

Clashing Softly: The US-Chinese Great Power Competition on a New Level

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Abstract

The US-Chinese competition moved to a new strategic level. It is no longer sufficient to compare the economic or military capabilities to determine the winners and losers in the geopolitical contest. Soft power has been gaining increasing influence over foreign policy objectives, practices, and means of global actors. Without a good impression on an international level, the attainment of any tangible outcomes is unthinkable. The following paper underscores the role of ideas, values, and interests in foreign policymaking. It analyzes the soft power capabilities of both the US and China and compares them from the Social Constructivism perspective. The piece employs three major indicators of soft power, namely familiarity, reputation, and influence. It argues that despite the longstanding status of the US as a “shining city on a hill,” its reputation has been facing several crises. China, on the other hand, with its multidimensional expansion, emerges as an alternative for nations to align with a new multilateral actor. Yet, despite the regularly diminishing gap between China and the US, it is noteworthy that the former is still far from surpassing the soft power influence of the latter.

Keywords: Soft Power, United States, China, foreign policy, Social Constructivism

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Introduction

“In today’s information age, success is the result not merely of whose army wins but also whose story wins” (Nye Jr, 2009). Hence, being a superpower is not only about having the strongest army or largest economy but also about being prestigious worldwide. Though not enough, without an impressive image on a global level, it is unimaginable to attract the attention of other nations and accomplish foreign policy objectives.

Before delving into the main subject of discussion, it should be underlined that the current international security environment faces several critical challenges. They are direct demonstrations of hard power applications. Specifically, the ongoing situations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East demonstrate that hard power still holds sway. Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine has become the most extensive conflict on the European continent since WWII. Such a geopolitical earthquake has transformed European prosperity and stability into a hard power game and instigated unprecedented levels of militarization on both sides of the conflict. In addition, the current security landscape in the Middle East once again surfaced the dangers of terrorism, extremism, and radicalization. The Israel-Hamas war brought wider consequences for Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, among others. One can identify the growing tension, further militarization, and series of retaliatory strikes within the Middle East region.

In spite of the plethora of ongoing armed conflicts destabilizing dozens of regions of the world, international affairs cannot be fully scrutinized only by considering hard power interaction between global actors. Rather, soft power makes different civilizations interconnected, people-to-people relations lively, and globalization comprehensive. More than that, soft power influence governs the level of familiarity and reputation of states. The values and ideas of certain actors trigger the interests of different nations. As a result, great powers become the centers of gravity for

particular groups of states. The remarkable thing here is the voluntary nature of such alignment, which ultimately guarantees close cooperation between the global power and its allies.

The following article, with a particular focus on the US and China, discusses the role of soft power in attaining foreign policy goals. It is noteworthy that “in the 21st century, relations between America and China stand out, primarily because America is one of the most powerful states in the world, and China, with its growing economy, occupies a leading position among the countries of the world” (Chitadze, 2023, p. 4). Roughly in the last decade, the US-Chinese competition moved to another level other than economic or military. The soft power elements, including American Hollywood, NBA, Coca-Cola, Disney, Marvel Studio, and McDonald’s, on the one hand, and the Chinese cutting-edge technologies, martial arts, unique cuisine, language, and festivals, on the other, attract the attention of world society. Consequently, the two states use their national elements to raise popularity and attract the hearts and minds of target groups worldwide.

The research paper explores an answer to the following question: To what extent can Chinese soft power compete with American soft power?

The paper uses a qualitative research method, in particular, desk research. Consequently, it examines a variety of books, articles, international agreements, and electronic sources. The research employs a deductive method by providing the theoretical framework and later comparing American and Chinese soft power elements.

The scientific relevance of the research is that while most case studies focus on the Sino-U.S. competition in terms of economy and military, it is essential to underscore the role of ideas, values, and interests in foreign policymaking. Thus, the paper analyzes the soft power capabilities of the US and China and compares them from the Social Constructivist perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Soft power targets the interests, norms, culture, and shared values. These factors are usually explained through the lens of Social Constructivism. Developed by Alexander Wendt, this social theory illuminates the methods through which states popularize themselves.

In the post-Cold War era, there was a necessity for developing a new International Relations theory. Humans and their value-driven actions and interactions appeared as the principal objects for policy-makers. As Wendt proposes, Social Constructivism works based on the following equation: the summary of willingness and belief is equal to action, or to put differently, the interest-driven desire and identity-rooted belief ultimately encourage the specific action (Wendt, 1999). In this process, shared ideas play a decisive role.

States actively use their soft power to impact the belief- and opinion formation of other nations. The concept was famously coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. back in the 1980s as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye Jr., 2005).

Furthermore, while analyzing the soft power impact of any state, one should consider the roles of its international image, reputation, and branding (Kiambi, 2017). The way the global actor portrays itself results in a similar degree of familiarity worldwide. Through mediated and relational public diplomacy, state-financed programs attract the interests of different people. By showcasing themselves as a distinguished economic power, a magnificent cultural and educational hub, and an influential global actor, states aim to fulfil their foreign policy objectives.

There are three indicators for measuring the soft power of any country, namely *familiarity*, *reputation*, and *influence* (The Place Brand Observer, 2020). First, the more famous businessmen, public figures, athletes, tourism destinations, and exclusive features, the sounder the *familiarity* of a specific country. Second, the state should have a positive and

solid status in the eyes of the rest of the world. Being a role model for either pro-democratic states or emerging economies is central to improving their *reputation*. Finally, *influence* indicates the scale of impact regionally and globally. The broader the scale of influence, the more effective the soft power of a particular state.

Generally, soft power is about winning the hearts and minds of target groups across the globe. It is the most widespread approach practiced by the modern United States, which remains the leading state in the world. At the same time, the People’s Republic of China is no less effective in raising its multifaceted popularity in the contemporary world.

American Soft Power

The United States of America has long been perceived as a role model by most nations. With its ‘star quality’ reputation, the U.S. benefits from wide-reaching popularity. “America lives up to its own values as it cultivates democracy at home and thereby serves as a beacon for the rest of humanity” (Chumburidze, 2022, p. 2).

Democracy, liberal values, inclusive opportunities, and human rights protection represent chief American symbols, which portray the U.S. as a “shining city on a hill” (Frum, 2021). These elements serve best for making the United States so popular power that hundreds of world states aspire to maintain a close partnership with it and follow the American line. As a result, they similarly align their policies and actions with it.

Drawing a parallel with Social Constructivism, some scholars explain the relations of the United States with developing countries based on their similar history and identity of being colonized by imperial powers in the past. The US respects freedom-loving nations which pursue their independence from stronger actors. Interestingly, the Statue of Liberty, the hallmark of the US, has become a driving force for freedom-

seeking people. Ultimately, shared interests and identity positively contribute to the peaceful collaboration between the US and other nations.

An additional element of American soft power can be the origins of the contemporary leaders in the US. The successful election of Barack Obama made him the first African American President of the United States (The White House, Barack Obama: The 44th President of the United States). It was a clear message to the world that the US represents an inclusive and multicultural state respecting all humans irrespective of ethnicity, gender, origin, skin color, religion, etc. As Joseph Nye Jr. highlights, "his image and his message held great appeal even in parts of the world that had become notably hostile to U.S. policy" (Nye Jr, 2014, p. 52). The most recent election of Kamala Harris as the first female Vice President with Indian and Jamaican origins once again stresses that the U.S. provides equal opportunities for all (The White House, Kamala Harris: The Vice President).

It is worth noting that the US has been actively providing educational, scientific, and youth development programs for the rest of the world. In particular, hundreds of states benefit from the academic and professional initiatives of the U.S., such as FLEX, UGRAD, the Fulbright Program, the Peace Corps, and the USAID (Giridharadas, 2018). These opportunities undoubtedly advance the level of education of all peoples over the globe, on the one hand, and considerably grow the level of popularity of the United States, on the other. As a result, there was a threefold increase in the enrollment of international students within the period from 1980 to 2017, exceeding a million (Bound, Braga, Khanna, & Turner, 2021, p. 164).

Indeed, government-sponsored projects play a tremendous role in popularizing the United States. However, the soft power impact of American companies, brands, and products, namely McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Nike, NBA, Apple, Hollywood, Netflix, Amazon, Harvard University, Microsoft, Graffiti art, Disney, and Marvel Studios, is far more incredible.

Remarkably, "the top twenty-five highest - grossing films of all time are U.S. production, American consumer products and brand names are omnipresent, together with U.S. sports and media figures" (Shioshvili, 2022).

Ultimately, as one Norwegian media researcher, Todd Gitlin, pointed out, "American popular culture is becoming everyone's second culture. It doesn't necessarily supplant local traditions, but it does activate a certain cultural bilingualism" (Gitlin, 1992). Accordingly, while watching NBA or Hollywood movies, eating McDonald's, or using Apple products, people from various parts of the globe usually feel like half-Americans experiencing limitless opportunities. For instance, Hollywood movies have been representing one of the primary instruments for spreading the voice of the American way of life. As Rosenberg (1982) explained forty years ago, in difference with European movies, the US-produced films aim at reaching the masses of the world population because they are created for performing the role of entertainer, which opens a new window of opportunity for international communication. The global impact of Hollywood is even more explicit nowadays.

Notably, these unique features automatically shape the charming image of the United States worldwide and gather nations around its soft power influence. Ultimately, "American culture needs no gun to travel" (Joffe, 2006). These are what illustrate American popular culture to the rest of the world as "exciting, exotic, rich, powerful, trend-setting – the cutting edge of modernity and innovation" (Rosendorf, 2000, p. 123).

It is worth noting that the enlargement of American soft power has become much simpler due to the irreversible process of globalization, particularly the communication/information expansion. It encourages political, economic, cultural, social, legal, and environmental interdependence among the countries and populations. It is a well-known practice of the U.S., which employs "caring and sharing" to decrease the

gap between the rich and poor states. The United States regularly increases its global role through globalization and “Americanization,” which are not identical but still tightly interconnected. Undoubtedly, the process is stimulated by the information revolution.

The elements of American-type soft power, starting from spreading democratic norms and values and ending with an impressive diffusion of NBA, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Hollywood, etc., shape the country’s global image as highly developed, altruist, and prominent. It is believed that the world without American soft power would not be as advanced, unified, and, at the same time, diversified as it is now.

Yet, the recent developments in Washington D.C. brought some tragic consequences for the image of the US as a global leader. It is logical that “the Capitol siege was a win for China” in soft power competition with the United States (Kokas & Mastro, 2021). The failure of the American government to secure the symbol of democratic rule from a mob attack diminished confidence in the foundational pillars of American Democracy. Subsequently, it became a crucial narrative for the People’s Republic of China to portray the United States as a failing global power and extend its global image simultaneously.

Chinese Soft Power

China is widely perceived as a challenger of the liberal world order. Its distinctive civilization and unique features promote the image of China as the alternative for nations to align with a new norm-maker.

To better understand the Chinese soft power, one should recall the illustrious quote by Sun Tzu: “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting” (Jackson, 2014). It is the practice the People’s Republic of China has been employing to challenge the long-lasting prestige of the U.S. without waging war against it.

The Asian power portrays itself as a multilateral player pursuing the construction of a more

peaceful world. China attracts hundreds of world states through peaceful means, such as developing economic ties, providing infrastructural projects, spreading its cultural elements, playing a significant role in global politics, and so forth.

One of the remarkable diplomatic steps was taken by China back in 2006 when it hosted an unprecedentedly big China-Africa Summit (Power & Mohan, 2010). That development has further strengthened their cooperation, mainly in financial terms. Drawing a parallel with Social Constructivism, some scholars explain the Sino-African relations based on their shared identity of being colonized by the imperial West in the past. Based on this logic, China uses its well-known “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” vis-à-vis African states. Hence, the “Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty” (1), “Mutual non-aggression” (2), “Mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” (3), “Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit” (4), and “Peaceful co-existence” (5) guarantee the solid partnership between China and Africa (Chen, 2016, p. 112). Nevertheless, the “Dragon Slayers-Panda Huggers” debate is also actual nowadays. The discussion considers two contrasting ideas on whether the PRC uses its Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to colonize African states economically or to provide essential opportunities (Balasubramanyam, 2015).

While discussing Chinese approaches to becoming one of the leading states through diplomatic means, the cultural determinants are of vital importance. One of the examples of Chinese cultural and educational extension is the opening of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) around the globe since 2004. Notably, by extending Chinese culture and language worldwide, they serve as soft power tools under the guidance of China’s Ministry of Education. According to BBC (2019), China had 548 Confucius Institutes and 1193 Confucius Classrooms established at the end of 2018. In addition, it is also noteworthy that the US and UK are the most active hosts of Chinese cultural and educational

centers (Dig Mandarin, 2023). Confucius Institutes are the instruments for China to develop public and cultural diplomacy abroad and fulfil its foreign policy goals (Hartig, 2012).

More than that, besides government-financed Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, China has unique cultural characteristics and tourism destinations that are spread without state involvement. These include calligraphy, paintings, martial arts, a variety of cuisine, cinema, and literature (d'Hooghe, 2005). Furthermore, the Great Wall, Forbidden City, the Terracotta Army, the Chinese New Year, tea, chopsticks, customs, and local festivals with their red lanterns, Dragon Dance and Lion Dance are so popular across the globe that they bring millions of tourists to experience Chinese way of life there (TransIndus, 2024). Consequently, China has become increasingly attractive to foreigners.

When it comes to showcasing China's striking image globally, the Olympic Games of 2008 is worth mentioning. As a picturesque host of such an iconic event, China demonstrated its solid preparedness to become a new global leader and promote the principle of "One World, One Dream" (Griffiths, 2021). Beijing managed to hold "Green Olympics" in response to the widespread environmental concerns before the Games, "High-tech Olympics" by successfully using its cutting-edge technological achievements, and "People's Olympics" by arranging a variety of cultural and educational festivals and guaranteeing a pollution-free environment both for its residents and visitors (International Olympic Committee, 2019). Moreover, by hosting the Winter Olympics Games of 2022, China extensively promoted its fame in terms of its financial spending and technological development. It was particularly essential for China to host the Olympics after the South Korea- and Japan-hosted Olympics in recent years (Kuo, 2022).

China is famous for its global initiatives, which represent the considerable elements of its diplomacy and serve best for fulfilling its worldwide interests. The biggest East Asian country is progressively gaining

international support through its almost all-inclusive international projects. These global initiatives illustrate China as an altruist actor in multiple dimensions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a long-term international project introduced by the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping in 2013 (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019). The initiative is built upon the purposes of connecting the diversity of markets; strengthening hard infrastructures such as railways, pipelines, and highways, and soft infrastructures such as trade and investment contracts; and providing a people-to-people relationship that can include not only economic but social, cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation too.

Yet, it is still under question whether such initiatives are truly altruistic. As a Research Assistant at the Institute of World Politics, Phillip Holt argues, "There is no geopolitical direction behind the BRI; rather, it focuses on taking advantage of geopolitical opportunities wherever they arise" (Holt, 2020). For instance, Chinese investment in Laos and Myanmar is the precondition for China's uninterrupted resource transportation and energy security, whereas Cambodia appears to be the potential provider of China's maritime domination in mainland Southeast Asia. Furthermore, dependent, non-aligned, cooperative, and neutral Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan are the focal points within China's national security agenda (Holt, 2020).

China is a communist state with a variety of restrictions and a less stellar human rights record. Often criticized by the international community, there are many impediments to Chinese soft power to be persuasive. Despite its innovative global initiatives, cultural and educational extension, and magnificent economic capabilities, China lacks the face of a role model for the democratic part of the world. Further, despite its tremendous achievements, the PRC does not yet have a planetary mission to serve. One can say that the Chinese government has more attention on the internal maintenance of power rather than leading the globe into everlasting peace and prosperity. Any

achievement abroad serves best the regime to keep standing at the top of the power pyramid.

The latest circumstances in the world have revealed that extremist groups and despot rulers mostly resort to hard power tactics as an instrument or style of action. It often results in negative public reactions. If states and people get attracted to the soft power influence, they tend to resist or express discontent while facing the use of hard power. As for China, it is still unclear whether the country will follow in the footsteps of despots and extremists and abandon its accumulated soft power impact. Despite China's cultural and diplomatic expansion, it is still far from becoming a soft power oasis among autocratic regimes. In situations where China fails to win the hearts and minds of target states, it may apply its coercive diplomacy measures and even military force in the future.

Conclusion

The American soft power has been a prominent guideline for the international community. Being a superpower, the U.S. could actively make a soft power impact over any of its target groups, countries, and societies. It represents the most remarkable case. As of now, no other great power can substitute the US soft power yet. Indeed, China attempts to gain an attractive image among the world nations through its cultural or diplomatic tools, but it is far from becoming a soft power leader. In particular, Chinese movies cannot substitute for Hollywood, as Chinese food cannot change the impact of McDonald's, while authoritarian China cannot shift the world's attention from the primary promoter of democracy - the US. Hence, the process of globalization works best for the promotion of the US soft power and world image. The elements of American-type soft power shape the country's global

image as highly developed, altruist, and prominent. Globalization favors those elements of soft power which are abundant in the American soft power arsenal. Hence, the American elements, such as Hollywood, Disney, NBA, Coca-Cola, and the Statue of Liberty, remain popular among most nations.

Chinese foreign strategy includes building a multipolar international system, promoting the principles of equality of states, positive reciprocity rather than dominance, cooperation and peaceful co-existence, and cultural and educational interconnectedness. Due to its rapid transformation in the fields of economy, technology, and education, the popularity of China is on the rise. Yet, it is far from surpassing the American one.

Developing and underdeveloped countries desperately want to participate in the China-led global infrastructural and investment initiatives. Hence, in the contemporary and upcoming periods, China is expected to use more dynamic methods of diplomacy and increase its global role primarily through its almost all-inclusive projects.

It is safe to say that China, unlike the United States, lacks a planetary mission to serve. While the U.S. has long been referred to as a "shining city on a hill" and a role model for all freedom-loving and capitalism-oriented nations, China has not accumulated such an image yet. Interestingly, the Chinese-led global initiatives aim to strengthen China domestically. Nevertheless, as Social Constructivists argue, reality is socially constructed. Thus, it can change at any time. What we observe nowadays is the growing role of the PRC in all the fields of our lives, whereas the global position of the U.S. is gradually declining. China, mainly because of its governance system and human rights records, is far from becoming a role model for the rest of the world. However, the gap with the United States is regularly diminishing.

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