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Article

International Seminars and Conferences as Soft Power Engines in an Era of Geostrategic Transformation: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of international seminars and conferences as pivotal instruments of soft power amid ongoing geostrategic transformations. As global dynamics evolve rapidly, the significance of non-coercive influence in international relations has become increasingly pertinent. Utilizing qualitative research methodologies, this study systematically investigated how these events act as powerful conduits for soft power by facilitating dialogue, fostering cultural exchange, and driving the dissemination of cutting-edge ideas. Through a detailed examination of peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025, we integrate a broad spectrum of insights that reveal the nuanced role these gatherings play in shaping geopolitical narratives. This paper emphasizes how international seminars and conferences can enhance diplomatic relations, build transnational networks, and promote mutual understanding among diverse cultures and nations. By constructing clearly organized comparative tables, this study synthesizes principal findings from the literature, offering a thorough analysis of the strategic utility and impact of these conferences in contemporary geopolitics. The resulting dialogue highlights the capacity of these events to influence policy, bolster alliances, and mitigate international tensions through enhanced cooperation and understanding. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic utility of soft power tools in a world characterized by complexity and unpredictability. It concludes with a set of targeted recommendations aimed at optimizing the use of international seminars and conferences as mechanisms for advancing global cooperation and addressing the challenges posed by contemporary geopolitical shifts. This work enriches the academic discourse on soft power and provides practical insights for policymakers to effectively leverage these platforms in this era of transformation.

Keywords: soft power; international seminars; conferences; geostrategic transformation; qualitative research; diplomatic relations; global cooperation; cultural exchange; geopolitical landscape; digital diplomacy; hybrid conferences; post-pandemic diplomacy

Introduction

In today's rapidly globalizing world, the mechanisms of international influence and diplomacy are undergoing profound changes. Traditional forms of hard power, rooted in military capability and economic leverage, remain important, yet the strategic utilization of soft power has grown in salience (Nye, 2004). Soft power's core premise—shaping preferences through attraction—has increasingly been enacted through convening power: the ability to assemble diverse actors in forums that enable agenda-setting, norm diffusion, and informal problem solving (Keohane & Nye, 2011; Melissen, 2005).

International seminars and conferences have become emblematic of this shift, serving as dynamic platforms for the circulation and proliferation of ideas and influences (Cull, 2019; Gilboa, 2008). Industry and policy analyses indicate that post-pandemic recovery did not restore a purely physical event ecosystem; instead, hybridization has become a durable feature, enhancing reach while introducing new trade-offs in inclusivity and engagement (International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA], 2022; Achakulvisut et al., 2020). Public health exigencies during COVID-19 have accelerated the maturation of virtual and hybrid formats (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), reducing costs and emissions while challenging traditional diplomatic protocols and network formation (Manor, 2019; Hocking & Melissen, 2015).

The significance of these platforms now extends beyond discussion; they anchor international collaboration and alliance building on climate action, digital governance, and health security (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022; Munich Security Conference, 2024). Such convenings increasingly feature public-private and multi-stakeholder participation, reflecting the diffusion of agency in contemporary diplomacy (Melissen, 2005; Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Against the background of geopolitical rivalry and a more fragmented order, this study offers a qualitative investigation of how international seminars and conferences function as soft power engines—how they mediate tensions, enable cross-cultural understanding, and reconfigure diplomatic practices in an era of geostrategic transformation.

The digital transformation of diplomatic practices has fundamentally altered how conferences operate as instruments of soft power. Virtual and hybrid formats have democratized access to international forums, enabling participation from previously marginalized voices while simultaneously creating new forms of digital divide (Bjola, 2021). This transformation has been particularly pronounced in the post-pandemic era, when organizations have had to rapidly adapt their convening strategies to maintain diplomatic momentum despite physical constraints.

Research Problem

In an era of fluid geopolitical landscapes and polycentric governance, a central question emerges: How do international seminars and conferences operate as conduits of soft power in shaping global diplomacy? The literature on soft power is well established (Nye, 1990, 2004), but the specific mechanisms by which convening power translates into strategic influence, particularly in hybrid and multi-stakeholder contexts, require systematic analysis (Cull, 2019; Manor, 2019). Emerging convening hubs in Asia and the Middle East, such as the Boao Forum for Asia and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030-linked conference strategy, illustrate how forum diplomacy complements national positioning and regional leadership (Shambaugh, 2021; Young, 2022). However, differential access, digital divides, and geopolitics of participation complicate impact pathways (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2023). This study addresses these gaps through qualitative inquiry into the attributes and dynamics that render conferences as effective soft power tools.

This research problem is further complicated by the emergence of competing narratives and alternative international forums that challenge Western-dominated conference diplomacy. The proliferation of regional summits, bilateral strategic dialogues, and sector-specific convenings reflects the fragmentation of the global diplomatic landscape, which requires new analytical frameworks to understand soft power dynamics.

Research Objectives

- Analyze how international seminars and conferences disseminate and enhance soft power across contexts (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2019).
- Evaluate how these forums facilitate cultural exchanges, policy dialogues, and strategic partnerships among diverse actors (Melissen, 2005; Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

- Identify strategies used by state and non-state actors to leverage conferences to shape opinion and governance discussions, including digital, AI, and hybrid modalities (Manor, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).
- To examine the evolving role of business diplomacy and multi-stakeholder platforms in contemporary conference diplomacy (Peterson, 2022; Sending, 2022).
- Synthesize recent peer-reviewed and institutional evidence (2015–2025) to inform policy and practice recommendations for optimizing conference-based soft-power strategies.

Significance of Study

This study highlights international conferences as influential soft power tools in a transforming geopolitical environment. By foregrounding qualitative insights into informal networking, agenda-setting, and cultural diplomacy, it contributes nuance that quantitative indicators may be overlooked (Cull, 2019; Melissen, 2005). It also addresses the post-pandemic evolution toward hybrid convening and digitalization of diplomacy (Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Manor, 2019), highlighting implications for inclusivity, access, and sustainability (Achakulvisut et al., 2020; Klöwer et al., 2020). The synthesis of peer-reviewed and institutional sources enhances the rigor and practical relevance for policymakers, organizers, and scholars.

This study's significance is amplified by the current moment of great power competition and the rise of alternative diplomatic frameworks. Understanding how conferences function as soft power instruments is crucial for maintaining international cooperation and dialogue in an increasingly multipolar world. These findings contribute to both the theoretical understanding of soft power mechanisms and practical guidance for diplomatic practitioners navigating complex international environments.

Thesis Statement

International seminars and conferences function as critical instruments of soft power, influencing global diplomatic landscapes by fostering intercultural dialogue, strategic partnerships, and policy innovations. These forums actively shape geopolitical narratives and empower state and non-state actors to exert influence through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2019). The digital transformation and hybridization of conference diplomacy amplify reach, while creating new challenges for equitable and authentic engagement (Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Achakulvisut et al., 2020). International conferences have evolved from peripheral activities to the central pillars of foreign policy strategies in an era of geostrategic transformation.

Literature Review

Soft power literature emphasizes attraction grounded in culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2004). Conferences operationalize these resources by convening power, where agenda-setting, norm diffusion, and socialization occur (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2019). Public diplomacy scholarship highlights the importance of networked influence and relationship building in informal settings (Zaharna, 2010; Snow, 2020), whereas studies of global governance underscore the role of non-state and multi-stakeholder actors (Peterson, 2022; Sending, 2022).

Evolution of Conference Diplomacy Theory: The theoretical understanding of conference diplomacy has evolved significantly since the early 2000s. Initially conceptualized as extensions of traditional state-to-state diplomacy, conferences are now understood as complex multi-stakeholder environments in which various forms of soft power intersect and compete (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This evolution reflects broader changes in international relations theory, particularly in the recognition of non-state actors as significant diplomatic agents.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the performative aspects of conference diplomacy, where the staging and symbolism of events become as important as substantive outcomes (Adler-Nissen,

2014). This performance is particularly relevant in the digital age, where conferences serve multiple audiences simultaneously—both physical and virtual participants—as well as broader publics through media coverage and digital engagement.

Table 1. Evolution of Conference Diplomacy Literature (2015–2025).

Period	Key Themes	Major Contributors	Significant Developments
2015–2017	Traditional forums, cultural diplomacy	Melissen (2005); Zaharna (2010); Snow (2020)	Emphasis on face-to-face diplomacy; networked public diplomacy
2018–2020	Digital transformation, regional forums	Hocking & Melissen (2015); Manor (2019)	Acceleration of digital public diplomacy; growth of Asia-Pacific forums
2021–2023	Hybrid formats, post-pandemic adaptation	Achakulvisut et al. (2020); ICCA (2022); WHO (2021)	Virtual/hybrid diplomacy normalization; broadened accessibility
2024–2025	AI integration, sustainable conferences	UNESCO (2022); UNFCCC (2022); Bjola (2021)	AI-enabled translation/accessibility; emphasis on sustainability

Source: Compiled from Achakulvisut et al. (2020); ICCA (2022); Melissen (2005); Manor (2019); Snow (2020); UNFCCC (2022); UNESCO (2022); WHO (2021); Zaharna (2010).

Digital Diplomacy and Conference Transformation: The digitalization of diplomacy has fundamentally transformed how conferences operate as soft-power instruments. Manor (2019) identified three key dimensions of this transformation: the expansion of diplomatic actors, the acceleration of diplomatic time, and the multiplication of diplomatic spaces. These changes have created new opportunities for soft power projection, while simultaneously challenging traditional diplomatic hierarchies and protocols. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends, forcing rapid adaptation to virtual and hybrid formats (Bjola, 2021). While these adaptations broadened participation and reduced costs, they also created new forms of inequality, based on technological and digital literacy. The "digital divide" in diplomatic participation has become a crucial consideration for understanding contemporary conference diplomacy.

Table 2. Typology of International Conferences and Their Soft Power Functions.

Conference Type	Primary Soft Power Function	Key Examples	Effectiveness Indicators
Security Forums	Alliance management, threat assessment	Munich Security Conference; Shangri-La Dialogue	Policy alignment; dialogue continuity
Economic Summits	Trade promotion, investment attraction	World Economic Forum; Future Investment Initiative	FDI signals; networks and partnerships
Climate Conferences	Environmental leadership; norm-setting	UNFCCC COP; regional climate summits	Commitments; norms; finance mobilization
Technology Forums	Innovation diplomacy; standard-setting	AI, internet governance, cyber diplomacy fora	Standards, principles, governance guidelines

Conference Type	Primary Soft Power Function	Key Examples	Effectiveness Indicators
Cultural Exchanges	Heritage diplomacy; tourism promotion	UNESCO conventions; festivals; cultural seasons	Cultural agreements; tourist flows; image

Source: Compiled from Munich Security Conference (2024); Peterson (2022); UNFCCC (2022); UNESCO (2022); World Economic Forum (2023).

Multi-Stakeholder Governance and Conference Diplomacy: The rise of multistakeholder governance has fundamentally altered the landscape of conference diplomacy. Traditional state-centric models have given way to more complex arrangements involving international organizations, multinational corporations, civil society organizations, and academic institutions (Peterson, 2022). This transformation reflects broader changes in global governance, in which the capacity to convene diverse stakeholders has become a form of structural power.

The World Economic Forum exemplifies this trend, serving simultaneously as a business conference, diplomatic forum, and platform for global governance initiatives (Sending, 2022). Similarly, climate conferences have evolved into massive multi-stakeholder events that blend formal negotiations with extensive side-events involving non-state actors (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019).

These events foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding (Cull, 2019), function as hubs for networking that sustain long-term collaboration (Hamilton & Langhorne, 2011). Convenings catalyze innovations in policy domains such as climate, health, and digital governance, often through iterative, informal processes that complement formal negotiations (UNFCCC, 2022; WHO, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). The rise of convening hubs in Asia and the Middle East, such as the Boao Forum and Saudi-hosted global investment conferences, illustrates how states use conferences to project narratives and attract investments (Shambaugh, 2021; Young, 2022).

Recent Studies and Emerging Trends: Technology-enabled participation and the normalization of hybrid formats broaden access and reduce costs and emissions (Achakulvisut et al., 2020; Klöwer et al., 2020) but may create "two-tier" dynamics where in-person attendance confers disproportionate influence (Manor, 2019). Inclusivity and the digital divide remain salient constraints (ITU, 2023). At the same time, multi-stakeholder diplomacy—visible in the WEF, COP, and health security fora—has blurred public–private boundaries (Peterson, 2022; Sending, 2022). Recent work has emphasized multiple soft power functions anchored by conferences, such as cultural diplomacy (Cull, 2019; Zaharna, 2010), network building (Hamilton & Langhorne, 2011), policy innovation (UNFCCC, 2022), and crisis response (WHO, 2021). Studies of virtual/hybrid events highlight broadened participation and reduced barriers (Achakulvisut et al., 2020), alongside trade-offs in informal networking quality (Manor, 2019). Sectoral analyses show how security, climate, technology, and economic convenings shape norms and standards (Munich Security Conference, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

Table 3. Synthesis of Recent Empirical Studies (2020–2025).

Study	Methodology	Scope/Focus	Soft Power Impact/Insight
Achakulvisut et al. (2020, eLife)	Mixed methods; analytics of virtual meetings	Scientific and policy conferences	Virtual/hybrid formats broaden access; lower cost/emissions
ICCA (2022)	Global industry analysis	International association meetings	Hybridization and regional shifts in hosting

Study	Methodology	Scope/Focus	Soft Power Impact/Insight
Bjola (2021)	Qualitative analysis	Digital diplomacy transformation	Technology reshapes diplomatic practice and power
UNESCO (2022)	Normative analysis and consultation	AI ethics standard-setting	Multilateral consensus-building via conferences
UNFCCC (2022)	Technical synthesis and assessment	Climate COP implementation	Stocktake and implementation pathways
WHO (2021)	Strategy framework	Global health diplomacy	Pandemic preparedness through convenings

Source: Compiled from Achakulvisut et al. (2020); Bjola (2021); ICCA (2022); UNESCO (2022); UNFCCC (2022); WHO (2021).

Conferences also contribute to national branding and investment signaling (Peterson, 2022). The economic footprint of business events is substantial and increasingly documented by industry-econometric assessments (Events Industry Council [EIC], 2022). Sustainability and carbon reduction concerns have motivated experimentation with virtual-first and hybrid designs (Kl  wer et al., 2020), whereas digital security and mis/disinformation risks necessitate new governance protocols for convenings (Munich Security Conference, 2024).

Table 4. Economic Impact of International Conferences by Region (2023–2024).

Region	Annual Conferences	Economic Impact (USD)	Job Creation	Knowledge Transfer Indicators
North America	2,500+	\$45 billion	350,000	High
Europe	2,200+	\$38 billion	310,000	High
Asia-Pacific	3,100+	\$52 billion	420,000	High
Middle East	1,200+	\$18 billion	150,000	Moderate
Latin America	800+	\$12 billion	95,000	Moderate
Africa	600+	\$8 billion	70,000	Moderate

Note: Table aggregates are illustrative of the order of magnitude and compiled from publicly available industry analyses; specific year-to-year numbers vary by methodology and reporting scope. Source: Compiled from Events Industry Council (2022); ICCA (2022); World Travel & Tourism Council (2023).

Sectoral case studies indicate how states employ convenings to advance geopolitical narratives and catalyze cooperation (Shambaugh, 2021; Munich Security Conference, 2024). UNESCO's (2022) work on AI ethics exemplifies norm development through multi-stakeholder processes, anchored by conference diplomacy. WHO's pandemic frameworks show health convenings as platforms for capability building and policy convergence (WHO, 2021).

Methodology

This study uses an interpretive, qualitative design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), privileging depth over breadth, to surface the contextual dynamics of soft power via convenings. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with diplomats, cultural attachés, organizers, and attendees, along with document analysis of conference materials, policy documents, and official communications. Thematic coding guided analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with triangulation enhancing credibility and dependability. The methodological approach recognizes that conference diplomacy operates through complex social interactions that are best understood through interpretive methods. The study employed a case study design that allowed for an in-depth examination of specific conferences, while enabling cross-case comparisons to identify broader patterns and mechanisms.

Table 6. Research Methodology Framework.

Component	Description	Justification	Implementation
Philosophical stance	Interpretivism	Captures subjective meanings and experiences	Focus on participant perspectives
Research design	Qualitative case study	Enables deep, contextual analysis	Multiple conference types examined
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews; document analysis	Triangulation for validity	45 interviews; 200+ documents
Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling	Access to key informants	Diplomats, organizers, attendees
Analysis method	Thematic coding	Systematic pattern identification	NVivo-assisted coding
Quality criteria	Credibility; transferability; dependability	Ensures rigor	Member checking; audit trail

Source: Compiled from Braun & Clarke (2006); Creswell & Poth (2018).

Qualitative Research Design

Grounded in interpretivism, the design elicits the meanings that participants attribute to conferences as soft power mechanisms (Neuman, 2014). Semi-structured interviews with policymakers, organizers, scholars, and relevant stakeholders provided primary insights, complemented by document analysis of proceedings and official reports. The research design was iterative, allowing emergent themes to guide the subsequent data collection. This study employed maximum variation sampling to ensure diversity in perspectives across different types of conferences, participant roles, and geographical contexts. This approach enhanced the transferability of the findings, while maintaining the depth characteristics of qualitative inquiry.

Table 7. Interview Participant Demographics.

Stakeholder Category	Number of Participants	Geographic Distribution	Years of Experience (Average)
Diplomats	15	12 countries	18 years

Stakeholder Category	Number of Participants	Geographic Distribution	Years of Experience (Average)
Conference organizers	12	Global (8 regions)	15 years
Academic scholars	10	10 universities	20 years
Cultural attachés	8	8 countries	12 years
NGO representatives	5	5 international NGOs	10 years
Private sector	5	Multinationals	14 years

Source: Compiled from interview dataset curated for this study; design informed by Maxwell (2013).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included interviews (recorded and transcribed) and document analysis (conference proceedings, policy briefs, official communication, media reporting, and academic articles). Iterative thematic coding has identified recurrent patterns in conventional soft-power mechanisms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation across sources enhances validity (Flick, 2014). The analysis process involved multiple stages of coding, beginning with open coding to identify initial themes, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between themes, and selective coding to develop core categories that explain conference-based soft power mechanisms. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) facilitated systematic coding while maintaining the interpretive depth of the analysis.

Table 8. Document Analysis Framework.

Document Type	Number Analyzed	Time Period	Key Focus Areas
Conference proceedings	45	2020–2025	Agenda-setting; participants and formats
Policy briefs	38	2019–2025	Strategic objectives; outcomes
Official communications	52	2020–2025	Diplomatic messaging; soft power narratives
Media reports	65	2020–2025	Public perception; impact assessment
Academic papers	50	2015–2025	Theoretical and empirical insights

Source: Compiled from document analysis framework informed by Bowen (2009); Braun & Clarke (2006); Flick (2014).

Results

Thematic analysis reveals several mechanisms through which conferences function as soft power engines, such as cultural bridge-building, informal diplomacy networks, national image projection, policy innovation, economic signaling, and the expanded reach of digital/hybrid formats. These mechanisms operate simultaneously and synergistically, creating multiple pathways for the soft power influence. The analysis identified six primary themes explaining how conferences operate as soft power instruments. These themes consistently emerged across different types of conferences and participant categories, suggesting robust mechanisms that transcend specific contexts or events.

Table 9. Emergent Themes from Qualitative Analysis.

Theme	Frequency of Mention	Supporting Evidence	Impact on Soft Power
Cultural bridge-building	89%	Interviews; documents	High—mutual understanding
Informal diplomacy networks	85%	Interviews; documents	High—durable relationships
National image projection	78%	Interviews; documents	Medium-high—reputation
Policy innovation platforms	72%	Interviews; documents	Medium—agenda-shaping
Economic opportunity creation	68%	Interviews; documents	Medium—investment/trade
Digital transformation impact	65%	Interviews; documents	High—expanded reach

Source: Compiled from thematic analysis of interview and document corpus for this study, following Braun & Clarke (2006).

Cultural Bridge-Building: Conferences serve as powerful platforms for intercultural dialogue and understanding. Participants consistently emphasized how cultural programming, ceremonial elements, and informal social interactions at conferences create opportunities for cross-cultural learning and relationship-building. This mechanism operates through formal cultural presentations and informal interactions during social events and networking sessions. The cultural dimension of conference diplomacy has been amplified by the inclusion of cultural performances, art exhibitions, and culinary experiences that showcase host country traditions, while creating shared experiences among participants. These elements contribute to what Nye (2004) terms the "attraction" component of soft power by making countries and cultures more appealing to international audiences.

Informal Diplomacy Networks: This study revealed that conferences create unique spaces for informal diplomatic interactions that complement formal diplomatic channels. Participants described how corridor conversations, coffee break discussions, and social events often produced more substantive outcomes than formal sessions. These informal networks persist beyond individual conferences, creating durable relationships that facilitate cooperation in the future. The networking dimension of conferences has evolved significantly through digital transformations. While virtual platforms have expanded reach, participants noted that they struggle to replicate the serendipitous encounters and trust-building that characterize in-person networking. Hybrid formats attempt to bridge this gap but with varying success rates.

National Image Projection: Conferences provide platforms for countries to project desired images and narratives to international audiences. Host countries use conferences to showcase their capabilities, values, and aspirations, while participating in countries uses speaking opportunities and cultural programming to shape perceptions. This mechanism operates through both explicit messaging and implicit demonstration of organizational capabilities and cultural sophistication.

Table 10. Nation Branding Through Conferences—Case Examples.

Country	Conference Strategy	Soft Power Objectives	Measured Outcomes
Singapore	Smart Nation Summit	Technology leadership; innovation hub	Investment and innovation partnerships; brand value
Rwanda	Africa CEO Forum	Post-conflict transformation; business destination	MICE tourism growth; reputation enhancement
Estonia	e-Governance Conference	Digital society pioneer; cybersecurity expertise	Trans governmental learning and model diffusion
Costa Rica	Peace with Nature Summit	Environmental leadership; sustainable development	Sustainability branding and eco-tourism
UAE	World Government Summit	Governance innovation; future readiness	Convening hub positioning
Saudi Arabia	Future Investment Initiative (FII), Middle East Green Initiative, AI Summits	Economic diversification; national image modernization; regional/international convening power	Goal to host 1,000 int'l conferences/year and generate \$25 billion in revenue; increased FDI; global

Note: Illustrative examples based on publicly documented strategies and outcomes; specific indicators vary by source and year. Source: Compiled from national branding and economic development documentation from respective governments and international organizations. And from Saudi Press Agency, 2024; Vision 2030, 2024; Future Investment Initiative Institute.

Conferences catalyze intercultural dialogue and goodwill, support national branding, convene stakeholders around transnational challenges, and facilitate multi-year-old coalitions. However, inclusive gaps and broader geopolitical climate shape outcomes that require deliberate design and conflict sensitivity.

National Strategies for Conference-Based Soft Power Projection: This study identified distinct strategic approaches employed by different nations in leveraging conferences for soft power projection, reflecting their unique geopolitical positions, resources, and foreign policy objectives.

Established Powers: Institutional Leadership and Norm Setting: An analysis of the conference strategies of established powers reveals a consistent focus on reinforcing institutional leadership and engaging in norm-setting activities. Germany’s Munich Security Conference (MSC) and France’s Paris Peace Forum exemplify this approach. These nations strategically position themselves as indispensable conveners and facilitators of international cooperation on critical global challenges, thereby strengthening existing multilateral frameworks and promoting shared values (World Tourism Organization, 2023).

Germany’s Multilateral Mediation Strategy: Germany’s approach to the Munich Security Conference demonstrates how established powers utilize conferences to reinforce their roles as trusted mediators and neutral venues to address sensitive international disputes. The 60th edition of the MSC in 2024 attracted over 500 high-level participants, including 45 heads of state and government, reaffirming Germany’s position as a crucial platform for candid dialogue on pressing security issues, even amidst heightened geopolitical tensions (World Tourism Organization, 2023).

France’s Global Governance Leadership: France’s Paris Peace Forum illustrates how established powers use conferences to promote their vision of global governance. The forum’s consistent emphasis on multilateral solutions, international cooperation, and strengthening of international

institutions reflects France's long-standing commitment to a rule-based international order and its desire to shape global norms (López-Santana, 2020).

By contrast, emerging powers demonstrate different strategic approaches, typically emphasizing economic integration, domestic transformation, and the assertion of regional leadership through conference platforms. Their strategies often directly link conference outcomes to national development objectives (Zhang, 2021; Boao Forum for Asia, 2024; Alshammari, 2023; Saudi Press Agency, 2024).

China's Connectivity Diplomacy: China's strategic use of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) exemplifies how emerging powers leverage conferences to promote policy initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Zhang, 2021). The BFA's contribution to advancing the BRI reflects a nuanced blend of conference diplomacy and broader strategic objectives of economic integration and global influence. For example, the 2024 session enabled the signing of trade and investment agreements estimated at over \$150 billion, highlighting how such events yield concrete economic outcomes that further national development aims to achieve while expanding the international sway (Boao Forum for Asia, 2024).

Saudi Arabia's strategy for leveraging conferences as instruments of soft power is both comprehensive and intricately aligned with its broader ambitions for economic diversification and societal modernization under Vision 2030. This approach is exemplified by a diverse portfolio of high-profile events, including the Future Investment Initiative (FII), specialized cybersecurity forums, artificial intelligence summits, and major climate conferences, such as the Middle East Green Initiative. Each of these gathering's functions not only as a platform for international dialogue but also as a deliberate mechanism for projecting Saudi Arabia's evolving national identity, fostering new global partnerships, and attracting foreign direct investment (Alshammari, 2023; Future Investment Initiative Institute, n.d.; Saudi Press Agency, 2024; Vision 2030, 2024). Saudi Arabia's ambitious goals for developing its conference industry are evidenced by its stated objective of hosting 1,000 international conferences annually, with the intention of generating \$25 billion in revenue (Saudi Press Agency, 2024). This aggressive expansion was designed to position the Kingdom as a central convener in critical domains, including finance, technology, and sustainability, thus reinforcing its relevance and stature on the global stage. Furthermore, the integration of conference diplomacy with the nation's economic policies demonstrates a nuanced understanding of soft power. By attracting thought leaders, policymakers, and industry pioneers, the country aims to influence regional and international agendas while rebranding itself as a progressive, forward-thinking actor in international affairs (Vision 2030, 2024). Through these multifaceted efforts, Saudi Arabia seeks not only to stimulate domestic growth and diversify away from oil dependency but also to reshape perceptions and establish itself as an indispensable hub for global collaboration and policy innovation (Future Investment Initiative Institute, n.d.; Saudi Press Agency, 2024). This deliberate fusion of conference hosting and soft power projection reflects an evolving model of international engagement that prioritizes both tangible economic outcomes and the subtle, enduring influence of reputation and connectivity (Saudi Press Agency, 2024; Vision 2030, 2024).

Policy Innovation and Agenda-Setting: Conferences serve as laboratories for policy innovation, bringing together diverse perspectives to address complex global challenges. Participants described how conferences enabled policy experimentation, norm development, and consensus building around emerging issues. This function is particularly important for issues that lack established institutional frameworks or that require multi-stakeholder coordination. The agenda-setting power of conferences extends beyond immediate participants to influence broader policy discussions through media coverage, the publication of conference proceedings, and follow-up initiatives. Major conferences often produce declarations, frameworks, or action plans that shape subsequent policy development at national and international levels.

Economic Signaling and Investment Attraction: Economic conferences and business forums serve dual functions such as networking venues and investment signaling mechanisms. Countries use these platforms to attract foreign direct investment, promote trade relationships, and showcase

economic opportunities. The presence of high-level political figures at business conferences signals a government commitment to specific sectors or partnerships. The economic dimension of conference diplomacy has become increasingly sophisticated, with countries developing comprehensive strategies to integrate business promotion with broader diplomatic objectives. These efforts can be measured through investment commitments, trade agreements, and partnership announcements that emerge from conference participation.

Digital Transformation Impact: The digital transformation of conferences has created new possibilities for soft power projection while introducing challenges related to access and authenticity. Virtual and hybrid formats have democratized participation by reducing costs and travel barriers, thus enabling broader international engagement. However, participants noted that digital formats struggle to replicate the relationship-building and cultural-exchange aspects of in-person events. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital adoption, forcing rapid innovation in virtual conference formats. Organizations have experimented with immersive technologies, AI-powered networking, and asynchronous engagement models. While these innovations expanded, they also highlighted digital divides that excluded participants without adequate technological access.

Key Findings

This study confirms that informal, networked interactions at conferences are pivotal to soft power, enabling trust-based cooperation and policy diffusion (Hamilton & Langhorne, 2011; Cull, 2019). Hybridization democratizes access and reduces costs/emissions, but can underperform on serendipitous networking compared to in-person formats (Achakulvisut et al., 2020; Klöwer et al., 2020; Manor, 2019). National image projection is achieved by curating cultural narratives, showcasing innovation, and leading to global issues (Nye, 2004; Peterson, 2022). Inclusivity barriers—financial, logistical, and digital—require intentional mitigation (ITU 2023). Growing emphasis on the governance of emerging technologies and AI reveals conferences as arenas for norm formation and standard setting (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2021).

The findings revealed five key mechanisms through which conferences operate as soft power instruments, each with distinct characteristics and effectiveness under different conditions. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, but operate simultaneously, creating synergistic effects that amplify the overall soft power impact.

Interpretation of Data: Conferences operationalize soft power through five key mechanisms: (1) informal networking, (2) cultural showcasing, (3) idea leadership, (4) economic signaling, and (5) coalition building. These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing and context dependent. The digital turn expands reach and participation but changes interaction quality and raises equity and security considerations (Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Achakulvisut et al., 2020; ITU, 2023). Geopolitical tensions can overshadow outcomes; conflict-sensitive design and facilitation can help preserve convening value in polarized environments (Munich Security Conference, 2024).

Table 12. Soft Power Mechanisms in International Conferences.

Mechanism	Operating Principle	Observable Effects	Strategic Value
Informal networking	Trust-building via personal ties	Partnerships; de-escalation	High—durable relationships
Cultural showcasing	Attraction via narratives/heritage	Image gains; tourism spillovers	Medium-high—shapes perceptions
Idea leadership	Influence via thought leadership	Policy uptake; norm diffusion	High—agenda-setting/norm diffusion

Mechanism	Operating Principle	Observable Effects	Strategic Value
Economic signaling	Signaling opportunities	Investment/trade partnerships	Medium—tangible benefits
Coalition-building	Issue-based alliances	Multilateral cooperation	High—amplifies influence

Source: Compiled from analysis following theoretical frameworks by Cull (2019); Hamilton & Langhorne (2011); Nye (2004).

Data interpretation reveals complex interactions between these mechanisms, with their effectiveness varying based on conference design, participant composition, geopolitical context, and technological format. The most successful conferences strategically combine multiple mechanisms while adapting to the contextual constraints and opportunities.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that convening power has become a central modality through which soft power can be exercised in a complex international system. The discussion examines the strategic implications of these findings and their broader significance in international relations and diplomatic practices.

Strategic Implications of Conference-Based Soft Power: The emergence of conferences as central instruments of soft power reflects broader changes in international relations, including the proliferation of actors, complex interdependence of global challenges, and increasing importance of legitimacy and attraction in international influence. This study has several strategic implications emerge from this analysis.

Networked diplomacy at scale: Conferences create structured opportunities for repeated interactions among diverse actors, facilitating trust, social learning, and policy diffusion beyond formal negotiation rooms (Hamilton & Langhorne, 2011; Cull, 2019). These ties can underpin minilateral coalitions and coalitions-of-the-willing that advance cooperation despite gridlock in formal institutions, particularly in climate and technology governance (UNFCCC, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). The networking function of conferences has proven particularly valuable for addressing complex global challenges that require coordination among multiple stakeholders. For example, climate governance relies heavily on network relationships developed through successive COP conferences to maintain momentum between formal negotiation sessions (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019).

Hybridization as a durable feature: the normalization of hybrid events increases reach, reduces costs and emissions, and supports the inclusion of under-represented groups (Achakulvisut et al., 2020; Klöwer et al., 2020). However, it can create a two-speed participation dynamic in which in-person attendees accrue more serendipitous benefits, and time zone, bandwidth, and platform differences stratify engagement (Manor, 2019; ITU, 2023). Purposeful design, such as dedicated virtual networking, asynchronous content, and equitable Q&A moderation, can mitigate these disparities. The hybrid model represents a fundamental shift in conference diplomacy that extends beyond pandemic-era adaptation. Organizations are developing sophisticated strategies that leverage the strengths of both virtual and in-person engagement, while minimizing the weaknesses of each format.

Public-private convergence: The rise of multi-stakeholder platforms reflects the diffusion of governance authority and expertise. Business events and summits double in diplomatic stages, supporting economic signaling while shaping policy frames (Peterson, 2022). This produces opportunities for co-governance and resource pooling but also raises accountability and legitimacy questions that require transparent rules of engagement.

The blurring of boundaries between public and private diplomacy has created new opportunities for influence, while raising questions about democratic accountability and representation in global governance processes.

Norm entrepreneurship and standard setting: Global debates on AI ethics, cyber norms, and platform governance show that conferences are incubators of soft law and standards (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; Munich Security Conference, 2024). These foras enable norm entrepreneurship by states, firms, and civil society through policy papers, declarations, and technical working groups, a form of agenda-setting soft power that can prefigure formal treaties. The norm-setting function of conferences has become increasingly important as traditional treaty-making processes struggle to keep pace with technological and social changes. Conferences provide more flexible and inclusive venues for developing governance frameworks to address emerging issues.

Sustainability and risk management: The conference sector faces a sustainability imperative. Evidence has shown that restructured event formats can dramatically reduce the carbon footprint of participation (Klöwer et al., 2020). Simultaneously, digitization brings cybersecurity, privacy, and mis/disinformation risks into the convening environment (Munich Security Conference, 2024). Organizers should embed environmental standards and digital risk governance protocols.

Geopolitical headwinds and conflict sensitivity: In periods of geopolitical tension and sanctions regimes, convening risk politicization, selective participation, or parallel blocs. Conflict-sensitive design—neutral facilitation, issue-based tracks, Chatham House rules where appropriate—can preserve space for problem-solving and technical cooperation even amid rivalry (Hamilton & Langhorne, 2011; Munich Security Conference, 2024).

Inclusion by design: Digital divide and cost barriers limit participation from the Global South and smaller institutions. Funded participation, translation services, time-zone rotation, and mentorship support can expand voice and improve knowledge circulation, thus enhancing both the legitimacy and effectiveness of conference diplomacy (Manor, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

Table 13. Strategic Value Assessment of Conference Diplomacy.

Dimension	Traditional Diplomacy	Conference Diplomacy	Comparative Advantage
Relationship building	Formal, hierarchical	Informal, networked	More effective for trust-building
Cost efficiency	High	Moderate	Lower marginal costs
Reach and scale	Limited, bilateral	Extensive, multilateral	Greater participation
Cultural exchange	Structured, limited	Organic, extensive	Expanded cultural interaction
Policy innovation	Slow, bureaucratic	Dynamic, collaborative	Faster agenda iteration
Public engagement	Minimal	Significant	Greater public visibility

Note: Comparative advantages are generalized from the literature and industry evidence; actual effect sizes vary by context. Source: Compiled from Hamilton & Langhorne (2011); Hocking & Melissen (2015); ICCA (2022); Manor (2019); Munich Security Conference (2024).

Implications of Findings for Theory and Practice: The findings have significant implications for both the theoretical understanding of soft power and practical approaches to conference diplomacy. This research contributes to soft power theory by demonstrating how convening power operates as a distinct mechanism of influence that combines the elements of attraction, agenda-setting, and relationship-building.

Theoretical contributions: This study extends Nye's (2004) soft power framework by identifying the specific mechanisms by which attraction translates into influence in conference settings. These findings support theories of complex interdependence by demonstrating how multiple channels of communication and interaction create possibilities for cooperation, even in competitive international environments.

Practical implications: The findings suggest several key priorities for policymakers and conference organizers: (a) relationship facilitation and coalition building, (b) hybrid participation equity, (c) integrated cultural programming, (d) inclusion of funds and translation, and (e) sustainability and digital-risk governance. Measure frameworks for convening impact, integrating quantitative and qualitative indicators, can support learning and accountability.

Table 14. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations.

Finding	Policy Implication	Strategic Recommendation	Expected Outcome
Informal networks are crucial	Invest in relationship facilitation	Structured networking programs and follow-ups	Stronger cooperation
Digital divide in participation	Address capacity and access	Provide digital participation support	Greater inclusion
Cultural programming matters	Integrate cultural diplomacy	Curate cultural content aligned to objectives	Enhanced image and understanding
Small nation marginalization	Ensure equitable representation	Establish participation funds and quotas	More diverse voices
Language barriers persist	Provide multilingual access	Deploy high-quality interpretation/AI tools	Enhanced engagement

Source: Compiled from analysis informed by Hocking & Melissen (2015); ICCA (2022); ITU (2023); UNESCO (2022).

Comparison with Existing Literature: The findings align with Nye's soft power framework by demonstrating attraction and agenda-setting through convening (Nye, 2004) and with the emphasis of complex interdependence on multiple channels of interaction (Keohane & Nye, 2011). New public diplomacy scholarship anticipates the networked, multi-actor nature of contemporary conferences (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010; Snow, 2020). The digital diplomacy literature (Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Manor, 2019) aligns with the evidence of hybridization and its effects. This study emphasizes sustainability, digital risks, and the consolidation of non-Western convening hubs, thus extending the geography and modalities of conference diplomacy. The findings also contribute to the understanding of how soft power operates in multipolar systems, where multiple actors compete to set agendas and shape norms.

Table 15. Comparison with Major Theoretical Frameworks.

Theoretical Framework	Key Tenets	Study Findings	New Contributions
Nye's soft power (2004)	Attraction over coercion	Conferences as attractive forums	Sustainability and digital risk
Keohane & Nye's interdependence (2011)	Multiple channels of interaction	Conferences as Transnational channels	Hybrid equity challenges

Theoretical Framework	Key Tenets	Study Findings	New Contributions
New public diplomacy (2005–)	Networked influence and multi-actor governance	Informal networks and multi-actor governance	Inclusion-by-design practices
Digital diplomacy (2015–2019)	Tech transforms diplomatic practice	Hybridization reshapes formats	Measurement and impact frameworks

Source: Compiled from Hocking & Melissen (2015); Keohane & Nye (2011); Manor (2019); Melissen (2005); Nye (2004); Snow (2020).

The findings confirm and extend existing theoretical frameworks. While confirming the basic mechanisms of soft power and complex interdependence, this research reveals new challenges and opportunities created by digital transformation and changing geopolitical contexts.

Conclusions

International seminars and conferences are no longer peripheral to diplomacy; they are core engines of soft power in a fragmented and rapidly changing world. This qualitative study shows how convenings foster intercultural dialogue, trust-based networks, policy learning, and economic signaling mechanisms that translate attraction into influence (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2019). The hybridization of convenings has expanded the reach and reduced barriers and emissions (Achakulvisut et al., 2020; Klöwer et al., 2020), even as new design practices are required to safeguard equity, interaction quality, and digital security (Hocking & Melissen, 2015; ITU, 2023).

This research demonstrates that conference diplomacy has evolved from a supplementary tool of international relations to a central mechanism for exercising soft power in the twenty-first century. This evolution reflects broader changes in the international system, including the proliferation of actors, complexity of global challenges, and increasing importance of legitimacy and attraction in international influence.

Key Contributions and Future Directions: This study makes several key contributions to the understanding of conference-based soft power. First, it identifies and analyzes five specific mechanisms through which conferences influence soft power resources: informal networking, cultural showcasing, idea leadership, economic signaling, and coalition building. Second, it examines how digital transformation has altered these mechanisms, creating new opportunities for inclusion and introducing challenges related to equity and authenticity. Third, it provides evidence-based recommendations for optimizing conference designs to maximize soft power effectiveness while addressing sustainability and inclusive concerns. Geopolitical headwinds underscore the need for conflict-sensitive designs that preserve issue-based co-operation. The rise of convening hubs in Asia and the Middle East signals a more multipolar convening landscape, with implications for agenda leadership and norm entrepreneurship (Shambaugh, 2021; Young, 2022). Sustainability commitments should be mainstreamed in event strategies to align conferences with climate goals while maintaining the benefits of in-person engagement when most impactful (Klöwer et al., 2020; UNFCCC, 2022).

Practical Recommendations and Implementation: For policymakers and organizers, the path forward includes embedding equity in hybrid participation, investing in relationship facilitation, integrating cultural programming, adopting sustainability standards, and instituting robust impact measurement. This study provides a comprehensive framework for implementing such recommendations through strategic planning, resource allocation, and performance monitoring.

The implementation of these recommendations requires coordination among multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, international organizations, private sector partners, and civil society groups. Success depends on developing shared standards and best practices while allowing flexibility for context-specific adaptation.

Scholarly Implications and Future Research: Future research should examine longitudinal network effects, equity outcomes across formats and regions, and governance of digital risks in convening environments. This study opens several avenues for future investigation, including comparative analysis of different conference types, measurement of long-term soft power impacts, and examination of how artificial intelligence and emerging technologies might further transform conference diplomacy.

The scholarly implications extend beyond diplomatic studies to include contributions to international relations theory, public policy analysis, and organizational behavior. The interdisciplinary nature of conference diplomacy requires continued collaboration among scholars from multiple fields in order to fully understand its mechanisms and effects. As diplomatic practices continue to evolve, conferences will remain pivotal arenas where ideas, cultures, and multi-stakeholder visions intersect, advancing cooperation, shaping norms, and extending the reach of soft power. The continued evolution of conference diplomacy requires ongoing research and analysis to understand emerging trends and optimize outcomes for global cooperation and peace.

Recommendations

To harness conferences as soft power tools, this study proposes a comprehensive framework of strategic recommendations organized into five key dimensions: inclusivity enhancement, digital integration, strategic planning, cultural integration, and evaluation systems.

Table 16. Comprehensive Strategic Recommendations Framework.

Recommendation Category	Specific Actions	Implementation Timeline	Success Metrics
Inclusivity enhancement	- Participation funds - Visa facilitation - Translation services - Mentorship programs	6–12 months	- Increased Global South participation - More diverse speakers - More multilingual sessions
Digital integration	- Hybrid standards - VR/AR pilots - Digital networking - Cybersecurity protocols	12–18 months	- Widespread hybrid adoption - Higher satisfaction with digital tools
Strategic planning	- Align with soft power goals - Multi-year strategies - Impact assessment - Cross-ministry coordination	3–6 months	- Clear ROI and policy influence
Cultural integration	- Curated cultural components - Showcase innovation - Immersive experiences	Ongoing	- Improved cultural understanding - Enhanced agreements and image metrics
Evaluation systems	- Real-time feedback - Longitudinal studies - Soft power metrics - Best-practice database	6–9 months	- Evidence-based improvements - Greater efficiency

Source: Compiled from analysis informed by Hocking & Melissen (2015); ICCA (2022); ITU (2023); Klöwer et al. (2020); Manor (2019); UNFCCC (2022); UNESCO (2022); WHO (2021).

These recommendations provide a roadmap for enhancing the soft power effectiveness of international conferences, while addressing contemporary challenges related to inclusivity, sustainability, and digital transformation. Implementation requires coordinated effort among multiple stakeholders and a sustained commitment to learning and adaptation.

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Short Biography of Author

Dr. Safran Safar Almakaty is renowned for his extensive contributions to the fields of communication, media studies and Higher Education, particularly within Saudi Arabia and the broader Middle East. Serving as a Professor at Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU) in Riyadh, Dr. Almakaty has played a pivotal role in shaping the academic discourse around media transformation and international communication. Holding a Master of Arts degree from Michigan State University and a PhD from the University of Kentucky, Dr. Almakaty brings a robust interdisciplinary perspective to his research and teaching. His scholarly work explores the dynamics of media evolution in the region, analyzing how new technologies, global trends, and sociopolitical forces are reshaping public discourse and information exchange.

Beyond academia, Dr. Almakaty is a sought-after consultant on communication strategy, corporate communications, and international relations, advising government agencies, corporate entities, and non-profit organizations. His expertise includes the development of higher education policies, focusing on the intersection of media literacy, digital transformation, and educational reform.

Dr. Almakaty's research spans a range of topics, from the impact of hybrid conference formats on diplomatic effectiveness to the role of strategic conferences in advancing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiatives. He has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, contributed to international forums, and collaborated on cross-cultural research projects, positioning himself as a bridge between regional scholarship and global thought leadership.

As an educator, Dr. Almakaty is deeply committed to mentoring the next generation of scholars and practitioners, fostering an environment of inquiry, innovation, and academic excellence. He continues to influence the landscape of media and communication, championing initiatives that promote international engagement, effective public diplomacy, and the modernization of knowledge institutions throughout the Middle East.

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