



US-China Growing Competition in Soft Power

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Abstract: The utilization of soft power, based on attraction and persuasion, is crucial for countries in the international arena, as it discourages the use of hard power. For China, soft power is just as pivotal as hard power in its efforts to dominate the world. Beijing's preoccupation with soft power is rapidly increasing, and it seeks to convince the world that it is a benign power and believes in soft power in foreign policy. China has now emerged as a rising power due to its strong economy, initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative BRI, the resolution of outstanding issues with neighboring states, rapid progress in technological development, and contribution to UN peacekeeping missions. Despite this, China's image in the West is not positive, and the US and its allies will continue to attempt to damage China's soft power image by criticizing its BRI, debt-trap policies, authoritarian regime, human rights violations, and labor exploitation in Africa. The competition for soft power dominance between the US and China is in full swing. Both states seek to continue their hegemony in the 21st century. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze and compare the utilization of soft power by China and the US, highlighting their respective soft power strategies.

Introduction

Power is arguably an essential tool for states in international politics. Surviving without power is simply out of the question. However, power cannot solely rely on hard power, which employs force and coercion. At present, soft power has gained increasing recognition. States are significantly pondering the significance of soft power, which, unlike hard power, can be used at any time and is cheaper while also winning the hearts and minds of people. Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power." He argues that soft power, unlike hard power, relies on attraction and negates coercion and payments, paving the way for mutual understanding and cooperation. A country becomes more attractive by capitalizing on its cultural policies and political ideas.

Admittedly, seduction appears to be more instrumental than coercion. The consolidation of democracy, human rights, and the empowerment of people are all part of seduction. General Wesley Clark further elaborates on soft power and articulates that "soft power gave us an influence far beyond the hard edge of traditional balance-of-power politics" (Bridge, Whalen 2015).

Nye emphasizes that hard power is intended to coerce someone, while soft power aims to attract someone. The use of hard power is likened to wielding a stick, while soft power is likened to a magnet. Nye suggests that certain elements of hard power can be transformed into soft power, such as the provision of naval ships by the US for tsunami relief in Indonesia in 2004, which had a significant impact on the region. The US Marshall Plan in 1948, which offered assistance to Europe

in the aftermath of WWII, also proved successful in enhancing US soft power. Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is enhancing its soft power influence globally. (Taverner, 2010).

Soft power is not a new concept and can be traced back to ancient Chinese civilization. It is suggested that Nye drew inspiration for his idea of soft power from Sun Tzu, who believed in winning battles without resorting to war. The notion of soft power was later popularized in the US, and even Japan, once seen as a bellicose nation, incorporated it into its constitution. European leaders realized after WWII that soft power was essential for peaceful coexistence and, accordingly, reduced their reliance on hard power. When the US initiated the War on Terror (WOT), Nye saw an opportunity to promote soft power. However, policymakers and journalists were largely unaware of soft power and often conflated it with non-traditional forces. (Ferguson, 2003).

The security threats in the foreseeable future will alter greatly. COVID-19 was certainly a wake-up call for states to improve and modernize their health, education, science, and technology sectors with the aim of coping with non-traditional threats. Neglecting soft power and relying solely on hard power will prove counterproductive. (Siraj Bashir et. Al., 2021).

The Soft Chinese power

Sun Tzu's Peculiar Soft Power Diplomacy

China has the advantage of being able to draw upon the ancient wisdom of Sun Tzu, a 6th-century-BC strategist whose ideas primarily revolved around soft power. As previously mentioned, Nye's concept of soft power was inspired by Sun Tzu's ideas, which were outlined in his book "The Art of War". Sun Tzu believed that leaders should make wise decisions and demonstrate moral excellence in order to promote the prosperity and security of their country. (Dost Barrech, 2020). The Chinese Academy of Military Science organized the 9th International Symposium in 2014, which aimed

to explore the soft power concept of Sun Tzu's "Art of War". The event highlighted that the teachings of "Art of War" emphasize soft power and encourage Chinese leaders to adopt a trajectory of win-win cooperation, which can contribute to global peace and tranquillity. According to experts, the current Chinese government has been following this approach, emphasizing peaceful development and win-win cooperation. Liu Xiaoming, who served as China's ambassador to the UK, highlighted the significance of "Art of War" in a lecture at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College in 2012, stating that China possesses the potential for wisdom and deterrence, which can lead to victory without fighting. (Leon Whyte, 2015)

Utilization of Confucius institutes as Soft Power

When it comes to soft power, it would be unjust not to mention Confucius. Experts are of the view that China will incorporate its past by utilizing soft power in its foreign policy. China has a rich history of soft power in the shape of Sun Tzu and Confucius. The former and latter are believed to have been China's forefathers of political tradition in moral influence. Confucius believed that the government was supposed to have the authority of legitimate governance. He further maintained that "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it" (Lorand C. Laskai, 2013). Ancient Chinese philosophies and Confucianism, arguably, revolve around soft power; the term Ru (儒) "as far as Chinese civilization is concerned is referred to as 'soft,' 'gentle,' and."

Confucius' philosophy is rooted in the principles of soft power, such as promoting harmony, obedience, and benevolence. He believed that leaders who govern with moral force rather than physical force would win the hearts of the people and have a greater impact in the long run. In line with this philosophy, China has established Confucius Institutes (CIs) worldwide since 2004. These educational organizations offer Chinese language and

cultural resources to promote multiculturalism and contribute to building a harmonious world. To date, over 540 CIs have been established in 160 countries, serving as a means of promoting China's soft power. (Marin Ekstrom, 2021)

The Chinese Buddhism Diplomacy

Since ancient Chinese times, Buddhism remained to be seen as a pivotal tool in the projection of soft power. Buddhism is the oldest foreign religion in the country and has the largest Buddhist population. In the prevailing geopolitical landscape of regional politics, both China and India are embroiled in border skirmishes. However, Buddhism was a significant tool for both countries to spread their soft powers. Both countries promoted people-to-people exchanges. The Indian interpreters were believed to have been travelling to China. Meanwhile, China allowed its pilgrims to travel to India. (Liu, 1988) China has the world's largest Buddhist more than 200 to 300 million Buddhists live reside in China. The former utilized Buddhism diplomacy in Southeast and East Asian countries. Buddhist diplomacy, by and large, is used strategically by China, rendering fruitful results and attracting the people of Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Chen, 2015).

Chinese President XI says that Tibetan Buddhist culture, language and knowledge have a great deal of importance to China. It is an established fact that China is known for orchestrating the world's largest projects, such as the Great Wall of China and BRI, building the world's largest dams in Tibet now committed to becoming a leader in promoting Buddhism diplomacy. Within China, yin guo (karmic) associated with Buddha Amitabha is gaining considerable prominence and becoming popular in China. It is considered by many Chinese as an instrumental tool to get inner satisfaction. Against this backdrop, the Chinese Master Jingzong maintains that "China's intent to realize its economic and political destiny would pale compared to the urge amongst millions to accomplish their spiritual fortunes". He further

reiterates that China cannot make progress in the projection of soft power unless Buddhism diplomacy is promoted. (Dost Barrech, 2021)

BRI: China's Soft Power

China's President XI 2013 announced the Belt and Road Initiative IRI, which is considered one of the biggest projects in mankind's history. BRI in the Chinese political discourse will promote different continents' connectivity like Asia, Europe and Africa, establishing and cementing partnerships among the 150 signatories of the BRI. (Wenxian Zhang, Ilan Alon and Christoph Lattemann, 2018) China has been utilizing its economic power to project its soft power. China has bilateral trade with nearly 120 countries. The world, arguably, presently is more deponent on China than on the US. China, unlike the US, accentuates win-win cooperation and shunning interference in the internal affairs of other countries that, by and large, yield fruitful results for the country. Lifting 800 million out of poverty has consolidated China's soft power.

China claims that they are the real champion of human rights by reducing poverty. Most considerably, China also poses a severe challenge to Western democracy; they make hollow claims of reducing poverty and protecting human rights. China being an authoritarian government, surpassed Western democracy. China will leave no stone unturned to cajole countries towards its BRI. The war-led policies have caused massive damage to its soft power. China, thus, is in an advantageous position to provide economic opportunities and avoid military and political interference under BRI that invariably will prove instrumental for its soft power. (Dost Barrech, 2021)

China's Vaccine Diplomacy

The origination of Covid-19 in China was prognosticated that it would damage the soft power of China. On the contrary, the pandemic proved to be a blessing in disguise for China. However, the Trump administration accused

China of originating Covid-19. Beijing won the laurel in the pandemic and provided medical equipment to other states in a bid to cope with the pandemic. Provision of the vaccine to more than 53 countries amid Covid-19, by and large, reinforced China's soft power. Even China provided free vaccines to the US closed allies. More than 115 million doses of vaccine were shipped to different countries. The US ally EU was overwhelmed by China in the way it contained the pandemic, and EU members tried to emulate China's modal to curb the virus. Meanwhile, the pandemic, according to the experts first time challenged the US exceptionalism, and the countries instead of the US tilted towards China. (Michael Leigh, 2021)

The US, amid the pandemic, did not handle the situation properly and even threatened its closest ally India to support the US. The former followed an exclusive approach, while China remained inclusive and gave a lucid message to the world that it would be a rising power in the foreseeable future. Nouriel Roubini, who is an American economist at NYU, argues that China stole a march over the US amid the pandemic and remained successful in the projection of its soft power. China assured the world that its political system, economic system and technological model were better than that of the West. Roubini reiterated that "The political, economic, and social model of China is going to be appealing to many semi-authoritarian countries" and "Traditional market-oriented democracy is under threat." He added. (WIRED, 2020)

The US Soft Power

The US Soft Power under Marshal Plan

The roots of soft power in the US political discourse ostensibly are deeply embedded. The aftermath of WWII caused devastation and provided a massive opportunity for the US to win the hearts and minds of the Europeans. The latter endured irreparable damages caused by the war, desperately requiring support from the US to rebuild Europe. The Marshal Plan initiated by the

US, by and large, was a substantial move to recover Europe, resulted in the consolidation of European economic growth and saved the former from bankruptcy. The Marshal Plan was also aimed at reducing the growing influence of Communism as WWII culminated into the two blocks of capitalism vs Communism. Apparently, overlapping interests between the US and Europe in the reinforcement of democracy and containment of Communism brought them on one page that invariably went in the US's favour as far as its soft power was concerned. (Curt Tarnoff, 2018)

The war-ravaged Western Europe in the post-WWII era impelled the US to pump billions of dollars in an effort to stop Communism, provided humanitarian aid such as food, medical rebuilt the infrastructures and modernized the transportation and communication network resulted in a steep rise in the projection of the US soft power. The US assistance in the renewal of European currencies and restoration of finance and budgets accelerated the US influence unprecedentedly. The Enhancement of international trade in Europe with the rest of the world provided great opportunities for the people of Europe to improve their livelihoods. The US was conceived as a last resort in addressing the European crisis. (Curt Tarnoff, 2018) The Marshal Plan is believed to have been the great milestone of the US in the 20th century and proved instrumental in serving US national interests. Foreign assistance is conceived soft as well as smart powers. Marshal Plan, thus, promoted the US soft as well as smart powers in Europe. (Lael Brainard, 2007)

The Arab World and the US Soft Power

The US remained engaged with the Arab world by virtue of the region's distinctive geo-strategic location. The US, since the end of WWII, tried to implement different kinds of means to influence the audiences and tried to debunk the negative image of the US by using public diplomacy. Public

diplomacy, ostensibly, proved effective in the US foreign policy in the Middle East. A majority of the people of the region remained wary of the US policies in the region. The US, via public diplomacy, molded the minds of the people. An opinion poll conducted in 2004 conducted in UAE, Morocco and Jordan articulated that people in the aforementioned countries had favorable views about US science & technology. The US democratic values, educational sector and movies thrilled them. Meanwhile, the same poll also demonstrated that the US War and Terror WOT caused a great deal of damage to its soft power. Admittedly, the US freedom of expression, advanced educational sector, Hollywood movies, progress in science and technology and cuisine dazzle the Arabs, making them interested in visiting the US (William Rugh, 2017).

According to another opinion, research conducted in six Arab countries in 2010 unveiled that in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, approximately 76 percent of people were watching US films more than 3-7 times weekly. The ranking of the US as second in democracy and freedom of expression further cemented its soft power in the Middle East. (Zogby & Maryland, 2010)

US Uses Universities as a Soft Power

The use of universities as a soft power tool by the United States has been an important aspect, exemplified by the establishment of institutions such as the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1866, the American University in Cairo (AUC) in 1919, and Yenching University in Beijing between 1915-1920. These universities, along with 20 other US missionary universities in China and the Middle East, served as transnational actors in bolstering the US soft power. However, the use of universities as a means of soft power also presented the US with various challenges. In the early 1900s, students and their families initially rejected the proselytizing missions of the US, leading to violent attacks by host societies during times of conflict. As a result, the US recognized the unacceptability of these missions

and shifted towards philanthropic organizations. Universities transformed their roles and began to focus on philanthropic work in areas such as health, education, and social development. This philanthropic work was aimed at enhancing the soft power of the US in universities by providing benefits to students and their families. (Bertelsen and Møller, 2016).

Despite rejecting the US Middle Eastern policy, student activism at the time was still in favor of upholding liberal values such as academic freedom and educational excellence. According to the AUC experts, the students were pro-Palestinian, nationalist, and expressed criticism towards the US Middle Eastern policy. Although the US was unable to fully achieve its goals in promoting missionary education as a form of soft power, it is clear that soft power can be a valuable tool in winning the support and affection of people. (Rasmus Gjedss Bertelsen, 2014)

US Higher Education Promoting Soft Power

Compared to China, the US has the most prestigious higher education system, and many international students are eager to pursue education in the US. This highlights the significance of higher education as a powerful tool for a country's soft power. In 2001, Colin Powell, the former US Secretary of State, expressed that one of the most invaluable assets to the US would be to have world leaders stay in the country. During the Cold War, the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union was fought using both hard and soft power tactics. According to Joseph Nye's 2017 research, academic and cultural exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1950s played a crucial role in boosting US soft power. (Joseph Nye, 2017) Today, US universities continue to hold a highly esteemed reputation worldwide. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 16 advanced economies, revealing that a median of 59% of adults across these societies regards US universities as the best in the world. Despite ongoing tensions between the US and China,

Chinese students make up the largest international student population in the US, with 35% in the 2020-21 academic year. Following closely behind, Indian students represent 18% of the international student population in US universities projecting the US soft power unprecedentedly. (Pew Research Centre, 2021)

The US is highly regarded as the top destination for foreign Nobel laureates. Out of the 13 Nobel Prize winners in 2021, five of them had immigrated to the US. From 2010 to present, there have been 28 foreign-born Nobel laureates in the US. Throughout history, 16 percent of all Nobel laureates have been foreign-born individuals who either permanently immigrated to the US or were studying at a US higher education institution when they received the award. This trend of foreign Nobel laureates immigrating to the US highlights the country's exceptional institutions and its reputation as a place that values critical thinking and creative ideas. The US educational institutions, political systems, and democratic norms significantly contribute to the country's projection of soft power. (Institute for Immigration Research, 2012)

The US Soft Power through Hollywood Movies

The Hollywood film industry in the US is renowned worldwide for its captivating and dazzling movies, which attract audiences not only in the US but also globally. The US takes full advantage of the potential of its film industry, enabling it to export its culture and values. The US film industry's contribution to the country's foreign policy success is evident. Movies such as "Pearl Harbor" and "The Pianist" depict the US's neutrality during World War II while portraying Japan and Germany as the aggressors responsible for the war's devastation. The US film industry also serves as a propaganda tool in foreign policy, promoting its culture, traditions, and human rights, even among adversarial nations. The movie "Casablanca," which was released during World War II, depicts the US as a peaceful, responsive, neutral, and benevolent country

during the war. Similarly, during the Cold War, the US utilized its film industry to counter Communism led by the Soviet Union. In his book "Hollywood's Cold War," Tony Shaw reveals how the US aimed to tarnish the image of the Soviet Union. The Hollywood movie "Ninotschka," directed by Ernest Lubitsch, became the most popular film promoting the US's official ideology of anti-communism. The US government enacted the "Smith-Mundt Act" and "Motion Picture Production Code" to utilize the film industry in disseminating American values against communist countries. (Muhammad Estiak Hussain, 2021)

Comparison between US and China Soft Power

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" about three decades ago. The idea behind soft power is that a country's military forces, economy, and people should be complemented by its soft power. Soft power can be used in situations where hard power is not necessary. The US has utilized soft power both economically and culturally. Hollywood movies have been instrumental in projecting American influence worldwide, and American corporations such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola have spread the American brand globally. As Chaudhary explains, this is not an example of hard power but soft power. (Aizaz Chuari) It has been observed that many countries are now interested in utilizing soft power, including China, which has a rich history and civilization dating back centuries. For instance, China has established Confucius institutes in over two-thirds of the world to promote its culture and values.

China's economic progress and development initiatives in other countries, such as building sports stadiums and parliament buildings, are also contributing to the projection of its soft power. (Siraj Bashir, Muhammad Arshad, Sadia Barech, 2019). Similarly, the United States is using its soft power through its cultural influences, especially in English-speaking countries where Hollywood and American products have been popular for decades. While

the United States is still leading in terms of soft power, China is quickly catching up, and both countries now recognize the importance of complementing hard power with soft power to enhance their global influence. (Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary, 2022)

Although the idea of soft power is a relatively recent one, it has existed for some time and has been predominantly embraced by the Western world, particularly the US. The US believed that their value system and policies made them more attractive to others and that soft power would allow them to form winning partnerships. They believed that their political system, human rights, and liberal economic system were all components of their soft power that would make them appealing to others. China was slower to embrace the concept of soft power, and the Western world initially had the advantage over China in this area. However, China eventually realized that its history, culture, and civilization also contributed to its soft power and began to utilize it. (Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary, 2022)

While the Western world still dominates in terms of soft power, the gap between them and China is narrowing over time. The Western world is losing ground for a variety of reasons, including inconsistencies between what they proclaim and what they actually do in practice. For example, the US promotes democratic values, but the recent assault on democracy within their own country and incidents of racial oppression and discrimination undermine their claims. The US also claims to advocate for peace and human rights, yet its actions in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan suggest otherwise, causing a significant gap between their assertions and their actions. As a result, the US's soft power is losing its appeal and becoming less effective. (Mushahid Hussain Syed, 2022)

As a student, I had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout the United States and gained valuable insight into American culture and values. Comparing Pakistan to the United

States, I believe the two cultures are more closely aligned than Pakistan and China. Unfortunately, in recent years, China has been unfairly stigmatized for its communist past and its use of advanced technology to achieve its goals, leading some to fear Chinese domination as the next global superpower. In contrast, the United States has effectively projected its soft power by promoting its values, such as human rights, women's rights, and children's rights, to the world. Consequently, China is often viewed through the lens of American perceptions.

As a result, many individuals aspire to educate their children in the West. Students who study in China often encounter the issue of their degrees not being recognized by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). In today's world, perceptions are everything, and the United States has been more successful than China in utilizing its soft power. However, China is now beginning to challenge the US in this regard. In my opinion, it will take China some time to promote its culture and society in a manner that is as appealing to Western audiences as the US has been able to achieve. (Ambassador Nadeem Riaz, 2022)

It is important to consider the potential military applications of a country's technological advancements when using them as a soft power tool. Soft power involves promoting values such as liberation and economic growth, which create job opportunities and attract individuals to a particular way of life. The US model has been successful in this regard and is widely admired globally. While we tend to align ourselves with the Western way of living, we still know very little about Chinese culture and society. The US and China have different models, and both intervene in other countries in their own ways. Pakistan has traditionally been aligned with the US, and Western culture is more attractive to the Pakistani people. We lack a comprehensive understanding of Chinese intentions, and there are hidden aspects of initiatives such as the CPEC and BRI that even the world does not know.

People-to-people exchanges between China and Pakistan are controlled by both governments, and the general public is more likely to choose the US due to its abundance of opportunities and individual rights. There has not been enough clarity about China in academic discourse, and the negative aspects of Chinese society have not been projected to us. (Adil Sultan, 2022) In terms of their soft power in Pakistan, both China and the US have their distinct advantages. The US has been able to attract Pakistanis through its education, scientific institutions, and political systems. Pakistan has been aligned with the US since its inception in 1947 and has received military equipment, training, and scholarships for its agricultural sector from the US. Additionally, the US has provided trade and assistance to Pakistan through loans and grants, which has further enhanced its soft power in the country.

On the other hand, China's soft power in Pakistan is rooted in its long-standing friendship and neighborly relations. Despite its economic struggles in the past, China has remained a sincere friend to Pakistan and has played a pivotal role in the industrialization of the country. Chinese products are also popular in Pakistan due to their affordability and quality and have gained worldwide recognition, including in the US. As a result, the US has refrained from imposing sanctions on Chinese products, as they are in high demand among consumers and more cost-effective compared to American products. (Ambassador Asif Durrani, 2022)

Conclusion

The use of soft power in the foreign policies of the U.S. and China dates back to the very foundations of these states. While China has a long history of using soft power, the U.S. has also employed it effectively over the course of its four hundred years of history. However, some argue that China has an advantage in this area due to its long history as a civilizational state, with a legacy that includes the teachings of Sun Tzu and

Confucius. Despite this advantage, the U.S. currently appears to be more appealing and influential on the international stage than China. This is due in part to the U.S.'s democratic values, emphasis on freedom of expression, strong institutions, technological innovations, and popular culture, including Hollywood films and diverse cuisine. These elements of American society inspire people around the world and contribute to the U.S.'s soft power influence. While China's civilization and cultural heritage cannot be discounted, the U.S. currently appears to have a stronger appeal to people in the global arena.

China cannot rely solely on its past and must address the ideational war waged by the U.S. In order to do so, China needs to address some of the U.S.'s serious concerns, including its authoritarian regime, human rights violations, debt trap policies, and violations of labor rights, particularly in Africa. Compared to the US, China still has some unattractive aspects in its soft power appeal. However, China has made recent strides in projecting soft power, investing an estimated \$10 billion annually in this area. Soft power is as important as hard power for China to become a global power. While the world is still overwhelmingly inspired by U.S. soft power, China's economic growth, success in lifting 800 million people out of poverty, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project and technological advancements are all positive indicators for China's soft power projection. In order to compete with the U.S., China will need to make further progress in its soft power appeal.

The U.S. has effectively utilized both economic and cultural soft power to project its influence worldwide. The country's Hollywood film industry and corporate brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola have spread the American name far and wide. Meanwhile, China, as an ancient and large civilization, has established Confucius Institutes in more than two-thirds of the world and has projected its soft power through economic progress and

infrastructure development in other countries. Both the U.S. and China employ soft power in different ways. The U.S. has an advantage in English-speaking countries where its cultural influences, such as Hollywood, are well understood. However, China is quickly catching up in the use of soft power, as both countries recognize that it complements hard power to enhance a country's influence. Although the U.S. currently leads in soft power projection, China is making significant strides in this area.

China's non-interference policy narrative is a counterpart to America's liberal ideas. Americans believe that in order to have a foreign policy and diplomatic relations with any country, there must be some ideological support for individual rights and freedoms, regardless of American actions. While autocracies may create economic development, corruption and unequal distribution often plague such systems, leading to cracks and problems. While autocracies may be initially successful, they lack resilience. In contrast, democratic systems may not appear as successful initially, but they possess great resilience. In short, it is expected that both countries will continue to engage in a soft power competition in the near future, as the world cannot be solely governed by hard power. Soft power is gaining increasing importance and recognition alongside hard power.

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