



SHIFTING GLOBAL POWER: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOFT POWER IN THE US AND CHINA

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Abstract

This article uses soft power, a country's capacity to influence others by attraction as opposed to coercion, to examine how the dynamics of global power are changing. China's strategic use of soft power shows it is making substantial progress towards becoming another superpower, perhaps pushing the international order towards a bipolar system, even while the United States remains the only hegemon in the existing unipolar world order. China's ability to cultivate a more appealing image on the international scene is credited with its success. This is made possible by its recently acquired economic prosperity, which enables large-scale investments in international aid and infrastructure projects funded by programmes like the Belt and Road Initiative.

Furthermore, China tends to present a more "friendly" foreign policy than the US, emphasising economic alliances rather than intervening militarily. On the other hand, the US seems to be losing ground as the only superpower. Its reputation has been damaged by a number of foreign policy choices, which have also undermined confidence among allies and the global community. Accusations of vaccine hoarding, the perceived shortcomings of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, and a perceived deficiency in leadership during the COVID-19 epidemic are a few of them. Due to these acts, the US is now a less desirable partner on the international scene, which could reduce its soft power and influence.

Keywords: Soft Power, Unipolar vs Bipolar World Order, China's Rise, US Foreign Policy, Attractiveness of Superpowers.

Introduction

Today the international system is viewed as a unipolar system with the United States of America (USA) as the sole hegemon. There is a myriad of debates however on whether it is the right nomenclature or diction to continuously refer to the USA as the sole hegemon. There is a sponsored scholarship among scholars that see the USA as, 'a declining sole hegemonic power' with China hot on USA heels to create a bipolar world. For predications have been made looking at the current growth rates and projections for 2032, China



will likely overtake the USA and become the world's largest economy thereby inadvertently tilting the world towards multipolar with two hegemonic powers. China's economy is likely to surpass that of the USA in either 2028 or 2029. This assertion was made after a study conducted by the Japan Centre for Economic Research (Yenigu, 2022).

For much of the last century, the USA has sustained its status as a global superpower by upgrading its military prowess and at the same time promoting its democratic values and the strength of American culture around the world. USA's soft power which is the ability to achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion has been essential to effective foreign policy and successful global trade. But according to some global surveys, the USA's ability to be influential has been dwindling because the USA has of late taken some foreign policy decisions that left some of its trusted traditional allies perturbed. In fact, USA's soft power, by some measures, is in decline. The Soft Power 30 project ranked the USA fifth globally in 2019, its lowest position since the project began (Seymour, 2020).

The Concept of Soft Power

A starting point for a research that uses the concept of soft power is to first familiarize oneself with Joseph Nye's formulation of the concept. In his initial work "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" Nye pointed out that USA's influence started to decline after the end of the Cold War. It was no longer adequate for the USA to possess only hard military but soft ways also needed to be employed if the USA sought to continue being influential in the world. The adoption of soft ways came to be known as soft power (Nye, 1990). Since then the idea of soft power has been gaining prominence albeit as a concept and not a fully fleshed theory in International Relations. Theories and concepts in International Relations emerged and continue to emerge building on some of the ideas of two of the most prominent theories of International Relations- Realism and liberalism (Wendt, 1999). Recent theories and concept try to take into account various identities, interests, ideas and norms, which interact to result in changes in the international system (Vyas, 2006).

One such theory is constructivism, which emphasises that states consist of actors and agents, which interact with each other intersubjectively according to their interests and identities. Furthermore, it is not only the central government that plays a role in the international system, but other actors, like multinational corporations (MNCs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These have a role to play in how nations relate in the international system. MNCs and NGOs have become transnational because they have operations in many countries (Wendt, 1999). According to Lukes (2005), constructivism is about how people's ideas, interests, and identities affect the international system. Constructivists view sources of power as emanating from people's ideas and interests (Lukes, 2005). One can therefore extrapolate and argue that it was within the context of constructivism that the concept of soft power was developed by Nye in 1990.

A distinct notion known as "soft power" has arisen to explain the complex interactions between nations and the various ways in which they use non-coercive measures to influence global players (Gallarotti, 2010). One type of meta-power is soft power. Meta-power refers to circumstances in which power dynamics are part of a larger constellation of social ties that impact those dynamics and, in turn, impact the results of the interactions between the actors (Gallarotti, 2010). The goal of soft power is to use appeal to coerce others. As a result, the other states will voluntarily be drawn to copy and mimic what they find endearing about the state that exudes charm (Wilson, 2008).



Sources of Soft Power

According to Joseph Nye, soft power can be attained through three main pillars of which Nye referred to sources of a country's soft power. The main sources of a state's power are culture, political values and foreign policy. However, economy and military can be included if they make a country look positive in the eyes of others (Nye, 2006). Because of its invisible nature soft power is projected through different actors; both state and non-state. Those under state control are: domestic and foreign policies, international cooperation, diplomatic relations, public diplomacy, cultural and educational exchanges, various types of state broadcasting, trade opportunities, economic and relief aid, developmental programs and peace-related military missions. These are some of the most common tools, but states may further come up with and employ additional ones (Nye, 2004). The government, unless having far-reaching oversight over internal affairs, does not solely control soft power propagation. That is because there are other unofficial channels such as companies, NGOs and cultural products such as films, music, sports which can sell a country abroad. These equally play a significant role in creating foreign people's opinions. Sometimes watching a movie may be the only insight someone will ever have about a distant foreign country. More importantly however, non-governmental actors can cooperate with the state by willingly aligning with its policies (Nye, 2011).

Criticism of Soft Power

Many authors have written criticisms to the concept. In their article "Hard Power, Soft Power: Toward a More Realistic Power Analysis" Pinar Bilgin and Berivan Elis examine the notion of power (which is central to soft power) and argue that most discussions of it in international relations falls under the purview of realism. Within realism much emphasis is put into studying hard resources such as the military and economy. Bilgin and Elis (2008) point out that because soft power aims to influence other actors it should simply be considered as part of realist theory. In addition, they indicate that Joseph Nye did not explain the concept well enough, defining it verbosely broadly. His main aim was to help maintain USA's influential image, but he did not go into depth in explaining how the USA attained soft power in the first place (Bilgin & Elis, 2008). Other sceptics of soft power argue that 'hard power' is the most effective foreign policy tool.

According to Gray (2011), hard power should remain the essential instrument of policy as soft power is unsuitable for policy directions and control as it relies too much on the foreign countries' perception about another country. Ferguson (2004:24) opines that soft power's reach is limited and argues that cultural imperialism's real engine is hard power and concludes that "soft power is merely the velvet glove concealing an iron hand." Soft power, unlike hard power, cannot be measured, it is impossible to measure how one country changes its behaviour because of another country's soft power (Kearn, 2011). Mattern (2005) dismisses soft power in totality, describing it as little more than another realist excuse pushing values and cultures on to other countries. One thing is clear though, soft power is not yet a solidified theory. It is still in the building phase. This is precisely why in this paper it referred to as a concept. Despite the shortcomings stated above, this paper still uses soft power as its theoretical framework. The choice of soft power as the theoretical framework is informed by the greater changes in modern world politics, which raised the relevance of soft power, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gallarotti, 2010). This came after the two most prominent theories of IR, realism and liberalism, failed to forecast the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 (Cox, 2009). Soft power has become a crucial element in enhancing influence over international outcomes because it has become more difficult to compel nations and non-state actors through the principal levers of hard power (i.e., threats and force). Globalisation has strongly compounded the effects of



interdependence by enhancing the process of social and economic interpenetration in the international system, thus underlying the importance of soft power of modern day politics (Gallarotti, 2010).

Battle for Supremacy through soft power means USA and China

Much like competition between the USA and the former Soviet Union, the rivalry between the USA and China is not only one of military-strategic and economic challenges but also one of ideas. Up until recently the USA, has had the advantage of presenting a more compelling image to the rest of the world in the form its soft power. People in other countries have always been attracted to the USA because it is a beacon of democracy, has an attractive culture worldwide (e.g. language and music), has some of the best universities in the world as well as a very attractive movie industry (Hollywood).

The above scenario was perhaps true in the early years of the post-Cold War era, until China started using its newfound affluence to create a friendlier image for itself abroad through promulgation of soft power sources (Liang, 2012). With some recent analysis suggesting that China's economy will overtake that of the USA in 2028 (Silver et al., 2023), China's attempts to rebrand its image will not only have more resources but also find an increasingly eager international audience that seeks to engage with the newly envisaged emerging number one global economy. Soft power, after all, means little without an economic capability to back it up, and China has just that. This article analysis how China's endeavours to influence global public opinion about itself through soft power diplomacy are bearing fruits thus making it an important global actor in world politics. The article also examines how the USA has of late been struggling to use its soft power to influence global politics, which might result in a bipolar world led by USA and China. The article juxtaposes China's positive use of its foreign policy (which translates into soft power) and some of USA's erratic foreign policy choices that have the potential to diminish USA attractiveness.

As part of its foreign policy and in line with the concept of soft power a state must present itself as a responsible player in the global village. Devotion to international laws, norms and institutions is necessary in showing others respect for supranational authority and order. It also shows that a state is attentive to collaborating with others. Keeping to commitments towards other states, in the form of alliances or treaties, is likewise vital. If a state does not keep up to its word, then this creates an image of unreliability and unpredictability. Such behaviour has the potential to deter others from engaging with it (Gallarotti, 2011). What is also important in international behaviour is the assurance to others that there is no intention to harm them either militarily or economical through economic sanctions. While the sources of USA's soft power - culture, values, etc. remain attractive, it is the USA's foreign policy decisions that are unpopular and have over the years increased anti-USA sentiments across the globe (Nye, 2023).

On the contrary, China conceptualises soft power in a different way than is usual the case in the USA. China tries to use it as a foreign policy tool. China has positively been active in promoting a positive image of itself abroad. This is different to the USA, which is using soft power to preserve an influential position it has already attained (Fliegel & Kříž, 2020). However, it is worth noting that, China still lacks cultural industries able to compete with USA Hollywood, its universities are not top ranked and it lacks the many nongovernmental organizations that has over the years generated much of USA's soft power. But China has always had an attractive traditional culture, and it has created hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world to promote its language which is used as a conduit to transport China's culture across the globe (Nye, 2015).



China's Soft Power Diplomacy achievements and USA's self-inflicted Losses

COVID-19 and China's Vaccine Diplomacy and USA hibernation

China may be one of the few countries in world that 'created' an international catastrophe and then, possibly, should be credited for solving it. COVID-19 can be traced to Wuhan in China, China's initial reaction to the outbreak of COVID-19 was extremely abominable as China overly secretive government, and highly government controlled and censored society allowed the deadly novel virus to spread to other countries. This led to large-scale international criticism on China (Lawler, 2020).

As the pandemic spread globally, China was blamed for how it initial handled the pandemic, but China eventual found reprieve because of the ineptness of countries like the USA and the European Union (EU) which failed to take leadership roles during a global pandemic. A case in point is that of the beleaguered Italians led by its Prime Minister at the time (who once appeared on national television with an avalanche of tears trickling down his cheeks) asked for help from the European Union, but little help was sent after all. By March 2020 China redeemed itself and sent healthcare workers and medical related aid to Italy and other countries such as Serbia, Czech Republic and the Philippines. This endeared China to many nations in the world during a global pandemic at the time when the USA and against expectations went into hibernation with the then USA President Donald Trump labelling COVID-19 a Chinese flu and contemplating on withdrawing from the World Health Organisation (WHO). The USA and other powerful European nations would later practice COVID-19 apartheid by hoarding Covid-19 vaccinations for themselves, China meanwhile saw a windfall and moved swiftly to distribute vaccines to developing nations around the world through the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovations or COVAX alliance. Owing to COVAX initiative developing countries mostly in Asia and Africa got vaccines at subsidized rates (Asif et al., 2022; Lawler, 2020). The hoarding of vaccines by the USA put the country in a bad light with many questioning its leadership role during a pandemic as a superpower.

In relation to the above, China's President Xi Jinping announced that China would make its Sinovac vaccines available around the world as a global public good, thus distributing the vaccine equitably at subsidized rates (Asif & Sandhu, 2023; Guo & Jee, 2020). This endeared most countries from the third world countries to China, the willingness to share vaccines and not hoard them like the USA increased China's attractiveness and positioned China as a responsible global actor. The USA was reviewed with contempt as extremely narcissistic which is bound to reduce its attractiveness in the eyes of other states.

USA failure to taking a leading role during COVID -19

During her tenure as the USA ambassador to the United Nations (UN) Madeleine Albright once famously referred to the USA as, "the world's indispensable nation." However, when one looks at the USA's track record during the COVID -19 pandemic in dispensing doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the developing nations, the country no longer fits that description. Instead, the baton of leadership was usurped by China which took a leading role in sharing doses of its vaccines with the developing world. This was a global diplomacy victory for China, even though vaccines from Sinovac and Sinopharm reportedly have lower efficiency than the vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna (Braun, 2022). Since the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and Japan after the cataclysmic World War II, the USA has always exhibited global leadership on many different fronts. But its failure to take leadership role and be instrumental in the distribution of sufficient Covid-19 vaccines worldwide did damage its global reputation beyond redemption (Braun, 2022).



Unsuccessful Military operations across the globe

The USA military operations - Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan can never be termed a success in any meaningful sense of the word. In Afghanistan, the USA operation can be termed as ignominious at best. In August 2021, USA withdrew the last of its troops from Afghanistan, ending its military presence there after nearly 20 years. The USA exited from Afghanistan resulted in the Taliban (which the USA had deposed off during the initial stages of the occupation) regaining control of the country and created a refugee crisis as many Afghans fled. Grotesque images of Afghans falling off a USA passenger plane about to take off from Kabul told a story of a bleak future and USA twenty years of intervention that amounted to nought. USA withdrawal left chaotic scenes and also raised fears that terrorists might use Afghanistan as a safe haven. A research finding by the PEW research established that 69% of USA adults said the USA mostly failed in achieving its goals in Afghanistan and should not have gone there in the first place. Furthermore, USA's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to a rapid resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Nagal, 2022). The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria sought to establish a caliphate across the Middle East and has its origin traced to the USA second war in Iraq.

Following America's premature withdrawal, the Taliban immediately returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, signalling a defeat not just a superpower but the world's current superpower (Nagal, 2022). Perhaps one should add and say a superpower whose influence continues to plummet. Even former USA President Barack Obama was conscious of the USA's bellicosity when he remarked that some of USA's costliest mistakes since World War II were the result not of restraint, but of a "willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences." (Nye, 2014). To buttress this point one needs not to look no further than the two USA-led wars on Iraq.

In the case of the first Gulf War majority of the international community, granted by United Nations (UN) Resolution 678, supported the invasion to stop Iraqi's dictator Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait (Office of the Historian, 2014). But the second campaign, which lacked a UN sanctioned mandate, saw far less support, save for few Western allied countries such as Britain and Germany. Out of sheer arrogance and acting unilateral and supported by only few allies the USA invaded Iraq. This created an image of arrogance to the outside world and depicted USA as a belligerent state (Nye, 2004). The USA image was also damaged furthermore during the second invasion of Iraq for the atrocious treatment of inmates at Abu Ghraib prison (located west of Baghdad) in a manner which was inconsistent with USA values and handling of prisoners at home led to perceptions of hypocrisy that could not be reversed even by broadcasting pictures of Muslims living well in American cities. Domestic or foreign policies that appear hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to others' views, or based on a narrow conception of national interest can undermine soft power (Nye, 2023).

China's brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran

While the USA is becoming famous for war mongering and unsuccessful wars in the Middle East, China has been busy promoting peace. One of China's achievement in peace promotion was to broker a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 thus bring closer leaders of the Shia and Sunni worlds, respectively which is an incredible achievement.

The agreement covers among others respect for each other's sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of each other-a theme that has always been preached by China. This development has, however, insinuated a weak position of the USA in the region and in world order, giving credence to critics disparaging the USA for its "declining capacity" to shape the strategic landscape or resolve challenges bedevilling the



world. Whatever is China's goals in the Middle East, one thing is clear though China has partially succeeded, where USA has clearly failed to navigate the immensely complex region and bring peace despite its years-long engagement in the volatile region.

Furthermore, some domestic policies in the USA are bound to reduce USA attractiveness. Domestic policies, such as capital punishment (which China practices as well) and the absence of gun controls which has rendered the USA a lawlessness society, reduce the attractiveness of the USA in other countries. This has greatly been costly to USA's soft power (Nye, 2023). Public shooting and fatal for that matter are a common occurrence across most states in the USA due to porous and weak gun control legislations and this can only question the USA as a leader of the democratic and liberal world. China has also been accused by the international community for placing tight constraints on the religious freedom of Uyghur Muslims in the northwest Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It has been reported that China has placed in detention over a million Uyghur Muslims in order to 're-educate' them to adapt to 'Chinese culture'. China is also accused of using surveillance, control, and suppression of religious activity aimed particularly at Uyghurs accusing them of actively involving in separatist activity backed by foreign funding in order to destabilise the region (Anand,2022) (. This to some extent just like the issue of gun control in the USA has soiled China's soft power advancement abroad.

USA's unilateralism

While China appreciates multilateralism, the USA particularly during President Trump's administration became known for its condescension for alliances and multilateralism, which he always displayed at meetings of the G7 and NATO. President Trump even reduced USA's contribution towards NATO much to the chagrin of other NATO members. Trump further trivialised USA expected role to take leadership in curbing environmental degradation by withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and this sowed a seed of mistrust about USA's commitment to dealing with transnational global threats such as global warming and pandemics (Nye, 2023). China on the other hand is forging ahead with multilateralism as a loyal member of BRICS after playing a key role in its formation. BRICS is a group of five major emerging economies comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa which is gaining recognition among the major countries of the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt plan to approach BRICS for official membership while Iran has initiated the preparatory process for joining the group. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has joined the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) (Nair, 2021).

In summation over the years the USA has been shooting itself on the foot with its undesirable and unattractive foreign policy decisions. Those who hold these sentiments point out to the following:

- Abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)
- Withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement
- The unilateral exit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – better known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Combining these shifts in policy create an inconsistent and unpredictable USA foreign policy that gives the USA a paradoxical look of a great power in retreat from being a major global player.

Aid attached to conditions

There is a stark contrast between how China and the USA distribute aid. For the USA aid is always attached to conditionalities (Stevenson, 2003). A case in point is that in April of 2023 USA Vice president



visited three countries in Africa (Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia) carrying with her a promise of US dollar 100 million in aid. This aid however was not without conditionalities as the VP urged her hosts to legalise consensual same-sex sexual relations (<https://www.washingtonblade.com/2023/03/27/vice-president-to-visit-three-african-countries-that-criminalize-homosexuality>). This is in stark contrast to China's aid which is almost condition free. China attaches only one condition to its aid and that condition has nothing to do with the recipient's nation's internal affairs with China's internal affairs. The condition to China's aid is that the recipient nations must sever ties with Taiwan and pledge allegiance to the one China policy (Jacobs, 2006).

China's lack of interference in the domestic affairs of other countries increases its investment attractiveness. The policy of non-interference in the affairs of other nations plays a major role when it comes to nations deciding on their partnerships and alliances, with China always proving an attractive ally. This makes China an attractive ally of many developing countries compared to the USA (Cloke, 2020). China has built a lot of infrastructure in many countries of the world without putting demands on those countries to change the way they run their domestic affairs. China is seen as a new opportunity by developing countries (McGiffert, 2009). Being dictated by the USA on how to run their internal affairs so as to receive aid is akin to neo colonialism mainly on countries that to date still carry the psychological scars of colonialism.

China's development model

China is gaining popularity in the broader world, in developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America (Pew Global Indicators Database, 2020). The main reason behind this popularity is China's extraordinary development path since opening up its economy to the outside world in the late 1970s during the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. While having a communist political establishment with a high degree of state control over its economy China has been able to flourish for the past couple of decades. This comes as an alternative to the widely held Western assumption that in order for a country to develop it is necessary to have liberal democratic governance along with a capitalist economy. China is providing inspiration to developing countries' leaders by showing them another path of development. In addition to its politico-economic model China has been providing extensive foreign aid and assisting with developing infrastructure (Fliegel, 2020).

The 2008 financial crisis further strengthened China's image because it was one of the first countries in the world to recover from it and its continued high growth rates have contributed to its leverage and confidence by asserting itself as a global player tempting countries to have some form of economic connection with China (Wong, 2011). The USA on the other hand, in 2023 has been grappling with banks collapsing. The collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank, Credit Suisse and First Republic Bank led to a wave of financial instability and raised concerns that the crisis could spill-over to other countries with dire consequences. As global superpower the USA is expected to have stable financial institutions and the collapse of some banks can only add to the scepticism that the USA is a superpower in retreat and cannot be therefore entrusted with driving the world economy forward. (Ozili, 2024).

Conclusion

While the USA has remained the sole hegemon in a unipolar world since the end of the cold war, China has over the years made strides which threatens the USA position thereby turning the world into bipolar. To achieve this feat China had been relying on its soft power to increase its attractiveness. The USA on the contrary seems to be losing its attractiveness as a major global player thanks to its unilateral wars that did not end well, its poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, its withdrawal from major treaties in the world and



interference in internal affairs of other states. These and other examples has dimmed the light off the USA as a global leader thus leaving China poised to fill the vacuum left by the USA.

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