

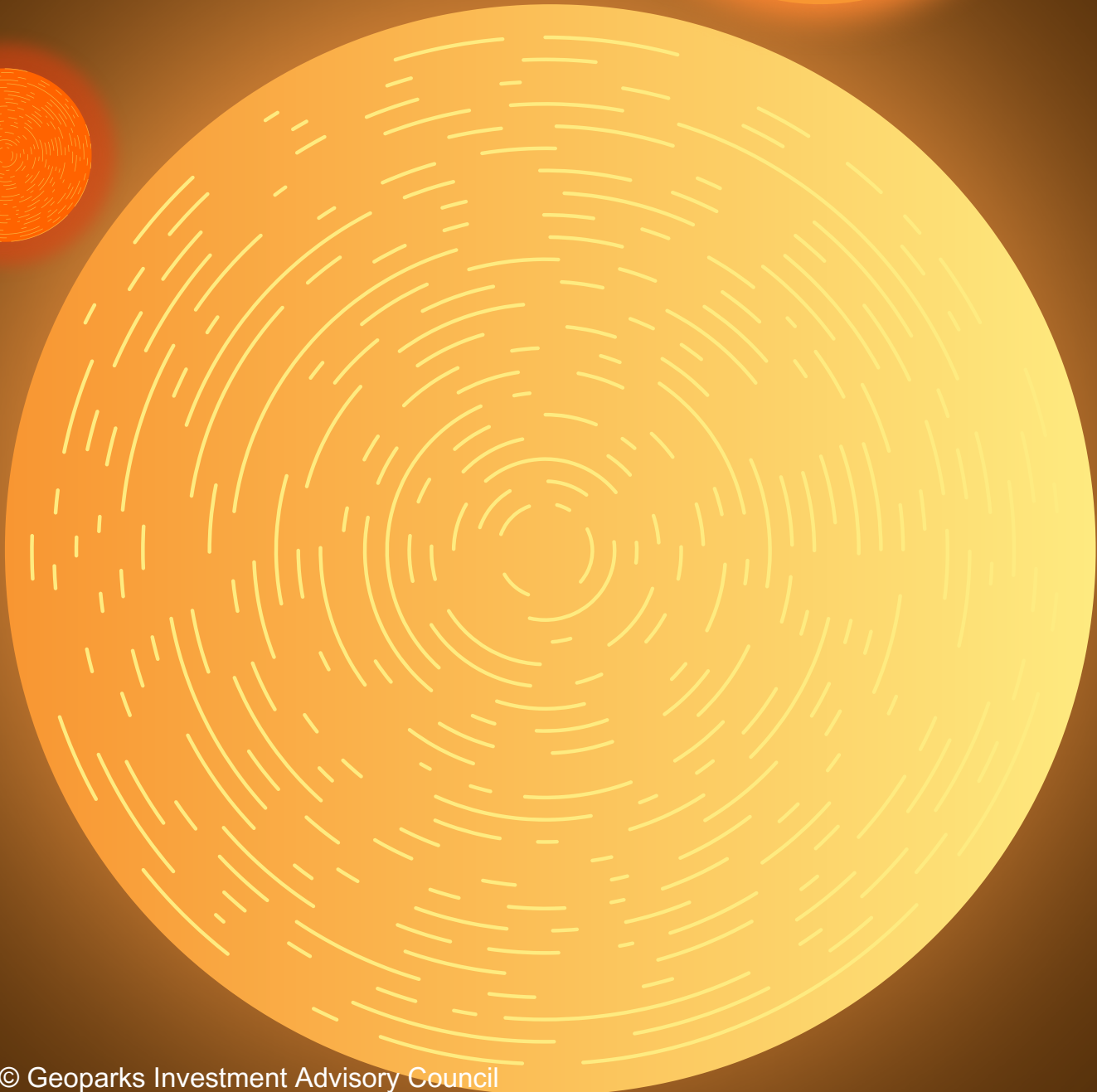
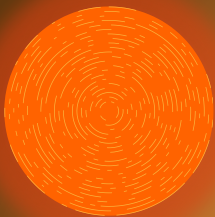
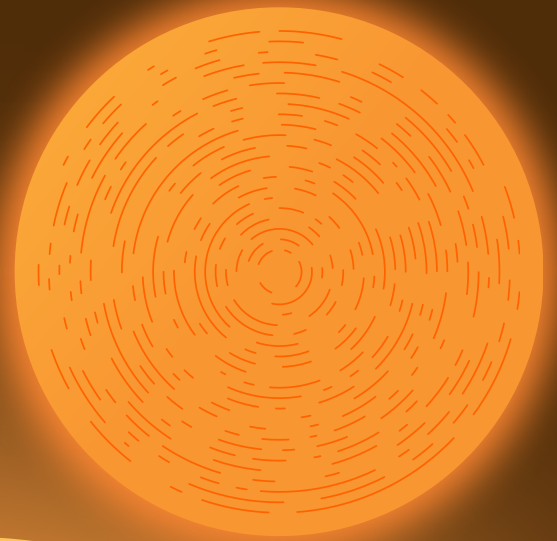


Geoparks Investment
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Geoparks as a *Soft Power*

Between the dominant
and the absent

Policy and Geopolitics ·
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Geoparks as Instruments of Soft Power

The Global Rise of China, the Strategic Potential of Indonesia, and the Absence of the U.S.

In a world where diplomacy is increasingly conducted through influence rather than force, the concept of soft power—the ability of a country to shape preferences and attract others through culture, values, and policies—has become central to international relations. One rising yet underexplored tool in this domain is the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network (GGN).

UNESCO defines geoparks as “single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development.” More than just protected landscapes, UNESCO Global Geoparks are now evolving into powerful instruments of national branding, public diplomacy, and cultural soft power. As the United States remains absent from both UNESCO and the Global Geoparks initiative, countries like China and Indonesia are actively using geoparks to project cultural prestige, demonstrate environmental leadership, and build global influence. In this new frontier of diplomacy, geoparks are emerging as quiet, yet powerful stages of global competition.

Geoparks and Soft Power: A Natural Alliance

The concept of soft power, introduced by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, redefines how nations exert influence on the world stage. Rather than relying on military or economic pressure, soft power rests on the ability to attract, persuade, and shape international preferences through culture, values, and intellectual capital. In an age where global narratives are shaped as much by perception as by policy, the tools of soft power have become central to diplomacy—and geoparks are emerging as one of its most innovative instruments.

UNESCO Global Geoparks represent a seamless convergence of natural heritage, scientific knowledge, cultural identity, and community engagement. They are more than just scenic landscapes; they are living embodiments of a nation’s environmental consciousness, cultural richness, and developmental aspirations. This makes them uniquely positioned to function as platforms of soft power.

Geoparks offer several avenues through which nations can project soft power:

- **Cultural and Scientific Storytelling:** Each geopark tells a unique story rooted in geological history, often intertwined with local culture, indigenous knowledge, and biodiversity. By preserving and sharing these narratives with a global audience, geoparks allow countries to frame their identity in terms of sustainability, heritage, and innovation.
- **Educational Diplomacy:** Many geoparks serve as open-air classrooms, hosting international researchers, students, and community education programs. These initiatives encourage the exchange of knowledge across borders and foster a shared commitment to environmental stewardship.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Geoparks promote responsible travel that benefits local communities while showcasing national landscapes and traditions. Tourism becomes a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, generating not just economic value, but emotional connections and cross-cultural understanding.
- **UNESCO Branding and Global Prestige:** Inclusion in the Global Geoparks Network bestows international legitimacy and recognition. For nations, this can elevate their image on the world stage, reinforcing their commitment to global values such as sustainability, multilateral cooperation, and cultural diversity.

By integrating the pillars of conservation, education, and sustainable development, geoparks transcend the boundaries of traditional diplomacy. They represent a soft power ecosystem—where natural beauty meets scientific inquiry, and where local narratives are elevated to global conversations. As international competition increasingly hinges on who can tell the most compelling and credible story, geoparks give countries the narrative space to assert leadership through attraction, rather than assertion.

China: Leading the World Through Geopark Diplomacy

Among the nations participating in the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network, China stands as the undisputed leader. With 47 designated geoparks, representing over 22% of the total global network, China has not only embraced the concept—it has elevated geoparks into a strategic tool of soft power and national branding.

China's use of geoparks is far from symbolic. It reflects a multi-layered approach to diplomacy, where nature, heritage, policy, and geopolitics converge. These parks are embedded within a broader framework of foreign policy and environmental leadership, positioning China as a nation that champions green development, cultural preservation, and scientific cooperation.

Panda Diplomacy and Cultural Symbolism

Perhaps the most well-known expression of China's soft power is Panda diplomacy—the global fascination with the Giant Panda, an animal endemic to China's Sichuan province and a recurring presence in many of its geoparks. These pandas are not only icons of Chinese biodiversity but also instruments of cultural diplomacy, gifted or loaned to countries as gestures of goodwill.

By embedding panda conservation programs within geoparks, China connects its environmental efforts to its national image, using nature to tell a story of peace, harmony, and stewardship. The panda becomes more than a species—it becomes a narrative vehicle that reinforces China's cultural charm and ecological commitment.

Geoparks and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Geoparks also play a subtle but important role within the Belt and Road Initiative, China's expansive infrastructure and diplomatic project spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. Some geoparks are situated along key BRI corridors, allowing China to frame sustainability, cultural cooperation, and scientific research as central pillars of the initiative.

These geoparks host international forums, exchange programs, and research collaborations that reinforce China's image as a responsible global partner, offering public goods like climate education, cultural heritage preservation, and ecotourism development. This positions China as an alternative model of global development—one rooted in harmony between nature and progress.

Environmental Diplomacy and Climate Leadership

China has pledged to reach peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060—ambitious goals that require visible and symbolic platforms to demonstrate progress. Geoparks serve this function well, showcasing renewable energy installations, reforestation projects, low-carbon tourism, and community-based conservation.

By highlighting these efforts within geopark frameworks, China reinforces its commitment to the global climate agenda and strengthens its voice in multilateral environmental forums such as COP. These parks become living laboratories for green transition, attracting international visitors, scientists, and policymakers alike.

A Soft Power Ecosystem

Through this triad of panda diplomacy, Belt and Road integration, and climate action, China has transformed its geoparks into a soft power ecosystem. These spaces do not just promote tourism—they cultivate influence, build trust, and project an image of a nation that is innovative, ecologically responsible, and culturally rich.

In doing so, China has effectively set the benchmark for what geopark diplomacy can achieve—not just as a matter of heritage preservation, but as a dynamic, forward-looking instrument of foreign policy. At a time when global narratives are increasingly shaped by sustainability and cultural identity, China's strategic use of geoparks has propelled it to the forefront of soft power innovation.

The U.S. Absence: A Strategic Gap

The United States is home to some of the most globally recognized and scientifically significant geological landscapes on the planet. From the geysers of Yellowstone and the canyons of Arizona, to the volcanic terrain of Hawaii, these natural wonders have long symbolized America's environmental richness and national pride. Yet, despite this unparalleled natural heritage, the U.S. remains conspicuously absent from the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network.

This gap is not due to a lack of eligible sites or scientific capacity. On the contrary, the U.S. arguably possesses some of the strongest contenders for UNESCO designation. The issue is political. The United States withdrew from UNESCO in 2018, citing concerns over governance and perceived biases. Since then, a reluctance to fully reengage in multilateral cultural and environmental institutions has kept it on the sidelines—even as geoparks have grown into a vital global platform for soft power and sustainability diplomacy.

A Vacuum with Real Consequences

The U.S.'s continued absence has created a strategic vacuum, one that goes beyond symbolic disengagement and into tangible loss of influence:

- **Loss of Narrative Influence:** Without participation in the Global Geoparks Network, the U.S. is unable to shape evolving global conversations around geoheritage, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism. While China, Indonesia, and other nations use geoparks to promote national narratives and global cooperation, the U.S. remains a silent observer.
- **Weakened Climate Diplomacy:** While successive administrations have made climate change a foreign policy priority, the failure to utilize UNESCO platforms like geoparks undermines that leadership. Symbolic action matters—especially in a world where environmental credibility is as much about perception and participation as policy.
- **Unrealized Soft Power Potential:** U.S. national parks already function as powerful cultural symbols, attracting millions of international tourists annually. However, their global impact remains limited by the absence of formal UNESCO designation. Without integration into global frameworks, these parks miss the opportunity to amplify their reach and diplomatic value.

Redefining the Rules Without the U.S.

As China expands its footprint through geoparks and climate diplomacy, and countries like Indonesia position geoparks as pillars of national branding, the United States risks becoming an outlier in the soft power realignment of the 21st century. By choosing not to engage, the U.S. effectively allows others to set the terms of the global sustainability narrative—from how nature is preserved to how environmental cooperation is showcased.

This passivity is particularly striking in an era where soft power increasingly shapes international influence, and where cultural and ecological diplomacy are no longer secondary to economic or military might. Geoparks, by their very design, integrate science, culture, and sustainability—three arenas where the United States has traditionally excelled. But without participation, even the most iconic American landscapes remain domestically powerful but globally disconnected.

A Missed Opportunity for Re Engagement

Rejoining UNESCO and actively pursuing Global Geopark designations for select American sites would serve as a low-cost, high-impact reentry point into global cultural diplomacy. It would align U.S. domestic environmental values with its foreign policy rhetoric, and reinforce its commitment to multilateralism, heritage preservation, and global education.

In a geopolitical environment increasingly defined by who leads in sustainability, storytelling, and science, the U.S. cannot afford to remain on the sidelines. Geoparks may seem like quiet diplomacy—but they are proving to be loud instruments of global influence.

Indonesia: The Rising Geopark Power in ASEAN

Following China's lead in leveraging geoparks as instruments of soft power, Indonesia is emerging as a regional force in geopark diplomacy. With 12 UNESCO Global Geoparks, 13 national-level geoparks, and over 110 documented geosites, Indonesia is building not just a network of geological conservation areas—but a strategic platform for national branding, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable development.

Indonesia's strength lies in its extraordinary natural and cultural diversity. Spanning more than 17,000 islands, the country is home to an array of landscapes—from active volcanoes and karst mountains to marine ecosystems and ancient fossil beds. But beyond its physical geography, Indonesia also boasts hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, and living traditions—an ideal backdrop for soft power engagement through heritage tourism, storytelling, and ecological leadership.

Unlike some of its regional peers, Indonesia has long prioritized soft power over hard power in its foreign policy toolkit. Campaigns like “Wonderful Indonesia” have promoted its rich culture, hospitality, cuisine, and natural beauty to global audiences. Now, with the continued expansion of its geopark network, the country has an opportunity to elevate this branding strategy by positioning geoparks as ambassadors of its national identity and global values.

To fully realize this potential, Indonesia must take a proactive and creative approach in transforming geoparks from conservation zones into strategic cultural assets. The following six strategies offer a roadmap for strengthening Indonesia's soft power through geopark diplomacy:

Position Geoparks within National Branding

Integrating geoparks into the “Wonderful Indonesia” campaign would amplify the message of sustainability, harmony with nature, and cultural diversity. A dedicated sub-brand—“GeoIndonesia”—could signal a modern, environmentally conscious Indonesia rooted in heritage and wisdom.

Showcase Geoparks at International Events

Indonesia should leverage global platforms such as World Expos, COP climate summits, and international tourism fairs to spotlight its geoparks as models of nature-based development. Geoparks can become living proof of Indonesia's commitment to climate action, indigenous rights, and community-led conservation.

Develop a Global Geopark Identity

To increase recognition and coherence, Indonesia should create a unified visual identity and branding system for all its geoparks. This includes consistent storytelling tools, visual assets, and multilingual communication strategies that spotlight local voices, indigenous knowledge, and historical narratives unique to each site.

Forge International Geopark Partnerships

By building sister geopark relationships with countries like Vietnam, Brazil, and France, Indonesia can promote cross-cultural exchange and raise its diplomatic profile. These partnerships can include joint research, youth exchanges, and co-branded ecotourism programs that bridge regions and strengthen ASEAN-EU or ASEAN-South America ties.

Go Digital and Immersive

In the digital age, global audiences increasingly experience the world online. Indonesia can lead by launching interactive campaigns, such as “12 Weeks, 12 Geoparks,” targeting international students, travelers, and educators. Integrating AR/VR experiences can also bring remote sites to life, expanding the reach of its soft power beyond physical borders.

Celebrate Intangible Culture

Indonesia’s geoparks are not just about rocks and landscapes—they’re about the people who live among them. By hosting local festivals, culinary events, traditional dance performances, and craft exhibitions within geopark sites, Indonesia can turn these spaces into vibrant stages for its intangible cultural heritage. This not only supports local economies but also reinforces a national image of diversity, resilience, and harmony with nature.

Leading the Global South in Geopark Diplomacy

As climate, culture, and sustainability become the new currency of international influence, Indonesia has a clear opportunity to lead. Its combination of ecological wealth, cultural depth, and diplomatic experience makes it a strong candidate to champion geopark-based soft power across the Global South.

By embracing these strategic recommendations, Indonesia can strengthen its role as a soft power innovator—not only in ASEAN, but on the world stage. In doing so, it not only advances its national interests but contributes to a broader narrative: one in which natural heritage becomes a foundation for peace, collaboration, and global understanding.

A New Frontier of Global Competition

In the 20th century, the pillars of global supremacy were defined by hard power—nations competed in space exploration, nuclear arms races, and industrial might. But the landscape of global influence in the 21st century is shifting dramatically. Today, soft power is the new battleground, where culture, climate leadership, and global trust are the currencies of status and sway.

As the world confronts existential challenges—from climate change and biodiversity loss to cultural homogenization and resource scarcity—nations are being judged not just by how strong they are, but by how responsibly they lead, how compellingly they tell their story, and how inclusively they engage the world. In this emerging paradigm, UNESCO Global Geoparks are becoming a subtle yet powerful arena of international competition.

Geoparks as Geopolitical Assets

Geoparks are more than natural showcases—they are platforms for narrative diplomacy. They allow countries to communicate who they are and what they stand for: their scientific sophistication, their environmental ethics, their cultural authenticity, and their commitment to sustainability. In a global information economy where perception is power, geoparks offer nations the ability to shape how they are seen—not through force, but through fascination and inspiration.

China has understood this early. With 47 UNESCO Global Geoparks—by far the largest number globally—it has seamlessly woven geoparks into its soft power toolkit. These sites advance its ecological narrative, host diplomatic events, and support strategic goals like the Belt and Road Initiative. In short, China has weaponized soft power through geoparks—quietly, effectively, and globally.

Indonesia, too, is on the rise. With a growing network of geoparks and a track record of soft power diplomacy, it is well-positioned to become a leader in sustainable tourism and cultural branding in Southeast Asia and beyond. Its embrace of geoparks represents a forward-thinking model for Global South nations, one that fuses heritage and development with diplomacy and digital outreach.

The U.S.: An Absent Superpower in a Critical Arena

Meanwhile, the United States remains absent from this emerging soft power frontier. Despite hosting some of the world's most iconic geological sites—Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Death Valley—it has no UNESCO Global Geoparks, due to its withdrawal from UNESCO and ongoing political hesitation to re-engage in multilateral cultural diplomacy.

This absence is more than symbolic. It represents a strategic blind spot in America's global engagement. At a time when environmental leadership and cultural storytelling are defining new rules of influence, the U.S. is ceding narrative ground to nations with clearer strategies and deeper international integration. While it may lead in innovation and science, it lags in connecting those strengths to global legitimacy, trust-building, and multilateral visibility.

The Future Is Soft, Strategic, and Sustainable

As the 21st century unfolds, the contest between nations will increasingly play out in spaces that are collaborative rather than coercive, inspirational rather than intimidating. The new geopolitics will be written not only in treaties and trade deals, but in cultural festivals, ecotourism experiences, and cross-border environmental cooperation.

Geoparks—at the intersection of geology, community, and diplomacy—are uniquely suited to be the flag-bearers of this transformation.

They are the arenas where nations quietly compete for hearts and minds, where storytelling becomes statecraft, and where sustainability is not just an ecological goal, but a diplomatic identity. In this sense, geoparks are not just protected areas—they are platforms of planetary influence.

Conclusion: Time for a Rebalancing

As the global order shifts from military alliances and economic dominance to narrative influence and sustainable leadership, it is clear that the tools of diplomacy must evolve. In this redefined landscape, UNESCO Global Geoparks represent more than conservation zones—they are strategic instruments of identity, cooperation, and international soft power.

For rising powers like China, geoparks have become hubs of environmental storytelling, allowing the country to showcase its ecological values, scientific achievements, and cultural symbols—most famously, the panda—as cornerstones of its global persona. For Indonesia, geoparks are emerging as key platforms for cultural diplomacy and sustainable tourism, rooted in a long tradition of peaceful, people-centered foreign policy. Both nations demonstrate how geoparks can translate natural heritage into geopolitical capital, especially in the Global South.

But for the United States, the continued absence from the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network marks a growing disconnect between its environmental excellence at home and its narrative influence abroad. With iconic landscapes that have inspired global environmental movements and a vast network of national parks admired around the world, the U.S. holds immense untapped potential. By rejoining UNESCO and seeking Global Geopark designation for its extraordinary sites, the U.S. could restore credibility, rebuild multilateral ties, and reassert its leadership in global environmental diplomacy.

This is more than an institutional decision—it is a strategic imperative. In an era defined by climate urgency, cultural fragility, and the race for sustainable futures, geoparks offer a platform for countries to tell compelling stories—stories of resilience, harmony with nature, scientific progress, and shared humanity. Those who seize this moment to connect their landscapes with their values—and to share those values with the world—will shape the soft power architecture of the 21st century.

Geoparks are not just where Earth's stories are preserved. They are where nations write their future.

About the Author



Lalu Ladeva is a Research Analyst at the Geoparks Investment Advisory Council (GIAC), where he is responsible for the Council's related matters to research and the business development of the council. He supports GIAC's in various ways in Public Policy and Geopolitics, International Business and Trade, and Organization Strategy. His expertise lies in the geopolitics, particularly navigating between major and middle power issues especially in security and soft/hard power topics. Previously, he was a Research Assistant at Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (BRIN RI) and also currently served as an Associate at the Jakarta Economic Club.