

**SOFT POWER AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: NEW DIMENSIONS  
OF U.S.–CHINA RIVALRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY***Shodiyeva Dilnoza**THE UNIVERSITY OF WORLD ECONOMY AND DIPLOMACY*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article analyzes the evolving nature of strategic competition between the United States and China in the 21st century, focusing on the critical domains of soft power and digital diplomacy. Moving beyond traditional hard power metrics, modern rivalry is increasingly centered on the ability to shape narratives, influence global public opinion, and control digital infrastructure. By employing a comparative analysis of American and Chinese strategies—including Confucius Institutes, the Digital Silk Road, “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, and U.S. digital engagement—the study highlights both opportunities and challenges in the age of global interconnectivity. The findings suggest that soft power in the digital era is increasingly intertwined with elements of “sharp power,” raising critical questions about transparency, values, and long-term legitimacy in international politics.*

**Keywords:** *Soft power, digital diplomacy, U.S.–China rivalry, sharp power, global influence, international relations*

**Introduction**

The 21st century has witnessed a profound transformation in international politics in a new way, where power is not based on military or economic might anymore. Instead, attraction, persuasion, and the ability to shape narratives—concepts that are integrated in Joseph Nye's idea of "soft power"[1]—have gained prominence in international power. With advancements in digital technology and expansion of global communications networks, states increasingly rely on digital diplomacy in an effort to engage global publics in real time [2]. The 21st-century



geopolitics is defined by strategic competition between the United States, the established power, and the People's Republic of China, the rising challenger.

The U.S.–China rivalry, always based on economic and military competition, has now extended into the digital and informational spheres. China adopts cultural and technological efforts such as Confucius Institutes and the Digital Silk Road, and aggressive online diplomacy or so-called "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy [3]. The United States utilizes international media platforms, communications based on values, and cyber diplomacy to maintain its image and legitimacy [4]. The digital revolution has transformed the application of soft power at its own foundations to produce "digital diplomacy" – the use of digital technology and platforms by states to advance foreign policy aims [2]. This is comprised of public communication, branding, audience engagement, and data collection on an unimaginable scale. This new arena is not merely an expansion of traditional diplomacy but a transformative power that amplifies messages, creates new vulnerabilities, and democratizes access to global audiences. The United States, long the only soft power wielder, now faces a systematic and well-resourced challenge from China. China's approach, often called "sharp power" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017), is manipulation and diversion, rather than pure attraction. This struggle is no longer confined to cultural institutions and exchange programs; it is waged on the social media sites, along the telecommunications networks, and in the standards-setting bodies of the information era.

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

Joseph Nye (1990) initially brought the concept of soft power to international relations theory as a state's ability to project influence through culture, values, foreign policy image, and institutions.[1] Digital diplomacy, on the other hand, is the process of practicing diplomatic initiatives through the internet, social media, and the digital communication network [2] Methodologically, this article employs a comparative analysis approach. The soft power initiatives of the United States and China, their social media online strategy, and digital diplomacy practice are



compared. In addition, media sources, reports of international organizations, and recent academic literature are employed.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

As Joseph Nye, the founder of the soft power theory, emphasized, the role of a state in international politics not only hinges on its economy and military capabilities, but also on its cultural attractiveness, values [1] and foreign policy image. In the 21st century, the phenomenon has become increasingly prominent in international politics and is central to the strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

The United States has long been the paradigm of soft power, and its power rests on civil society, cultural industries, universities, and the spread of democratic values. American culture's popularity remains firm: Hollywood still sweeps global box offices, with franchise behemoths such as Marvel and Avatar collecting billions of dollars and shaping global cultural imagination. Likewise, US pop culture idols such as Beyoncé and Taylor Swift enjoy international followings, as do US tech icons Apple, Google, and Microsoft that exhibit a perception of ongoing innovation and entrepreneurship.

Another significant aspect of American soft power is its educational appeal. The U.S. remains the go-to country for international students, hosting nearly one million foreign students in 2022, numbers authenticated by the Institute of International Education (IIE). Top universities like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford continue to be among the best in the world, offering not just a world-class international alumni network but also lasting loyalty to American values and institutions.

The civil society and media role reinforce U.S. influence further. A vibrant, unfettered press such as The New York Times or The Washington Post—occasionally critical of policy—improves American credibility with a pluralized public in which differing views are tolerated. NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, whose activities have occasionally been controversial,





maintain America's soft power by placing the U.S. at the epicenter of advocacy and global norm entrepreneurship.

But these strengths come with profound challenges. First, the inconsistency and incoherence of U.S. foreign policy, the clearest manifestation of which was under the Trump administration's "America First" doctrine, eroded the power of values-based diplomacy. For instance, Washington's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord in 2017 broke its long-standing leadership on global regulation. Similarly, the precipitate withdrawal from Afghanistan by President Biden in 2021, while different in motivation, reaffirmed sentiments of unreliability among the allies.

Second, the platform dominance paradox and state indecision can also be observed in U.S. digital diplomacy. While American companies own and operate the world's most influential platforms—Twitter (currently X), Facebook, YouTube, and Google—the U.S. state has often been incapable of making full use of them. In lieu of that, diplomacy has sometimes deteriorated into unbridled "Twitter diplomacy." President Trump's constant deployment of Twitter for immediate, unedited foreign policy declarations oftentimes undercut established diplomatic norms and raised issues concerning credibility and coherence.

Ultimately, the degradation of the American brand threatens its soft power in the long term. Heavy global media coverage of U.S. domestic political polarization, mass killings, and racial inequality has tarnished the reputation of the United States as a "shining city upon a hill." According to the 2023 Pew Research Center survey, while global perception of the U.S. was more favorable after Biden's election, skepticism in Asia and Europe remains high about America's ability to live its own democratic ideals. So also do the actions of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan remain in shadow, fueling charges of hypocrisy between stated beliefs and deeds.

In general, America remains endowed with unparalleled cultural, educational, and civil society assets supporting its traditional soft power model. Political disarray, cyber diplomacy abuse, and internal issues increasingly erode its



stature, and the question is whether or not it will be able to maintain its unique position as the world's most powerful source of attraction in the 21st century.

Compared to America, China's soft power model is state-directed, centrally planned, and well-funded, reflecting its broader authoritarian model of government. Instead of emphasizing political ideals such as democracy and human rights, Beijing places its charm strategy within economic growth, opportunity, and effective rule.

As rated by the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2025, China rose to be the second strongest in soft power globally after it surpassed the United Kingdom and was second to the United States

Behind the strategy of China stands the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since it opened in 2013, the BRI has funded infrastructure projects across over 150 countries[10], from Pakistani roadways to Sri Lankan seaports and African railways. This not only increases China's economic power but also generates political propaganda [3], turning China into the "motor of world development." There are, of course, some examples of so-called "debt-trap diplomacy," as Sri Lanka's lease of Hambantota Port to China for 99 years after it defaulted on loans.

Another key instrument is the Confucius Institutes network, designed to promote Chinese language and culture abroad. Even though there are more than 500 institutes currently operating worldwide, their activities have been criticized in Western democracies for allegedly stifling academic freedom and acting as instruments of political propaganda. As a result, a few institutes in America, Canada, and Europe have been closed down in recent years. China also advocates for a broader authoritarian paradigm, typically expressed in the form of "development first." This system puts emphasis on stability, economic growth, and non-interference in others' affairs — values that resonate with the majority of developing countries and authoritarian states seeking legitimacy without political openness.

Under digital diplomacy, Beijing has been assertive and extremely calculated. The so-called "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, as it is called after a Chinese box office hit action film, is characterized by assertive statements of diplomats on platforms like Twitter (X), typically straight-out challenging Western critics on



issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Xinjiang. China is also propagating its digital authoritarian model via the Digital Silk Road through the initiative of such corporations as Huawei and ZTE. By providing 5G networks, surveillance technology, and digital infrastructure in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, China extends its influence and plants internet governance standards that help improve state control, censorship, and surveillance. China also constructed alternative platforms—TikTok, WeChat, and Baidu—competing with Western digital ecosystems[12] . Although TikTok is highly popular globally, most especially in youth circles, it has also been a cause for concern in America and Europe in terms of data safety and state domination. In the Global South, however, such a platform is an easily accessible alternative to the Western one, and with this, China can establish influence and develop its own sphere of power in cyberspace. China's greatest weakness, however, is credibility. Its state-led message only seems artificial, while debt diplomacy scandals, surveillance exports, and Xinjiang human rights abuses undermine its international prestige. Hence, despite massive investments, China is not able to establish genuine trust, especially among liberal democracies.

Conversely, the United States relies on cultural and scholarly hegemony to connect with international communities through values and ideas of liberty. China, however, plans to make itself more attractive in developing countries on the basis of economic incentives, education, and information technologies. As a result, the United States has more influence in the West and Latin America, while China effectively exercises its soft power across Africa and Asia. To a large degree, the rivalry between China and the United States in the realm of soft power and digital diplomacy is defined by divergent strategies, tools, and outcomes

*Divergent Models of Soft Power:* The United States relies on a decentralized, society-driven model built around cultural industries, higher education, and liberal values. This model remains highly attractive, as evidenced by U.S. dominance in global university rankings and the worldwide popularity of American entertainment and technology platforms. China's strategy, however, is state-led and resource-





oriented, with its basis being initiatives like the Belt and Road, Confucius Institutes, and the Digital Silk Road. While effective in terms of constructing presence in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, such a strategy is often criticized as extremely instrumental and insincere.

*Digital Diplomacy Impacts:* America's digital space (Meta, Google, Apple, Netflix) is the world's default, offering strong narrative leverage. Washington's incoherent foreign policy messaging and domestic political discontent, however, undermine credibility. Digital diplomacy from China is characterized by the rise of platforms like TikTok and WeChat, as well as assertive "Wolf Warrior" messaging. The strategy has increased traction in the Global South but generated trust issues in Western democracies due to surveillance, censorship, and disinformation concerns.

*Perceptions and Trust Deficit:* The soft power brand of America has been tainted by scandals such as the military interventions, gun violence, and polarisation, though the original charm persists. China's model is an object of deep suspicion among developed democracies, especially on human rights in Xinjiang and "debt-trap diplomacy." However, it chimes with most developing countries seeking swift development without pressure for liberalisation.

*Global Competition in Digital Infrastructure:* Both powers are investing heavily in strategic digital infrastructure such as 5G networks, undersea cables, and data centers. For example, Huawei's 5G projects in Africa directly compete with U.S.-backed alternatives. This rivalry sets the stage for a bifurcated digital order, forcing third countries to navigate complex choices about alignment.

## **Conclusion**

The U.S.–China rivalry has expanded beyond military and economic competition into the spheres of soft power and digital diplomacy, making narrative control and technological influence central to global politics. The United States retains strong cultural, educational, and technological assets, but struggles with inconsistency in foreign policy and internal polarization. China, meanwhile, has invested heavily in initiatives such as the Belt and Road, Confucius Institutes, and



the Digital Silk Road, yet faces persistent credibility problems due to its authoritarian model and human rights concerns.

Looking ahead, the contest will not produce a clear winner but rather a fragmented digital and information order. States navigating this rivalry must carefully balance between competing narratives, infrastructures, and values. Ultimately, the future will favor those who combine technological mastery with credible storytelling and genuine partnerships grounded in trust.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Nye, J. S. (1990). Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power. Basic Books.
2. Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (Eds.). (2015). Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice. Routledge.
3. Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017). Sharp power: Rising authoritarian influence. International Forum for Democratic Studies (NED).
4. Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. PublicAffairs.
5. Nye, J. S. (2025). The Future of American Soft Power. [book/article reference placeholder].
6. QS Quacquarelli Symonds. (2023). QS World University Rankings 2023. QS.
7. Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation. Oxford Internet Institute.
8. Institute of International Education. (2023). Open Doors 2023: Report on International Educational Exchange. IIE.
9. Pew Research Center. (2023). Global attitudes toward the United States and international leaders. Pew Research Center.
10. World Bank. (2019). Belt and Road economics: Opportunities and risks of transport corridors. World Bank.
11. Brand Finance. (2024). Global Soft Power Index 2024. Brand Finance.
12. Rolland, N. (2017). China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. National Bureau of Asian Research.