARE.

Abstract: Can public diplomacy repair damaged reputations in international relations? Existing research focuses on states' efforts to highlight positive reputational assets to foreign audiences rather than address reputational liabilities. We test whether different public diplomacy messaging strategies – blame, distraction, and learning – can effectively address states' negative reputations. We investigate this question in the context of the controversial "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative associated with Chinese overseas development finance. We field a set of parallel household and online survey experiments in Indonesia and Kenya focused on Chinese-sponsored railways. The results, based on attitudes from over 5,000 Indonesians and Kenyans, show that public diplomacy struggles to repair damaged reputation. There is limited evidence that blame and learning are effective in Indonesia, but effects are limited to "shallow" attitudes such as project support. In neither country does public diplomacy shift "deep" attitudes, such as views of China's responsibility for Indonesian and Kenyan national debt.

Public diplomacy, or states' efforts to communicate with foreign citizens (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, and Kendrick 2013; Sevin 2015), is an important foreign policy tool. Governments use various public diplomacy strategies such as international media and radio broadcasting, cultural and educational exchanges, official visits overseas, and branding foreign aid and other development cooperation activities in part to pursue favorable public opinion among overseas elite and popular audiences. One of the primary aims of public diplomacy is to accumulate "soft power," often measured in international relations research in terms of foreign public opinion (Owen IV 2010; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; 2012; Rose 2016; Allan, Vucetic and Hopf 2018; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021).[1] Foreign public approval and "soft power" are important for states because they can affect security, political, and economic interests across a wide range of domains (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012; Bush and Jamal 2015; Rose 2016).

International relations research on public diplomacy has focused heavily on sender state efforts to tap into reputational *assets*.[2] Seminal research examines how states draw on and amplify cultural, political, foreign policy, or other elements they view as sources of positive reputation (e.g. Nye 2019).[3] But states also often possess substantial reputational *liabilities* and may have

[1] Soft power is defined as the ability to advance interests via attraction and inducement rather than coercion (Nye 2004).

[2] Reputation here refers to "beliefs about an actor's persistent characteristics or tendencies based on that actor's past behavior, which will influence what he or she does in the future" (Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler 2021, 169).

[3] Even when states engage in public diplomacy to address reputational challenges, they often focus on highlighting positive assets (Cull 2008; Nakamura 2013).

incentives to use public diplomacy to address them. If left alone, reputational liabilities might be left to interpretation or exploitation by other states or non-state actors and could potentially undermine the effectiveness of a state's positive public diplomacy messages or its image among foreign audiences. However, the effectiveness of state public diplomacy efforts to explicitly address negative elements of their global reputations, and the degree to which different messaging strategies are successful, have received considerably less scholarly and policy attention.

This article examines these questions in the context of Chinese public diplomacy, focusing on messages that address China's controversial role in international development. Despite the increased efforts by Xi Jinping administration to "tell the China story well"[4] and promote the country's positive overseas reputation, China still face reputation liability. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has encountered significant backlash locally and internationally, on issues involving labor conflict, debt and environmental footprints (Wong 2021; Hall and Krolikowski 2022; Mwase and Yang 2012; Blair, Custer and Roessler 2024). Existing research also focuses on how China draws on positive reputational attributes such as cultural and institutional appeal (Brazys and Dukalskis 2019; Green-Riley 2022; Mattingly et al. 2025), development finance, aid and investment (Morgan 2019; Blair, Marty, and Roessler 2022; McCauley, Pearson, and Wang 2022; Wellner et al. 2025), and infrastructure projects (Strange 2023), as positive public diplomacy opportunities to generate public support.[5] However, there is little theoretical or

[4] It was first used by Xi Jinping on 19 August 2013 during a speech he gave to the 2013 National Conference on Publicity and Ideology Work.

[5] A growing set of studies has examined the Chinese government's use of economic policy instruments to blunt potential sources of negative reputation such as human rights criticisms or

empirical evidence on whether and how Chinese public diplomacy can help overcome reputational obstacles in China's development cooperation.

We address this gap by focusing on a major reputational liability – the controversial "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative and broader concerns about debt to China – and Chinese public diplomacy messages that respond to these concerns. We develop theoretical expectations related to three distinct, realistic, and underexplored strategies: denying the problem and blaming foreign antagonists ("blame"); distracting observers by focusing on positive reputational aspects ("distraction"); and acknowledging the problem and emphasizing learning and improvement ("learning"). We then test the efficacy of these strategies relative to a baseline approach –no response ("silence") – using an original experiment embedded in household-level surveys administered in two important host countries for overseas Chinese infrastructure projects, Indonesia and Kenya. We focus on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway (JBHSR) and Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), two high-profile infrastructure projects, and Chinese government public diplomacy messages regarding these projects. To present the public diplomacy messages in a stronger and more realistic format, we also conduct follow-up online surveys in both countries where the same treatments are delivered in video form. In total we survey over 5,000 Indonesian and Kenyan respondents.

Overall, we do not find consistent evidence that the three messaging strategies – blaming, distracting, and learning – can more effectively overcome reputational liabilities than the baseline

territorial disputes (e.g., Flores-Macias and Kreps 2013; Kastner 2016; Wang, Pearson, and Kastner 2023). But few studies directly conceptualize and test whether and how public diplomacy messaging can address reputational liabilities.

strategy of remaining silent. On the one hand, the results suggest that both blame and learning may have positive effects on "shallow" outcomes, such as views towards individual projects, under certain conditions. In the Indonesia household survey, we find positive, robust effects of Chinese public diplomacy on support for the JBHSR, a new project that has generated variable attitudes among Indonesia respondents. In contrast, we find no effects of the same public diplomacy messages on support for the SGR in Kenya in either household or online surveys, or on support for the JBHSR in the online survey, where public opinion is already overwhelmingly positive in all cases. When delivered in video form, both blame and learning reduce perceptions that China deliberately traps their country in debt, but only in Indonesia. On the other hand, in neither Indonesia nor Kenya, across both the household and online surveys, do we find consistent evidence that public diplomacy has "deep" effects on more fundamental views, such as perceptions of China's responsibility for their country's debt problem.

Put simply, at least in our study context, public diplomacy messaging is not consistently effective at repairing states' reputation. Public diplomacy messages alter relatively shallow attitudes toward concrete outcomes such as project support, but not deeper attitudes toward sender states and fundamental reputational liabilities. Blame and learning – two strategies that explicitly address negative reputation – appear more effective than distraction, a strategy that avoids addressing the issue. Moreover, results are generally stronger in Indonesia than in Kenya, where all three strategies, whether delivered in either household or online surveys, show null effects across all outcomes, possibly due to overwhelmingly pre-existing support for the SGR. This suggests that public diplomacy messaging may be more valuable in contexts where attitudes are less hardened.

The findings contribute to international relations research in multiple ways. First, we provide rigorous evidence on the extent to which public diplomacy can effectively address negative reputation. This is the first study, to our knowledge, to conceptualize and empirically test efficacy of a diverse basket of reputation-repairing public diplomacy messages. The findings demonstrate how messaging content can condition the ability of public diplomacy to address negative reputation. Second, our findings also demonstrate that the depth of such public diplomacy efforts may have limits and may be more effective for changing project- or activity-specific attitudes but not more fundamental concerns. Finally, this study contributes to research on Chinese foreign policy and specifically to research on Chinese public diplomacy and development finance. While researchers have repeatedly examined the empirical validity of the "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative, we provide experimental evidence on whether and how states can address entrenched narratives like this one using public diplomacy messaging.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section develops theoretical expectations related to negative reputation and public diplomacy messaging. The following two sections outline our research design and present findings from household and online surveys, respectively. We summarize our findings in a conclusion.

Negative Reputation and Public Diplomacy Messaging

To what extent can public diplomacy effectively address sender states' reputational liabilities? International relations research recognizes public diplomacy as an important foreign policy tool for pursuing favorable opinion among foreign audiences (e.g. Cull 2008; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021). This can be achieved through highlighting positive attributes of the sender, with messages often citing and amplifying cultural, political, foreign policy, or other sources of positive

reputational cache, such as a democratic and vibrant civil society, or performance-based economic growth (e.g. Nye 2008; 2019; Mattingly et al. 2025). In addition to amplifying positive elements, public diplomacy can also take a "reactive" form of correcting and remedying a state's negative reputations, narratives, or images (Kelley 2008; Hartig 2016; Benoit 2024; Cull 2023). "Reactive" public diplomacy aimed at combatting reputational liabilities such as negative accusations, narratives, labels, or memes is an established concept in international relations. However, relative to positive public diplomacy, little if any existing research systematically conceptualizes and tests whether and what kinds of public diplomacy messages are best suited for this form of "damage control."

Compared with public diplomacy that highlights positive elements, reactive public diplomacy includes an additional layer of information processing. Audiences are exposed to first negative messages about the sender then corrective messages from the sender. Whether the latter can assuage potential damage caused by the former is conceptually unclear. It is possible that the strategy of "talking back" and responding to existing negative context might be more effective than sending positive messages (Kohama, Inamasu and Tago 2017). Addressing negative criticisms, for example, could help alleviate doubts about a sender's intentions if a message is perceived as thoughtful, authentic, and credible. Clearing such doubts might persuade the target audience to assume the sender country is honest and trustworthy (Sevin 2017). Reactive messages could also backfire (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007), particularly if audience question the source credibility (Weber, Dunaway and Johnson 2012), the message style is uncivil or irrelevant (Fridkin and Kennedy 2008; Brooks and Geer 2007), or messages otherwise fail to convince receivers.

States seeking to shore up reputational liabilities can choose from a wide menu of messaging approaches. One strategy that has been extensively studied is how governments rebut existing

criticisms by citing credible sources, such as external experts outside the sender state. States regularly rely on foreign individuals and groups to support their policy initiatives (e.g., Fang 2022; Jones 2019; Steiner-Khamsi 2004). Existing literature has long emphasized the "source effect" (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Austin and Dong 1994), and experimental evidence shows that people tend to trust sources with greater expertise and attractiveness (Wilson and Sherrell 1993), though at least one recent study finds that such effects may be smaller than those created by the actual content of messaging (Agadjanian and Horiuchi 2020).

We move beyond the "source effect" by focusing on messaging content while holding the source constant. Earlier public diplomacy research outlines a wide range of messaging strategies but is largely confined to describing and documenting such messages rather than analyzing their efficacy (e.g. Mor 2012; Avraham 2013; White and Radic 2014; Dodd and Collins 2017). Our aim is not to exhaustively catalog all of these strategies. Rather, we aim to rigorously study the relative efficacy of a basket of messages that are collectively diverse and broadly representative; not already exhaustively tested in other research; and realistic and used in real-world public diplomacy.

Specifically, we study and test the effectiveness of messages that focus on 1) "Blame," or denying wrongdoing and blaming critics for being politically motivated; 2) "Distraction," or distracting audiences by emphasizing other, positive outcomes; and 3) "Learning," or highlighting learning and corrective actions taken in response to the criticism. We compare the effectiveness of these strategies with a baseline strategy of "Silence," or when an actor offers no response to a criticism. Variants of each of these strategies have all received attention in public diplomacy research, but their effectiveness has not been systematically tested nor compared.

Blame

A commonly used strategy in reactive public diplomacy is for senders to refute negative claims by blaming outside actors for politicizing the issue (Sheafer and Gabay 2009). Blame is common in domestic politics where rival politicians accuse each other for politicizing negative reputational issues such as crime and corruption. This strategy is often effective at shielding politicians from being punished by voters for their alleged crimes (e.g. Muñoz, Anduiza and Gallego 2016). Rival states in international politics also regularly conduct information and public relations campaigns against each other (e.g. Sheafer and Gabay 2009). Sender states can similarly deploy messages that attribute negative narratives to politically motivated behavior by rivals. For example, when former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized the Belt and Road Initiative as "corrupt infrastructure deals in exchange for political influence" and described it as "bribe-fueled debt-trap diplomacy" undermining good governance; the Chinese government responded that the United States were attempting to attack and smear the BRI, and China was "fed up with the U.S.'s irresponsible remarks."[6]

Researchers find blame strategy effective when the message contains relevant topics and delivered in a legitimate fashion (Fridkin and Kenney 2004). Negative messaging can be more effective as people often react to negative stimuli and events (Pratto and John 1991; Lau 1985; Fridkin and Kennedy 2004). Following this stream of literature, we expect that blaming rival states

[6] "China warns US over BRI criticism", *China Daily*, May 10, 2019, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201905/10/WS5cd54685a3104842260bb06f.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

is an effective reactive strategy in global public diplomacy by eliciting doubts about the original claim.

Distraction

Another strategy that stops short of directly refuting claims is distraction, where senders divert audiences' attention from negative to positive reputational aspects. Complex issues often give rise to competing interpretations, allowing public diplomacy to highlight one perspective while downplaying others (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Distraction, like blame, is a well-known political tool. In controlling domestic information, King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) find that the Chinese government avoids engaging in argument and instead distracts by changing the subject and cheerleading. Letting an argument die could be a more effective strategy than trying to win it, because humans' fundamental reasoning tendencies may be programmed to prioritize winning arguments rather than seeking truth (Mercier and Sperber 2011), which could make any direct counterargument ineffective. Emphasizing a (different) act perceived positively may remind the audience of past good deeds and thereby help mitigate damage of the offensive act in question (Benoit 2024). Distraction may be a useful strategy when negative aspects are perceived as particularly widespread or deeply pervasive, and when positive aspects are similarly well known and accepted by large audiences, and perhaps more importantly, when it is hard to win an argument with counterargument. Moreover, senders often have strong incentives to emphasize positive aspects of their reputation and activities. Positive messages are already senders' public diplomacy toolkits – as cultivating positive images is often a fundamental aim of public diplomacy – and thus should be ready for use by sender states (Nye 2008).

Researchers find that distraction can be an effective public diplomacy strategy. Mattingly and Sundquist (2023) find that positive messages emphasizing aid and friendship are effective even in times of escalating bilateral conflict with the sender state. In a later study, Mattingly et al. (2025) find that audiences value performance and tangible results, even when informed of these alongside competing aspects. Kohama, Inamasu, and Tago (2017) show that positive messaging works when there is favorable public opinion to begin with. We thus expect that directing public attention away from the negatives to the positive contributions and generosity of the sender states could be another strategy to improve public perception.

Learning

Rather than engaging in "blame" and "distraction", a sender could instead implicitly acknowledge such claims and focus on how the sender is learning and improving. A basic feature of this messaging strategy involves listening, "the foundation for all effective public diplomacy" and one of its five key elements, according to Cull (2008, 2009)'s influential research. Learning entails collecting information about what foreign audiences think and adjusting public messaging accordingly. In doing so, senders can proactively convey information to targets about measures being taken to learn from past issues and improve in the future. This strategy is arguably the most politically risky and costly in its tacit acknowledgement of a negative issue. However, it may also provide credibility, and could increase observer perceptions of sender sincerity, benign intent, or other positive attributes that may alleviate negative reputation. In other political science research on public opinion, for instance, acknowledging arguments of the opposite side can be more effective at persuading others than simply advocating one's own point of view (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Xu and Petty 2022)

Learning-related messages are well-established in public diplomacy. Avraham (2013) document how several governments in the Middle East deploy "acknowledging the negative image" as a public diplomacy strategy, in which governments respond to negative reputational sources and emphasize learning efforts. Another research stream has examined whether and how a separate but related communication strategy, political apologies, can smooth relations between states by acknowledging and accounting for past mistakes (e.g. Lind 2011). This includes using public messages that emphasize recognition of and learning from past problems in order to repair negative contemporary attitudes toward a sender state among foreign publics. Recent evidence on American and Japanese public opinion (Kitagawa and Chu 2021) as well as US attitudes toward Russia and Germany (Mattes and Weeks 2025) suggests that apologies can be an effective public diplomacy messaging tool under certain conditions. Learning-focused messaging in our study context stops short of explicit apologies, but at the very least involves tacit recognition of a concern associated with a sender state and focuses on actions taken to improve the situation.

Silence

A final public diplomacy messaging strategy in response to criticism that we consider is silence. Opting out of reacting and laying low could be an effective alternative approach when facing negative reputational pressures. In the public relations literature, remaining silent on an undesirable discourse can weaken it by making it appear absent, abstract and unworthy (Dimitrov 2015). Despite its prevalence in diplomatic and organizational practices, this strategy is much less studied in existing public diplomacy and public relations literature than other more "visible" practices precisely because the "invisibility" of silence, a strategy that is difficult to accurately capture or even define (Dimitrov 2015). An exception is Kohama, Inamasu and Tago (2017), who

find that silence is least effective in raising popularity in diplomatic quarrels. In this paper we use silence as the baseline group and examine its performance relative to the above-mentioned messaging strategies.

To reiterate, the above messaging strategies are a diverse but certainly not exhaustive menu.[7] However, they collectively capture a wide spectrum of messaging types in terms of how responsibility is attributed, the extent to which messages are negative and positive, and a sender's degree of proactive messaging in response to negative reputation. At the same time, as we will show in the next section, they are realistically used in Chinese public diplomacy in response to criticism of its overseas infrastructure initiatives.

Research Design: Chinese-sponsored Infrastructure in Indonesia and Kenya

We evaluate the efficacy of these messaging strategies in the context of Chinese public diplomacy. China's major and controversial role in international development offers a particularly useful setting. We focus specifically on the "Debt-trap diplomacy" label frequently associated with Chinese development lending in recent years, and study China's attempts to use public diplomacy to address the narrative in two major host countries: Indonesia and Kenya. This section provides background context and outlines our empirical strategy.

[7] For instance, one potential messaging strategy we do not include is "whataboutism," or "downplaying certain factors by relativizing" them (Chow and Levin 2024; Gustafsson and Hall 2021, 977). Rather than suggesting to targets that the negative aspects are inaccurate, the sender can instead suggest that they are not exceptional, and that the actor making the criticism are themselves guilty of the same type of action.

Study Context: China, International Development, and "Debt-trap Diplomacy"

Research on Chinese public diplomacy, like the aforementioned general literature on public diplomacy, has focused heavily on positive messaging and less so on reactive public diplomacy. With a mandate to "tell the China story well," China's government has invested billions of dollars in media, social media, story-telling, and cultural exchanges with targeted at increasing China's attraction among foreign publics throughout the world (e.g. Brazys and Dukalskis 2019; Benabdallah 2020, 2021; Mattingly and Sundquist 2022). Presenting a good image of China focused on its reputational sources of strength – such as rapid economic growth, socioeconomic and political stability, infrastructure, and even Chinese cuisine – has been a driving force behind much China's public diplomacy (Zhao 2015). Other researchers have pointed out that during recent years China has taken an increasingly confident tone and is no longer shy about its achievements (d'Hooghe 2021). Importantly, however, China's public diplomacy, in addition to spotlighting sources of attraction, has also consistently faced the challenge of addressing reputational criticisms (Hartig 2016). To push back against negative images of China within Western discourse, China's public diplomacy campaigns have increasingly focused on correcting negative images and "presenting a truer image of China."[8]

China's major and controversial presence in international development offers a case in point. Public diplomacy challenges in the field of international development have become particularly acute for the Chinese government since its reemergence as a major donor and lender after 2000

[8] See Zhao Qizheng, "Better public diplomacy to present a truer picture of China", People's Daily, 30 March 2007.

(e.g. Alden 2007; Bräutigam 2009). In particular, China's global infrastructure drive since 2000 and during the first decade of the BRI resulted in hundreds of major Chinese-financed and built infrastructure projects in developing countries. Many of these projects have fueled local, national and international debates about the costs and benefits of Chinese global infrastructure (Strange 2023).

The "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative is the best-known and perhaps most acute source of negative reputation for China's international development cooperation. It suggests that China's government has been strategically luring borrower countries into its economic and political orbit by saddling them with unsustainable infrastructure debts that primarily serve China's own strategic benefits, such as the ability to seize overseas assets (Chellaney 2017). Academic researchers have repeatedly "debunked" the debt-trap narrative (e.g. Bräutigam 2020; Bräutigam et al. 2022; Jones and Hameiri 2020). However, despite abundant evidence that the narrative is empirically flawed, both the debt-trap narrative and general concerns about Chinese debt have remained highly salient in public discourse among policymakers, pundits, and journalists in many countries around the world.

Other research has documented various Chinese public diplomacy messaging strategies in response to the debt-trap narrative. Through an analysis of Chinese government documents, Yang (2025) uncovers six blame-avoiding strategies: attacking blame-attributors, shifting blame to others, invoking mitigating circumstances, foregrounding the positive while backgrounding the negative, stressing China's benevolence, and appealing to the imperative of development. These strategies align closely with our exploratory research on real-world Chinese public diplomacy (see next section and Appendix I-A), which informed our choice of the three theoretically diverse prototypes: Blame (attacking blame-attributors and shifting blame to others), Distraction

(foregrounding the positive while backgrounding the negative and appealing to the imperative of development), and Learning (invoking mitigating circumstances and stressing China's benevolence). Although such reactive strategies are increasing, China is still frequently accused of holding a "closed-door" attitude, non-responsive and lacking transparency when facing international criticisms (Hartig 2016). Our comparison between the three reactive strategies and the baseline of "silence" is therefore reflecting China's public diplomacy reality on the ground.

Experimental Design

To test the efficacy of different messaging strategies, we designed and implemented original surveys with embedded experiments in two important host countries for infrastructure projects financed and built by Chinese actors: Indonesia and Kenya. In the survey experiment, respondents are randomly assigned to read a Chinese government-sponsored public diplomacy message about a high-profile infrastructure project after reading a criticism of the project's cost and debt consequences. In Indonesia, the experiment focuses on the JBHSR project, a new high-speed railway from Jakarta to Bandung completed in October 2023. Kenyan respondents are administered an identically structured experiment about the SGR, a high-profile railway with Phase-I connecting Mombasa and Nairobi completed in June 2017, and an extension to Naivasha completed in October 2019.

These projects and country settings are useful for testing hypotheses related to reputational deficits and public diplomacy. Both multi-billion-dollar rail projects are among the most well-known infrastructure projects along the BRI and have been subject to intense scrutiny and debate in their respective host countries in recent years. Debt concerns have featured prominently in public debates in Indonesia about the JBHSR (Timmerman 2023), and the SGR has also been a

frequently cited case of China's "Debt-trap diplomacy" practice in Africa (Brautigam et al. 2022). We thus expect a relatively high degree of respondent familiarity with the narrative and the underlying sentiment that Chinese-financed infrastructure projects are costly and risky for borrowers. This provides a realistic and difficult scenario for testing whether public diplomacy messages can help assuage respondents' potential concerns about these projects and China's intentions.

To feature realistic public diplomacy messages, before finalizing our research design we conducted a qualitative analysis of several dozen actual Chinese public diplomacy messages from the government or official media. We found examples of messages that fit within the three aforementioned messaging strategies (for silence, which is not observable, we provided interview evidence to support its relevance in this context). Appendix I-A provides more information on this background research that informed the treatment vignettes.

The treatment vignettes test the relative efficacy of the three types of public diplomacy messages discussed above relative to the silence strategy and hold other factors constant for comparability purposes. The survey provides all respondents with basic context related to debt concerns about the railway. This is meant to prime potential debt concerns related to the "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative for all respondents, regardless of whether a respondent is familiar with the details of the narrative itself.

Respondents are then randomly assigned to receive a public diplomacy message treatment in the form of a Chinese government statement. The "Blame" group reads a message stating that the accusations are not accurate and politically motivated by the U.S. The "Distraction" group reads a message emphasizing that the accusations overlook the project's positive outcomes. The "Learning" group reads a message acknowledging the controversy and explaining that the

accusations have allowed the Chinese government to learn and improve. Except for the project name, other features of the vignettes for each country – such as their length, structure, and wording – are held constant. Full vignettes are provided in Appendix I-B.

Study 1: Household Surveys

We first conduct parallel household, face-to-face surveys in Indonesia and Kenya to test the above hypotheses.[9] The Indonesia survey was implemented in January 2024 and was administered to 1,220 respondents. We collaborated with Indikator Politik Indonesia (Indikator), a reputable, Jakarta-based survey firm that has copious experience with fielding academic and policy surveys and survey experiments. Indikator's face-to-face sampling strategy randomly samples respondents and generates a mostly nationally representative sample. Respondents are citizens of Indonesia who have reached 17 years of age (voting age) drawn from 34 provinces. Indonesia's administrative system includes levels of province (provinsi), district/city (kabupaten/kota), sub-district (kecamatan), urban/rural village (kelurahan/desa), greater neighborhood (rukun warga-RW), and neighborhood (rukun tetangga-RT). Samples are drawn proportionally to province size.

The Kenya survey was conducted in September 2024 with a sample of 1,350 respondents, in collaboration with Ipsos Kenya. Kenya's administrative units – province, county, division,

[9] Pre-analysis plans for this study were registered at OSF. Anonymous versions of the Indonesia and Kenya pre-analysis plans are submitted as supporting information. The surveys in the two countries were conducted independently, and each survey includes sections designed for other research purposes. However, the authors coordinated on the survey experiment component used in this study.

location, and sublocation – were used, with sublocations serving as the primary sampling units. The sampling process followed a probability proportional to population approach at the sublocation level, stratified by urban/rural areas and proximity to the SGR, with 25 km as the cut-off.[10] In total, our sample consists of respondents above the age of 18 from 20 out of Kenya's 47 counties. Appendix I-C and I-D provides further details on the survey procedures for the Indonesia and Kenya surveys, respectively, including sampling strategy and survey quality checks.

We focus on three post-treatment outcomes, ranging from relatively "shallow" attitudes about a specific project to "deep" concerns about the Chinese governments' intentions and responsibility for the host country's debt problems. First, we ask respondents to rate their overall support for the railway on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly support). Second, we ask respondents to what extent they believe China is using the railway to entrap Indonesia and seize strategic assets, rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Finally, respondents report the extent to which they believe the Chinese government is responsible for their country's debt problems, ranging from 1 (not at all responsible) to 7 (extremely responsible). Appendix I-E presents the exact wording of the pre-treatment and outcome questions, while Appendix I-F reports the distribution of outcome variables in both countries.

For clarity, we analyze public diplomacy strategies individually and also pool them into one group in comparison with the baseline silence group. We conduct regression analyses both without (differences in means compared with the "silence" group) and with individual-level covariates,

[10] The survey also includes questions for other research purposes, such as comparing views of the SGR and China based on their proximity to the SGR. To support these analyses, we oversampled residents living within 25 km of the SGR.

including gender, age, highest level of education, income level, ethnicity (specifically whether someone identifies as Javanese in Indonesia or Kikuyu in Kenya), living in a rural area, and support for incumbent President Joko Widodo (in Indonesia). Doing so enables us to present straightforward differences in means and also account for incidental imbalance across treatment groups. Our main results use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions using seven-point outcome measures. Tables I-F-1 and I-F-2 in Appendix I-F provides summary statistics for each variable used in the analysis for the Indonesia and Kenya surveys, respectively. We present tables with only treatment coefficients below, while Appendix I-G provides the full regression tables with coefficients for the individual-level covariates. As a robustness check, we recode the outcome variables into binary indicators (1 for responses of 5 or above, and 0 otherwise). The corresponding results are presented in Appendix I-H.

Table 1 reports tests of public diplomacy effectiveness measured in terms of support for the JBHSR in Indonesia and SGR in Kenya. In Indonesia, respondents who received a public diplomacy treatment (column 1) reported more favorable attitudes toward the railway than those who did not. Mean project support increased by .29 raw units on a 7-point scale, roughly a 4.8 percentage point increase. Blame, distraction, and learning messages all were associated with stronger project support (columns 3 and 4), and effects were strongest for the blame strategy (about a 6 percentage point increase). The learning treatment produces results similar to the aggregated public diplomacy result and narrowly misses conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .06$). Effects were weakest for the distraction strategy. As columns 2 and 4 show, the results are consistent when accounting for individual-level factors. The Indonesia results are generally similar in magnitude to effect sizes found by other recent work on attitudes toward aid projects. Such an effect size is substantively meaningful for development actors concerned with public attitudes

toward their projects (e.g., Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters. 2018; Dietrich, Hyde, and Winters 2019; Findley, Milner, and Nielson. 2017).

Table 1. Public Diplomacy and Project Support: Household Survey Experiments

	DV: Project Support (1-7)							
	Indonesia Face-to-Face				Kenya Face-to-Face			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	0.292*	0.290*			-0.042	-0.005		
	(0.135)	(0.131)			(0.095)	(0.096)		
Blame			0.427**	0.432**			-0.152	-0.105
			(0.165)	(0.161)			(0.116)	(0.119)
Distraction			0.165	0.136			0.050	0.092
			(0.163)	(0.159)			(0.116)	(0.118)
Learning			0.287+	0.316+			-0.023	-0.005
			(0.171)	(0.169)			(0.116)	(0.118)
Mean of DV	4.371	4.371	4.371	4.371	5.555	5.555	5.555	5.555
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1183	1173	1183	1173	1346	1256	1346	1256

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In contrast, in the Kenyan sample, exposure to public diplomacy messages does not significantly alter support for the project (column 5). The substantive effect is instead negative but small (just 0.04 points on a 7-point scale) and insignificant. When we disaggregate the strategies of blame, distraction, and learning, the blame strategy has a larger, negative substantive coefficient, but does not approach statistical significance. What explains this null finding? One potential explanation is that, compared to the Indonesian sample, baseline support for the Kenya SGR project is very high. While 51% of respondents in Indonesia expressed some degree of support (rating 5 or higher on a 1-7 scale) for JBHSR, 82% of respondents in Kenya expressed similar

support for the SGR. Public diplomacy messaging, at least in the context of this study, may have limited impact when an issue is already highly popular (or unpopular).

The results are generally similar when project support is coded as a binary variable (Table I-H-1). In Indonesia, while the pooled effects of public diplomacy are somewhat weaker, the blame treatment continues to be statistically significant, and distraction remains the least effective strategy. The effect of the blame message also extends to support for project expansion (Table I-H-2). In Kenya, all three strategies reduce support for the project, with the blame treatment producing the largest negative effect ($p = .06$) relative to silence.

Table 2 reports analyses of whether public diplomacy messaging changes perceptions of China's intention of entrapping Indonesia and Kenya into debt. In Indonesia, we do not find any evidence of such effects. Public diplomacy messages in aggregate are instead positively associated with heightened debt-trap concerns, though this result is substantively modest and statistically insignificant. The learning treatment comes closest to having a "backfire" effect and is most strongly associated with heightened debt trap concerns among the three communication strategies, though again, is not statistically significant.

In Kenya, while the SGR itself is highly popular, Kenyans remain sensitive to concerns about debt entrapment. In Kenya, 56% of respondents express some agreement (rating 5 or higher on a 1–7 scale) that China intends to entrap the country into debt, compared with 41% in Indonesia. This presents an opportunity for Chinese public diplomacy to mitigate such concerns. However, as in the Indonesian case, public diplomacy efforts do not reduce concerns about China's debt-trap diplomacy in Kenya. The distraction and learning strategies show relatively larger substantive effects, but in opposite directions: while the learning strategy tends to alleviate concerns, the distraction strategy seems to backfire.

Table 2. Public Diplomacy and China's Intention for a Debt Trap: Household Survey Experiments

	DV: China Has the Intention for a Debt Trap (1-7)							
	Indonesia Face-to-Face				Kenya Face-to-Face			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	0.142	0.069			0.034	0.016		
	(0.139)	(0.137)			(0.126)	(0.129)		
Blame			-0.041	-0.096			0.079	0.054
			(0.171)	(0.169)			(0.154)	(0.158)
Distraction			0.193	0.070			0.156	0.146
			(0.169)	(0.166)			(0.154)	(0.158)
Learning			0.291	0.260			-0.130	-0.147
			(0.177)	(0.176)			(0.153)	(0.157)
Mean of DV	4.003	4.003	4.003	4.003	4.352	4.352	4.352	4.352
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1153	1143	1153	1143	1328	1238	1328	1238

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Finally, Table 3 presents the results of receiving Chinese public diplomacy messages on perceptions of China's responsibility for their country's debt problems. In Indonesia, both the pooled results with the three treatment groups combined and the strategy-specific effects slightly reduce perceptions of China's responsibility for Indonesia's debt problems. However, none of the effects approach conventional levels of statistical significance. These insignificant effects may reflect Indonesian's relatively modest baseline tendency to attribute the responsibility to China: 40% of respondents in Indonesia place more than moderate responsibility on China (rating 5 or higher on a 1–7 scale). In Kenya, by contrast, the baseline tendency to blame China is much higher: 69% place more than moderate responsibility on China. Yet Chinese public diplomacy has no discernible effects on perceptions of China's responsibility, regardless of the strategies. On balance,

we find no consistent evidence across Indonesia or Kenya that any of the public diplomacy messages help disassociate China from either country's debt issues.[11]

Table 3. Public Diplomacy and China's Responsibility: Household Survey Experiments

	DV: China Responsible for the Debt Problem (1-7)							
	Indonesia Face-to-Face				Kenya Face-to-Face			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	-0.153	-0.164			-0.095	-0.088		
	(0.140)	(0.139)			(0.117)	(0.120)		
Blame			-0.182	-0.205			-0.158	-0.147
			(0.172)	(0.170)			(0.144)	(0.148)
Distraction			-0.113	-0.118			0.004	-0.009
			(0.171)	(0.168)			(0.144)	(0.147)
Learning			-0.169	-0.173			-0.131	-0.109
			(0.179)	(0.178)			(0.144)	(0.147)
Mean of DV	3.803	3.803	3.803	3.803	5.228	5.228	5.228	5.228
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1158	1149	1158	1149	1309	1222	1309	1222

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In short, the Indonesia component of Study 1 finds evidence that public diplomacy messaging – particularly the blame and learning strategies – can have positive impacts on public support for major infrastructure projects such as the JBHSR. But we do not find accompanying evidence that these messaging strategies can shift more general concerns about China's intention

[11] The patterns remain similar in both Kenya and Indonesia when perceptions of China's debt trap intention and the Chinese government's responsibility for the national debt problem are coded as binary variables (Tables I-H-3 and I-H-4).

for a debt trap and China's responsibility for their country's debt problem. The Kenya component shows that public diplomacy aimed at addressing China's negative debt-trap reputation do not increase overall support of an already popular railway project; they may run into ceiling effects. Additionally, as in the Indonesia study, all the three public diplomacy strategies – blame, distract, and learning – fail to change people's deeper perceptions about China's intentions and responsibility for Kenya's debt.

These findings have important implications. Three theoretically distinct strategies – blame, distraction, and learning – do not appear to outperform the baseline strategy of silence in addressing core concerns raised in the context of "Debt-trap diplomacy." However, this study's research design also faces potential limitations worthy of follow-up. One possibility is that the public diplomacy treatments may not be strong enough. Real-world public diplomacy messages are often more vivid and engaging than a few lines of text delivered by an dispassionate enumerator. Another potential limitation is that while our household surveys provide a largely nationally representative sample, especially covering both urban and rural areas, they do not replicate the natural context in which respondents typically encounter public diplomacy messages, i.e. online through social or traditional media or other channels.

Study 2: Online Surveys with Embedded Video-based Experiments

To address these possibilities, in July 2025 we conducted a follow-up, pre-registered online survey experiment in Indonesia and Kenya in which the same treatment messages described above but in video form, after which the same post-treatment outcomes are asked. This enables us to test the effectiveness of the public diplomacy messaging strategies using stronger treatments and a more realistic setting.

We worked with a vendor to create video treatments that closely mimic authentic Chinese public diplomacy videos. For each treatment, we carefully selected keywords to emphasize and background images to match the content, ensuring that each video conveyed a distinct message. At the same time, we held other elements constant – such as text style and color, and background music – so that the videos representing different public diplomacy strategies were comparable. As with the household vignette treatments, the videos for Indonesia and Kenya were identical except for content specific to the respective project and country context. We also made videos for the initial criticism baseline vignette. All videos were initially made in English and later translated into local languages. Appendix II-A provides more information on the video treatment design.

This design allows us to achieve three goals simultaneously. First, it enables us to fully replicate the messages from the household survey experiments, which would not be possible using actual Chinese public diplomacy videos that might introduce undesired noise into the treatments. Second and relatedly, by producing our own videos we can exercise control to ensure that each video delivers the intended treatment while remaining sufficiently similar in other aspects to allow for valid comparisons. Finally, although these videos are not actual Chinese public diplomacy content, we designed them to closely resemble the style of real videos. To ensure videos would deliver engaging and realistic treatments consistently without introducing noise that might undermine the approach, we engaged in more than six rounds of feedback with the vendor. Links to view the videos are provided in the Appendix II-A.

We partnered with Dynata, a widely used survey firm among international relations scholars, to field online surveys in Indonesia (n = 1,280) and Kenya (n = 1,281). In Indonesia, quotas based on census data were applied to ensure national representativeness in terms of age, gender, province,

and ethnicity. In Kenya, the sample has quotas on age and gender.[12] As with other online samples in developing countries, our samples in both countries are urban-biased, with most respondents having at least a secondary education. This is significantly different from the samples from the household surveys. We take this into consideration when interpreting any different results between the two studies, and do not make direct comparisons between Study 1 and Study 2. Appendix II-B provides additional details about the online survey, including a manipulation check that assesses whether respondents received the key information conveyed by each treatment video. Appendix II-C reports descriptive statistics for the same set of variables used in Study 1.

For clarity and consistency, we replicate the same analyses as in Tables 1–3 from Study 1. Again, we present tables with only treatment coefficients below, and Appendix II-D provides the full regression tables with coefficients for the individual-level covariates. Robustness checks with outcome variables coded as binary indicators (1 for responses of 5 or above, and 0 otherwise) are reported in Appendix II-E.

Overall, the results provide reassurance of the validity of the household findings – particularly public diplomacy's limited ability to reverse negative reputation – as well as our intuition of the potential for ceiling effects on public diplomacy messaging. Table 4 reports the effectiveness of online video-based public diplomacy on project support. In Kenya, the results are consistent with those in the household survey: public diplomacy has no effect on support for the SGR, where baseline support is already very high in both the household and online samples for this well-established project (82% in the online sample expressed support for the project). In Indonesia, the findings differ from the household survey experiment. The three strategies of public

[12] Dynata's Kenya panel does not allow for quotas in subnational region or ethnicity.

diplomacy do not increase support for the JBHSR in the online sample. This is perhaps because baseline support is already very high in this sample (68% in the online sample support the project, compared with 51% in the household survey), as in both of the Kenya surveys. The Indonesia online survey was conducted roughly 18 months after the household survey, and views toward the JBHSR may have matured over this period.

Table 4. Public Diplomacy and Project Support: Online Video Experiments

	DV: Project Support (1-7)							
	Indonesia Online				Kenya Online			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	-0.015	0.010			0.003	0.011		
	(0.092)	(0.090)			(0.092)	(0.092)		
Blame			0.006	0.053			0.101	0.100
			(0.113)	(0.110)			(0.112)	(0.113)
Distraction			0.075	0.064			-0.088	-0.074
			(0.113)	(0.110)			(0.112)	(0.113)
Learning			-0.129	-0.087			-0.004	0.008
			(0.113)	(0.110)			(0.112)	(0.113)
Mean of DV	5.070	5.070	5.070	5.070	5.605	5.605	5.605	5.605
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1277	1246	1277	1246	1280	1258	1280	1258

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5 reports whether online video-based public diplomacy reduces perceptions of China's intention to entrap Indonesia and Kenya in debt. In Kenya, the results are again consistent with those in Study 1 (Table 2): none of the strategies reduce perceptions of a Chinese debt-trap intention. In Indonesia, however, this stronger and more realistic form of treatment significantly reduces such perceptions. Specifically, the effects are driven by the blame and especially learning strategies, while distraction has no effect. This pattern aligns with the Indonesia household survey

experiment, where, when public diplomacy is effective, it is only driven by blame and learning strategies. It is not feasible to directly compare the household and online surveys, but this consistency is arguably reassuring given their different sample compositions and timing.

Table 5. Public Diplomacy and China's Intention for a Debt Trap: Online Video Experiments

	DV: China Has the Intention for a Debt Trap (1-7)							
	Indonesia Online				Kenya Online			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	-0.195+	-0.239*			-0.059	-0.041		
	(0.105)	(0.105)			(0.113)	(0.113)		
Blame			-0.219+	-0.232+			-0.108	-0.086
			(0.129)	(0.129)			(0.138)	(0.139)
Distraction			-0.032	-0.093			-0.016	0.011
			(0.128)	(0.128)			(0.138)	(0.139)
Learning			-0.336**	-0.390**			-0.054	-0.048
			(0.128)	(0.128)			(0.138)	(0.139)
Mean of DV	4.06	4.06	4.06	4.06	4.444	4.444	4.444	4.444
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1260	1230	1260	1230	1267	1246	1267	1246

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Finally, Table 6 reports the effects of video-based public diplomacy treatments on perceptions of China's responsibility for national debt problems. As in Study 1 (Table 3), the results are null for both Indonesia and Kenya. The only strategy that shows effects approaching conventional levels of statistical significance in reducing perceptions of China's responsibility is learning in Indonesia.

Table 6. Public Diplomacy and China's Responsibility: Online Video Experiments

	DV: China Responsible for the Debt Problem (1-7)							
	Indonesia Online				Kenya Online			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Public Diplomacy	-0.184	-0.184			-0.077	-0.073		
	(0.112)	(0.113)			(0.119)	(0.119)		
Blame			-0.183	-0.178			-0.151	-0.135
			(0.137)	(0.138)			(0.145)	(0.146)
Distraction			-0.157	-0.141			-0.023	-0.022
			(0.137)	(0.138)			(0.145)	(0.146)
Learning			-0.210	-0.232+			-0.058	-0.061
			(0.137)	(0.138)			(0.145)	(0.146)
Mean of DV	4.212	4.212	4.212	4.212	4.66	4.66	4.66	4.66
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Num. Obs.	1219	1192	1219	1192	1266	1244	1266	1244

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

When binary outcome variables are used, the results are consistent for both project support (Table II-E-1) and perceptions of China's debt-trap intentions (Table II-E-2). In Indonesia, the blame and learning strategies significantly reduce perceptions of China's responsibility for national debt when the outcome variable is coded as a dummy (Table II-E-3). This suggests that treatment effects for public diplomacy messaging may be, as expected, stronger when they delivered through video and when they do not run into extreme ceiling effects. In any case, overall the findings show that respondents in both countries are generally hesitant to change their minds about deeper attitudes towards China's role in their country's national debt.

In sum, the reputation-repairing effects of public diplomacy messaging remain limited even when delivered in a stronger and more realistic form. Both blame and learning softened perceptions of China's debt-trap intentions in the Indonesia sample, but are less effective at shifting views on China's responsibility for either country's debt problems. In Kenya, we observe consistently null

results across all strategies and outcomes. On the whole, Study 2 suggests that the limited effects observed in the household survey experiments (Study 1) are unlikely to be the result of research design limitations. It is also worthy that, weak overall effects notwithstanding, across both studies blame and learning strategies – which engage with the negative reputational element more explicitly than distraction – appear relatively effective. Finally, evidence from both the household and online studies consistently suggests that public diplomacy messaging seems to gain more traction in Indonesia than in Kenya, suggesting that reputation-repairing messaging may be more useful when local attitudes projects or issues in question are not already highly established.[13]

Conclusion

States invest significant resources into public diplomacy campaigns, including in the field of international development. In particular, donors' and lenders' efforts to communicate messages about development projects to foreign publics are important strategies for pursuing "soft power" in international relations. While many of these efforts focus on highlighting positive attributes, public diplomacy senders are often seriously concerned with addressing negative aspects of their reputation. Public diplomacy does not occur in a contextual vacuum, and governments need to contend with existing narratives and other reputational risks when communicating with foreign

[13] Part III of the Appendix reports several additional exploratory analyses, including: interaction effects with pre-treatment perceptions of Chinese development projects (III-A), treatment effects on general concerns about foreign debt (III-B), perceived credibility and effectiveness of core arguments presented in the treatment (III-C), the attractiveness of public diplomacy messages (III-D), and respondents' emotional reactions after watching the response videos (III-E).

audiences. However, existing research both on public diplomacy writ large and on foreign aid and soft power more specifically has not systematically accounted for pre-existing narrative contexts that might condition how states send messages and how observers digest them.

We developed hypotheses related to three reactive public diplomacy messaging strategies – blame, distraction, and learning – and designed and implemented parallel survey experiments to assess whether and how public diplomacy messages responding to pre-existing criticisms can sway attitudes toward projects and other outcomes of interest relative to a default strategy of silence. We administered the survey in two major host countries for overseas Chinese infrastructure projects, Indonesia and Kenya, focusing on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and Standard Gauge Railway, two high-profile BRI projects linked to the "Dept-trap diplomacy" narrative. We conducted both highly representative household surveys as well as online surveys with highly realistic public diplomacy treatments.

Our findings across these studies suggest that public diplomacy messaging aimed at addressing negative reputation has limited efficacy, at least in the context of our research. In Indonesia, where views toward the project in question are less hardened, we find limited evidence that public diplomacy messages can increase support for the project or even soften perceptions of China's intentions under certain conditions. Overall, however, across our surveys in Indonesia and Kenya, public diplomacy messaging generally fails to produce significant and substantive effects that alleviate negative reputation.

In addition to their importance for policymakers in public diplomacy sender states, these findings add to international relations research on public diplomacy and the political economy of international development in multiple ways. We contribute to public diplomacy research by theorizing and testing the efficacy of three diverse reputation-repairing public diplomacy message

types. On the whole, these strategies struggle to change both shallow and deep attitudes toward the sender state and its overseas activities, particularly when views are already relatively entrenched. We do not find convincing evidence that blaming, distracting, or learning are consistently more effective than simply staying silent. These findings relate to recent work suggesting that states may obtain more desirable results by avoiding altogether problematic narratives when dealing with states and other foreign audiences (e.g. Herrera and Kydd 2024).

The findings also contribute to research on Chinese foreign policy and specifically to research on Chinese public diplomacy and development finance. Public diplomacy campaigns have taken on elevated importance as China's government tries to "tell China's story well," an effort that encompasses China's international development cooperation. Given the spread and stickiness of the "Debt-trap diplomacy" narrative over the past decade, understanding whether and how public diplomacy can address negative reputations and pre-existing narratives is an important policy question both for China's government and counterpart governments and other development stakeholders. Arguably, the findings indicate that the Chinese government's heavy investment in public diplomacy is probably not worth the cost, at least when fighting back against criticisms.

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