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**Competing Hegemonies: A Strategic Comparison of U.S. and China’s Hard Power, Soft Power, and Nuclear Postures in the Emerging Multipolar World Order**

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**Abstract**

The balance of power in the world has changed fundamentally in the 21st century; the world is now defined by the strategic competition between the United States and the PRC. The emerging bipolarity has also highlighted the methods and means that both countries use to wield global influence. 1.1 The distinctive path of the United States and China As a traditional hegemon, the United States has followed a variety of hard and soft power mixing strategies; but China, as a rising power, has developed its own unique path which focuses not only on strengthening its military edge, but also on advancing economic and cultural diplomacy. The aim of this paper is to examine and to compare the hard power resources, soft power efforts and nuclear capabilities of both countries to understand their places in the modern international system. The hard power of both these states reflects diametrically different strategic trajectories. The United States has the world's largest most powerful, and most technologically advanced military. The force is deployed to bases around the world and is also involved in some we don't even know about. It continues to top the defence spending charts globally, underscoring its resolve to retain and expand its dominance in conventional as well as the new battle domains, namely that of cyber and space. China’s approach to hard power, on the other hand, is more regionally focused, though it is becoming more assertive, regional only, exerted alongside softer power. The PLA’s modernization, involving both its naval forces and missiles, indicates China’s determination to restructure regional security order, in Indo-Pacific in particular. Despite its much smaller military budget, the strategic focus of China on area denial and anti-access capabilities represents an asymmetric threat to U.S. dominion. No less important is the changing use of soft power in the U.S.-China rivalry. The United States has always had an edge because of its soft power, democratic values and leadership in the global media. Organizations like Hollywood, American universities, international aid organizations, have been vessels for the projection of soft power, setting global norms and winning international audiences. Yet over the last few years, the power of U.S. soft power has been challenged by growing domestic polarization and falling global trust. China, on the other hand, is heavily invested in its soft power toolkit, which promotes projects that range from the Confucius Institutes, to Belt and Road diplomacy, to state-sponsored media, all in the name of projecting a greater and more positive image to the world. Admittedly, Chinese soft power does not have the innate appeal of liberal democratic ideals, but it is a soft power strategically designed to bring economic benefits and cultural interaction, especially in those third world areas.

**Introduction**

The global structure of power has gone a number of profound changes during the last century, influenced mainly by the rubbing power of war, ideology and economic change. For much of modern history, the international system has been one of European and European-descended colonial powers, where Great Britain, France, and Spain ruled large overseas empires until the early 20th century. This colonial world-system slowly fell apart at the end of the two World Wars, especially World War II, when European and other colonial powers lost their power (such as the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers). Enmity between these two was to become the ideological and strategic contest known as the Cold War and it would be characterized by nuclear deterrence, proxy-wars and a struggle for global influence that, when it was won, ended not with a bang but with a whimper (Gaddis, 2005). The Cold War not only structured geopolitical relations in the world between 1947 and 1991; it also established a paradigm for how power was to be grasped and wielded across the globe. The bipolarity of the period presented few alternatives to joining either the U.S.-led liberal capitalist camp or the Soviet-led communist camp for most states. The United States wielded both hard power in military alliances like NATO and soft power, which entailed the promotion of liberal democratic values, economic development and cultural exports (Hollywood; rock ’n’ roll). In contrast, to uphold its zone of influence, the Soviet Union depended almost exclusively on force, military threat, and ideological brainwashing (Westad, 2007). Each side, driven by the rivalry to outpace the other in terms of the number of warheads, the sophistication of missiles, as well as the advancement of delivery systems, pursued the doctrine of “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD), which ironically provided strategic stability for the most part of the Cold War (Freedman, 2003). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the prelude to what most scholars have termed a unipolar moment, with the United States being the unopposed global hegemon. This time was one of the consolidation of liberal democratic values, neoliberal economic regimes, and the reiteration of U.S. US cultural hegemony across the global. The U.S. military, meanwhile, ravaged regions like the Middle East, and American universities, corporations and media continued to dominate global landscapes. But the unipolar order was not going to be forever. On the other hand, the ascent of China out of the economic reform begun by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, showed its capability to dismantle the established American-led world order (Ikenberry, 2011). The rise of China has been marked by an unusual combination of authoritarian rule and market-based rise and a determination to build a modern military. The CCP has wanted the world to look at China as more than just a regional power, but as a global buccaneer with aspirations to disrupt the current order. China’s GDP has expanded rapidly since entering WTO in 2001 allowing investment in infrastructure, technology and military power (Shambaugh, 2013). At the same time, the country has implemented diplomatic and cultural efforts to increase its soft power footprint, such as the creation of the Confucius Institute, and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involving over 140 countries (Rolland, 2017). The difference between American and Chinese power is stark but subtle. The United States still has unmatched military capabilities, with bases around the world and sophisticated nuclear arsenals. The cornerstone of its strategic position, including NATO, its bilateral treaties with Japan and South Korea, and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, is the alliance system. In support of soft power Despite internal political divisions and controversial foreign interventions in recent years, U.S. soft power remains (arguably) strong due to higher education, global news and entertainment media, and humanitarian assistance (Nye, 2004). But detractors complain that the heavy reliance on hard power in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan has under undermined the moral authority of US global leadership (Fukuyama 2006).

By contrast, China’s power projection has evolved somewhat differently. Although it has been rapidly ramping up its defense spending second only to the United States it is still not able to project power around the world or must consume its military experience the way the United States does. However, China has invested in building capacity in things like A2/AD, cyber and AI to generate asymmetric advantage all the same. The militarization of the South China Sea, the invention of hypersonic missiles and the rise of the navy, all suggests that strategic posture has taken on a new level of assertiveness (Mastro, 2019). China’s nuclear posture has been traditionally passive under its “No First Use” policy, but recent advances, like the increase in missile silos, have indicated a shift towards a more credible deterrence posture (Kristensen & Korda, 2021). There is also an essential realm of competition in soft power. The US uses its cultural institutions, technological supremacy and liberal democratic values to shape world opinion. Hollywood movies, Silicon Valley breakthroughs, and Ivy League degrees draw millions from around the world, making it all the more seductive to its model. China has also faced obstacles to the projection of its soft power, owing to censorship, authoritarianism and the absence of organic appeal. Beijing has taken a far different tact, embracing developing countries with economic aid, infrastructure loans, and medical assistance -- especially in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia (Kurlantzick, 2007). The story of non-intervention and mutual gain that the likes of the BRI propagates is a powerful counterpoint to models of Western conditionality. The nuclear aspect of this rivalry is just as important. The United States has a robust nuclear triad land-based missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers that provides assured second-strike capability. Its cooperation on arms control treaties, including START and the now-defunct INF, was indicative of an understanding of nuclear stability, yet developing trends under different U.S. administrations have provoked fears of a renewed arms race. The Chinese nuclear arsenal, while smaller, is increasingly sophisticated. Lack of visibility as well as formal arms control agreements with China creates ambiguity that makes strategic stability more complex and increases the potential for miscalculation, notably in areas like Taiwan or the South China Sea (Acton, 2020).

Due to these dynamics, it has been increasingly asserted by analysts that the present world system is moving from unipolarity toward multipolarity or even bipolarity in the form of a new type. Unlike the Cold War, when ideology was the main dividing line, in the U.S.-China rivalry that covers technology, military power, global governance and economic prowess. A production would need to be evaluated using a broader analytical framework for this multidimensional competition, one that acknowledges both traditional and non-traditional power. The notion of CNP, repeatedly invoked by Chinese strategists, captures this wider significance, including economic power, military strength, cultural appeal, and diplomatic clout (Scobell et al., 2020).

**Soft Power Theory: Joseph Nye’s Framework of Attraction-Based Influence**

The soft power idea changed the way in which international relations scholars and policymakers perceived power projection outside military and economic instruments. Soft power, a term first coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, is defined as the power countries yield through shaping the preference and behavior of others, and its ability to make other nations want the outcomes that the actor with soft power seeks, rather than coerce them. As Nye suggests, a country's culture, political beliefs and foreign policy can all become sources of global influence if they're seen as legitimate, and if other countries find them attractive. In contrast to hard power which forces acquiescence, soft power elicits acquiescence through attraction and legitimacy (Nye, 2004). Nye came up with his theory in reaction to the shortcomings of realist theory, which defined the hard power resources of military and economic might as the most integral factors of influence around the world. In a globalized world, especially after the Cold War, information, media and values increasingly decided what countries were legitimate and influential, he argued. PIX Nye noted that "the best propaganda is not propaganda," implying that soft power cannot be imposed or manipulated, instead it occurs as a reflex of a nation's identity and behavior (Nye, 1990). Here, democracies honor human rights and participate in global discourse, promote open societies. In such a realm, positive soft power is more likely to flower. The United States is generally good at wielding soft power. It’s developed positive public opinions around the world because of its universities, movie industry, popular culture and commitment to democratic values. Institutions like Harvard and Stanford draw international students, and Hollywood movies set global narratives. U.S. foreign aid and humanitarian interventions have traditionally been cast as acts of moral leadership. However, Nye also cautioned that said soft power can easily be eroded if a nation’s actual behavior contradicts its professed values—such as in the case of advancing democracy overseas while backing authoritarian allies (Nye, 2004). This inconsistency can undermine credibility and therefore undermine the efficacy of soft power.

China realises the value of soft power, and has set its sights on constructing its own brand of attraction-based influence. Using efforts like the Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language and culture, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which casts infrastructure-building as cooperation that brings benefits to both sides, China is trying to change how the rest of the world sees it. However, many researchers contend that China's soft power is directed by the state and that it is therefore less organic than in democracies. The image of censorship, human rights violations and propaganda detracts from the authenticity and persuasive impact of its soft power (Kurlantzick 2007).

Nye’s conception of soft power also draws out that attraction is not always a universal or symmetrical one. But what is popular among one audience is anathema to another based on history, ideology, or cultural distance. Hence, effective soft power strategies are those that involve targeted messaging, long-term involvement, as well as home credibility. This model often engenders scepticism in liberal democracies, but is more acceptable in Africa and Southeast Asia, where there is an emphasis on economic development before political liberalization (Paradise, 2009).

In addition, Nye differentiates between resource power and behavioral power. A state’s resources of soft power, such as culture, values and policies, might be there, but if they do not convert into actual influence over international preferences, it is useless. Accordingly, calculation of soft power entails an assessment of outcomes rather than simply counting inputs. This has particularly significance in relation to U.S. and China, as the media, education, and diplomacy are both states put great value on, and from which they derive a high magnitude of investment; however the level to which they can actually convert this into sustainable global influence differ substantively with legitimacy and context (Nye, 2011).

**Hard Power Theory: Realism and the Primacy of Military and Material Strength**

In contrast, hard power is rooted in the realist tradition in international relations that sees global politics as a competition of all-against-all in pursuit of domination and security among self-interested states. According to the realists, such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, it is military power and the strength of the economy which can best guarantee national interests. In this perspective, the international system is anarchic there is no central authority—and power must therefore be deployed to fend off challenges, defend sovereignty, and project influence (Waltz, 1979). Realism argues that as long as trust is in short supply and conflict an ever-present possibility, states will have to depend on visible capabilities — like military forces, stead and weapons systems, economic power and the like — to meet their goals. The presumption is that in times of duress moral values are secondary to survival, and power, specifically military power, is the value above all others in international affairs. This idea is considered to be fundamental to the concept of hard power — force and the threat of force to coerce other states (Mearsheimer 2001). This is not the case with soft power, which functions on the basis of attraction, whereas hard power uses the impact of fear, dissuasion, and force. The hard power has been widely used in deterrent and coercive ways, historically. The U.S. Atomic Umbrella in Europe Disuaded Soviet Aggression during the Cold War; America’s wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya provide examples of force employed to secure regional objectives. Realists claim that demonstration of military power strengthens credibility and deters opponents from questioning the resolve of a state. This perspective is at the heart of the U.S. defense policy, which has continued to emphasize conventional capabilities, the modernization of nuclear forces, and a prepositioned battle stockpile (Posen, 2003). China’s increasing use of hard power mirrors its evolving application of realism. And though Deng Xiaoping’s dictum about “hide your strength, bide your time” favored caution, recent decades have turned into an era of assertiveness. Its force projection and intimidation of regional states through a navy that has grown, the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missiles systems, and the creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea replay its aggressive geopolitical aspirations. Realist there is no doubt that realist theorists would simply see such behaviour as a rising great power making rational decisions in order to secure strategic space and in doing so, challenge the hegemonic order (Friedberg, 2011). Realism also focuses on the notion of deterrence -- discouraging the actions of an adversary by raising the specter of punishment. This is where hard power meets nuclear power. The Cold War logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD), underwritten as it is by realist thought, considers them less weapons of war-fighting than of deterrence. Even between today’s U.S. and China, nuclear weapons stabilize a situation by making conflict more costly, even as the lack of arms control agreements and possibly misperceptions create new dangers (Sagan & Waltz, 2002). A major criticism of realism and its focus on hard power is that it does not make sense of long-term cooperation, integration and international norms. But advocates maintain that even the UN or the WTO operate in the shadow of power, with the stronger states determining the rules and the weaker states playing along. Therefore, in contrast to the liberal conceptions of interdependence and cooperation, realists argue that these are conditions that are only possible as a result of a balance of hard power (Grieco, 1993).

In addition, hard power continues to be an important part of the strategic behavior of both rising and declining powers. Seeking to supplant American primacy in Asia, China keeps rising military spending and assertive maritime claims. The U.S. “pivot to Asia,” with its renewed military focus on Japan, Australia, and India, is also based in hard power calculations. In this perspective, power transitions are by nature unstable in the absence of credible deterrence and strategic balance (Tammen et al.2000).Realism, with its focus on hard power, serves as a good theory through which state behaviour could be interpreted in an anarchical system. The formula of military-craze material power mirrors that of its commitment to the belief that uses of force is a mode securing national safety. Through deterrence, compellence, or even mere forward presence, hard power continues to influence the behavior of the United States and China as they cope with an increasingly contentious international environment (Mearsheimer, 2014).

**United States as an Established Superpower**

The rise of the United States as a superpower was not a fluke or a flash but a long, Bang-like process of economic growth, military buildup, and self-projection. When World War II ended, the U.S. not only emerged as a victorious power, but also as the lead designer of a liberal world order. Much of Europe and Asia was ravaged by war, but the United States had unrivaled industrial strength, technological supremacy and a durable political order that gave it the capacity to help shape a postwar order. Its commitment to organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and United Nations was indicative of the central position the United States had in creating global governance and maintaining long-term strategic dominance (Ikenberry, 2001). Militarily, the United States has been the most powerful nation-state since the middle of the 20th century. The era of American military dominance began with the nuclear bomb of World War II, and continued and expanded during the Cold War in what was a gargantuan arms race for conventional and nuclear forces. The concept of containment, as developed under the Truman administration, was rooted in early U.S. efforts to contain the balance of power and Soviet-led expansion. Today the Unites States has well around 800 military bases in more than 70 countries, and there is nowhere that it cannot go. These bases can be seen as fulfilling both deterrent and power-projection missions, spreading American power across all of the world’s great regions (O’Hanlon 2017). Strategic relationships binding people to the U.S. are at the heart of its global military posture. This should illustrate the depth and extent of American strategic commitments to NATO in Europe, to our bilateral security treaties in the Indo-Pacific with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and across the various partnership efforts in the Middle East. In addition, these alliances are not only military but also diplomatic and economic, forming a complex network of influence that supports U.S. primacy. China and Russia's alliances are, in stark contrast, both of a predominantly transnational and transactional nature, or regional at best, whereas American partnerships are fundamentally institutionalized, and rest on either value-based or long-term considerations (Kaplan, 2010). This permits the U.S. to conduct combined exercises, trade intelligence and foster global security arrangements in patterns that other states are not able to imitate (Goldgeier & McFaul, 1992). The United States still has plenty of economic heft, even though it is increasingly being challenged by China. The U.S. dollar is the world's primary reserve currency and is used in the settlement of international transactions. And Wall Street, Silicon Valley and American multinationals still rule the world. Organizations like the Federal Reserve wield immense power throughout the world's financial network. The U.S. led economic sanctions, as coercive diplomacy devices, also validate the claim that American financial pre-eminence offers geopolitical clout (Drezner, 2011). These capacities speak to the intersection between economic and strategic power that frequently muddies the distinction between soft and hard influence.“Culturally, the U.S. has done an outstanding job at unleashing soft power using the media, education, and values.” American colleges and universities are epicenters of advanced learning and research and draw scholars and students from around the world. In Hollywood, in America’s music industry, on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, American cultural norms and values are propagated across borders. And not like the canned cultural exports of totalitarian societies, the free spread of American culture imbues it with an air of legitimacy and coolness, particularly among the young in the third world and semi-periphery (Nye, 2004). These liberal democratic principles-bourgeois democracy, human rights, and the rule of law-also support the moral authority of U.S. power. Still, the U.S. has not been the only superpower in the world. The emergence of China, the resurgence of Russia and the internal political polarization in the United States have led to questions over how long US leadership can endure. Despite these points of stress, the institutional thickness in the United States, from its democratic governance, federalism and independent judiciary to vibrant civil society and dynamic markets lays the foundation of its long-range resilience. Its innovative ability fostered through leadership in artificial intelligence, space exploration, and biotechnology, also keeps the U.S. ahead in strategic competition (Brands & Edel, 2019). There is yet another pillar of American dominance, this one over global information flows and cyberspace. The companies that dominate the world’s digital infrastructure, data storage and software ecosystems are almost all American: Google, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon. This control gives China not just the economic benefits but also strategic benefits in surveillance, communications and influence operations. While China’s emerging tech sector, notably corporations such as Huawei, TikTok, and Alibaba, is challenging this supremacy (Ssegal, 2018), in critical technologies, cyber security capabilities, and digital regulation, the US continues to be the leader. This aspect of power (1) represents a contemporary expansion of superpower to realms well beyond "hard" power. As a matter of strategic view, the United States has always subordinated its foreign policy to preserving a liberal world order. By advancing democracy, human rights and free markets, U.S. leadership has aimed to secure not only U.S. interests, but also an international order amenable to its values and form of government. From the Marshall Plan to post-Cold War Nato expansion and counterterrorism campaigns in the aftermath of 9/11, this is a role that the U.S. has deliberately sought to play on the global stage. Although there has been reconsideration of some commitments by recent administrations, the grand strategy of sustaining leadership and precluding hostile dominance in critical areas endures (Mead, 2014).

**China as a Rising Power**

China’s emergence as a world power is one of the most significant global developments in world politics since the end of the Cold War. Escaping a legacy of internal tumult, territorial encroachment, and ideological solitude, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has advanced from an underdeveloped outpost to the second largest economy on the planet, and a global strategic superpower to be reckoned with. The path of China’s rise has redefined the distribution of power within Asia, and it is only in recent years that the broader norms, institutions, and geopolitical alignments across the global stage have begun to shift as well (Shambaugh 2013). The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s forms the basis of China’s rise. By transitioning from a command economy to a market socialist one, China welcomed foreign investment, technology and trade. This economic liberalism, along with heavy state intervention, allowed the nation to support decades of 10 percent-plus GDP growth, lift hundreds of millions out of poverty and build the necessary industrial capacity. By 2010, China had overtaken Japan as the world’s second-largest economy, based on nominal GDP, a clear indication of change in the international economic order (Naughton, 2007). Today, China’s economic power can be seen as it sits at the center of global supply chains and as a top trading partner to more than 120 countries (World Bank 2021). Militarily, China has modernized its armed forces with a thorough reform of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), turning it from a predominantly land-based and quantity-oriented force into a high-tech and multidimensional one. The PLA has more modern naval fleets, fifth-generation fighter jets, cyber warfare units and long-range missile systems. Central to China’s military strategy is A2/AD, a strategy designed to prevent or at least frustrate external intervention in its selfproclaimed sphere of influence, particularly the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait (Fravel 2019). Such strategic direction indicates China’s intentions to expand power projection capabilities well beyond the vicinity of its borders, and to reconfigure regional security architectures to its advantage (Mastro, 2019).

China also sent a powerful message with its aggressive foreign policy, piloted by President Xi Jinping. Since taking power in 2012, Xi has tightened his grip at home and pressed for an increasingly assertive foreign policy. This vision of ‘win-win’ appears in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced in 2013. By building roads and bridges with its investments in over 140 nations, China has designed these infrastructure projects to establish economic corridors that will increase its global sway and make recipient states reliant on it. While in some quarters the initiative is criticized as a type of “debt-trap diplomacy,” it ha[s|ve] nevertheless seen China expand its strategic footprint across Asia, Africa, and as far as parts of Europe (Rolland, 2017). China’s involvement in international institutions has also changed. No longer content to be just a passive player in global governance, Beijing wants to actively influence international norms. It has ramped up its UN peacekeeping commitments, created parallel institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and assumed leading roles in such institutions as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Where the United States generally focuses on democratic norms and liberal governance, China advances ideas of sovereignty, nonintervention, and development-first policies as an alternative model for states frustrated with Western conditionality (Zhao 2020). When it comes to soft power, China’s efforts are strategic and state-led. Confucius Institutes have been set up around the world to encourage the teaching and study of Chinese language and culture, while projects such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) project Beijing’s media reach abroad. China has also used “vaccine diplomacy,” foreign aid, and high-level gatherings like the China–Africa Forum to win the allegiance of emerging countries. But its soft power is constrained by its political system, censorship and perceived lack of transparency. Opinion polls in liberal democracies often show suspicion about China’s global intentions, reducing the impact of its soft power in some areas (Kurlantzick, 2007). This is the opposite of the truth when it comes to technology: China is rapidly establishing itself at the vanguard of global innovation. It has made major inroads in artificial intelligence, quantum computing and 5G networks. The technology giants Huawei, Tencent and Alibaba are huge global players, and state-directed programs such as “Made in China 2025” aspire to dominate in high-tech manufacturing and new industries. This strategic push is a part of China’s desire to lessen reliance on Western technology and become self-sufficient in strategic industries (Segal 2018). At the same time, it stokes strategic competition with the United States, particularly in realms such as semiconductor production, digital infrastructure and cybersecurity. China’s nuclear capabilities, historically on a modest scale compared to those of the United States and Russia, are also evolving. Beijing follows a “No First Use” (NFU) policy and the minimal deterrence. Yet, recent developments such as missile silos, delivery systems diversification and increasing second-strike capabilities indicate towards a move from a lean deterrent to a more robust and survivable one. Although China has not yet engaged in arms control discussions, its expanding number of warheads is garnering international attention, most notably in the context of escalating great power competition with the U.S. (Kristensen & Korda, 2021).

This has kept order in China through its centralized control by the CCP. In certain areas such as large-scale infrastructure and industrial policies, the state’s capacity for long-term planning without electoral interference is considered by some as an advantage. But that model comes at the price of civil freedoms, of media Independence of any semblace of the right to political challenge. The Hong Kong demonstrations and the treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, for example, have led to international condemnation, added strain to China’s external relationships, and and stained its international reputation (Economy, 2018).China’s ascent is not without difficulties. It confronted demographic decline, environmental ruin, regional opposition and dependence on energy imports. Its surrounding countries also maintain disturbing relationships with Japan over territorial dispute and [alleged] hegemony. The current conflicts in both the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea and the emerging sense of rivalry with the United States are making China’s quest for global leadership that much more complex (Swaine, 2020).

**Comparative Analysis of Hard Power**

**Military Budget and Capabilities**

The U.S. and China are the two largest military spenders in the world and while they share this commonality, they have disparate focuses and expenditure strategies which reflect their strategic cultures. The fiscal year 2023 Department of Defense (DoD) budget was more than $840 billion, representing its determination to secure global dominance in land, sea, air, space, and cyber (Congressional Budget Office, 2023). All this massive spending, in turn, underwrites a highly technological nuclear triad, the ability to project massive force around the planet, and modernization programs aimed at future, not past, forms of warfare. In comparison, offical China held a defense budget of around $225 billion. "the real figure would be considerably higher, given non-disclosed R&D and internal security spending" (Cordesman and Lin, 2021). Though China’s defense expenditure is still lower than that of the U.S. in absolute terms, its steady annual increases and regional emphasis give it a powerful presence in East Asia. Conventional abilities are a different story, where the United States still enjoys an advantage in air and naval power, including 11 working aircraft carriers, at least hundreds of advanced fighter jets like the F-22 and F-35, and the world’s pre-eminent nuclear-powered submarine fleet in terms of global reach. Similarly, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps also have large expeditionary capabilities, resourced with the latest in logistics, allowing for long-range postings and rapid response to emergencies (O’Hanlon, 2020). China, meanwhile, has grown the number, and sophistication, of its People’s Liberation Army (PLA), especially (PLAN), which now has more ships in total than the U.S. fleet, although many are smaller and less capable. China’s focus on area denial has also fueled a missile boom, including the creation of two types of anti-ship ballistic missiles, the DF-21D and DF-26, intended to offset U.S. naval dominance in the Western Pacific (Karber & Li, 2015). Nuclear power is a significant aspect of hard power. The United States has a complete nuclear triad, based on land (intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs), at sea (submarine-launched ballistic missiles, or SLBMs), and in the air (strategic bombers) to ensure second-strike capability and global reach of its deterrent force. The U.S. also has deployed some nuclear weapons forward in Europe and Asia as part of its extended deterrence strategy. China, on the other hand, has, throughout history, embraced a minimum deterrence policy and an NFU commitment. But my new favourite song is still with me! (Yes, I am listening to other songs as well as Baamina da Boom Boom.) ‘Beijing appears to be growing its ICBM force considerably to host more fields and launchers, possibly transitioning to a more survivable and diverse deterrent posture’ (Kristensen and Korda, 2022). These advances point to the narrowing of a gap in nuclear capability, though the United States continues to hold dominance by the count of warheads and delivery systems. Further, the qualitative advantage of the U.S. armed forces is not eroded by comprehensive training schemes, interservice joint training, and frontline experience. American forces have been engaged in both combat and peacekeeping operations, thus honing their doctrines and sharpening their edge. By contrast, China’s PLA lacks a comparable level of combat experience, which it offsets with ambitious modernization, civil-military integration, and greater investment in high-tech warfare domains (Blasko, 2020). This difference in experience compared with modernization continues to inform a basic comparative measure of hard power capabilities.

**Global Military Presence (Bases, Troops, Alliances)**

The greatest sign of American hard power is its unmatched worldwide military footprint. There are 800 US military bases spread around the world in over 70 countries, providing for quick force projection, deterrence, and supporting US allies and coalitions (Vine, 2020). Such bases include major installations including Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Kadena Air Base in Japan, as well as smaller logistical hubs in Africa and the Middle East. This worldwide network is complemented with rotational forces and prepositioned materiel, and we prioritise maritime forces required to assert American interests in all key regions.America’s physical presence is complemented by strategic alliances, namely, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), bilateral defense agreements with Japan and South Korea, and nascent security partnerships such as AUKUS and the Quad. These relationships foster interoperability, intelligence sharing, and burden-sharing, thereby multiplying U.S. hard power via collective defense mechanisms. These also facilitate combined military maneuvers, synchronised dealing of regional crises and common adherence to freedom of navigation and rule-based order (Goldgeier & McFaul, 1992). In contrast, China’s worldwide military footprint is still in its infancy. ​It has only one officially-acknowledged overseas military" base (in Djibouti), but has obtained access to a number of ports via the Belt and Road Initiative, which may have dual civilian-military uses. China’s strategic interests with countries such as Pakistan (Gwadar Port), Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port), and Cambodia (Ream Naval Base) represent a still cautious but expanding worldwide military footprint (Erickson & Strange, 2016). But these institutions lack the depth, integration and long-term strategic presence of the American network.

China’s military diplomacy has expanded greatly, with peacekeeping missions, joint exercises, and weapons sales, especially in Africa and Asia. Yet these commitments do not entail the alliance-type security structures that define American strategic relationships. In contrast, China promotes non-alignment, sovereignty and non-interference in its military relations, which restricts the efficacy of its collective security activity (Zhao, 2020). That said, despite enlarging its footprint, China’s global profile is still predominantly economic rather than military-based at this point. Thus, the gap in global military power between the two countries is as much quantitative as qualitative. The U.S. sustains a deeply inscribed security architecture based on alliances, forward presence and global logistic networks. Meanwhile, China remains in the incipient phases of seeking to create a sustainable global military posture capable of power projection beyond its immediate periphery (Scobell et al., 2020).

**Technological Superiority (AI, Cyberwarfare, Satellites)**

Technology will increasingly be the vehicle of modern hard power projection. It does not change the fact that the United States has a preponderance of its military technology, and the institutions, like DARPA, and the defense-industrial complex, that connects basic research to military use. It also includes edge in stealth, gps navigation and autonomous weapons platforms. The past two generations of American defense doctrines have highlighted artificial intelligence (AI), hypersonic weapons, and next-generation cybersecurity as priority domains for ensuring military advantage (Kania, 201). Artificial intelligence is quickly changing the character of conflict, and the U.S. and China are pouring resources into the development and application of military AI, including for drone swarms, predictive systems and autonomous systems. Already, the United States has created the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) and begun multi-billion dollar efforts in the Department of Defense to incorporate AI in command-and-control, logistics, and combat systems. China, meanwhile, has integrated AI into a military-civil fusion strategy and set the goal of being the world’s primary AI innovator by 2030. Corporations like Baidu and Tencent participate in dual-use technology which benefits PLA modernization (Allen, 2019). Cyberwarfare is another major front. The United States has created its own U.S. Cyber Command to ward off digital assaults while launching its own counters when needed. It has numerous decades of hard embraced network and information dominance warfare. China as well has built formidable cyber capabilities, credited to organizations such as PLA Unit 61398, responsible for cyber espionage attacks against defense contractors, infrastructure, and governmental bodies globally (Segal, 2018). Both states see cyberspace as a warfighting domain, but the U.S. tends to emphasize strategic deterrence, while China frequently employs cyber tools for long-term strategic advantage and intellectual property theft. When it comes to space capabilities and satellite systems, the United States still outpaces all challengers in terms of civilian and military capabilities. It operates a worldwide system of reconnaissance, communication, and navigation satellites to aid in force deployment, and enable precise targeting. The U.S. Space Force is one such response; a Space Force is an acknowledgment that the United States must view space as a domain for strategic competition. China has also significantly enhanced its space program, sending more than 400 satellites into orbit and conducting anti-satellite (ASAT) tests. Its goal, as one Chinese academic proposed, is to dominate near-Earth orbits and field space-based ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) for military purposes (Cheng, 2020). Both the technological gap between the U.S. and China and others has decreased due to increasing capability, particularly in areas like AI and cyber, but U.S. forces retain the important advantages of more integration, more advanced command structures, and better technologies that have been battle tested. But given how fast China is innovating, this race has become more competitive than ever before, spurring concerns about strategic parity in future warfighting domains (Horowitz 2018).

**Regional Assertiveness (South China Sea vs. NATO/Eastern Europe)**

One of the most tangible points of hard power is how states exercise dominance in their immediate neighbors. These days, the South China Sea serves as a flashpoint for internal Chinese assertiveness, while the US performs as US forces in the less militarily vital theater of Eastern Europe, where NATO’s role is to manage internal accommodation to US regional containment and deterrence policy. In both arenas, military buildup, disputed sovereignty and strategic signaling are key features. The picture that China has painted for itself in the South China Sea has been that of a power gradually making and connecting new islands and reefs, making them capable of extended military operations, and pushing for acceptance of its territorial claims under the “Nine-Dash Line.” These efforts are in violation of international law according to the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration but China persists in enhancing its presence and thwarting the sea access of regional and extra-regional players (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). The PLA Navy frequently exercises in contested waters and Chinese coast guard and fishing militia forces harass ships from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, raising the risks of miscalculation (Poling 2020). The United States counters by carrying out Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and joint exercises with regional partners like Japan, Australia, and the Philippines. Such operations serve to push back on excessive maritime claims and assure allies that the United States is committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific. U.S. strategy has been enhanced by the Indo-Pacific Command and greater military aid to its Southeast Asian partners, too. This standoff is an integral part of the emergent US-China strategic rivalry in Asia (Green, 2017). Yet as it is, the United States serves as a front-line deterrent in Europe and if more pressure were taken off Europe, the U.S. likely would have to strengthen its deterrent there. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 led to the initiative known as the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) which had NATO troops, including U.S. troops, moved into Poland and the Baltic states. The U.S. also commands multibillion-dollar exercises like Defender-Europe and sends advanced systems, such as Patriot missiles and F-35s, to its allies in the region. These gestures are indicative of both NATO’s commitment to collective defense and the U.S. will to act as an off-set to enemies attacking it allies (Deni, 2020). While China’s regionalized muscle flexing in Asia is unilateral, U.S. regional initiatives many times work through multilateral channels, which gives them a legitimacy that increases their credibility. But both powers, critics say, engage in strategic overreach, which fuels instability. In either event, regional defiance is a manifestation of more fundamental change within the global order wherein spheres of influence are no longer contested through purely military means but rather by legal, diplomatic and technological instruments as well (Allison, 2017).

**Comparative Analysis of Nuclear Capabilities and Strategy**

**U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)**

The United States Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is a key strategic document that explains the role of nuclear weapons in US defence policy, providing direction on modernization, deterrence and on efforts to ensure strategic stability. As added in each new NPR that has been issued since 2002, perceptions of threats and developments in technology have evolved. The 2018 NPR, authored by the Trump administration, was focused on the reinforcement of deterrence against near-peer adversaries like Russian and China, as well as the re-introduction of low-yield nuclear warheads to provide greater flexibility in response. It was a departure from the Obama Administration's approach that had focused on reducing the nuclear arsenal and working towards a long-term goal of global disarmament (Kristensen & Korda, 2018). The 2018 NPR, in turn, re-vindicated the triad of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and strategic bombers as crucial for preserving credible deterrence. It also sought to develop a new SLCM and modify existing warheads so that they could be used both for strategic and regional purposes. The NPR stressed that nuclear weapons will be reserved" for extreme situations, without articulating what those situations might be, including non-nuclear strategic attacks, thus lowering the bar for possible nuclear use (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Critics contend, however, that the NPR’s enlarging of the circumstances under which nuclear weapons might be employed will erode strategic stability and heighten risks of escalation. The introduction of low-yield options is especially contentious, since it could decrease the nuclear threshold by making a more limited use of such weapons more “thinkable” in a crisis. Advocates, however, argue that diversifying this way reinforces deterrence by plugging potential holes in credibility, particularly while deterring regionalist opponents or those with an asymmetric posture (Acton, 2020). The NPR also reaffirmed the assurance of extended deterrence to allies in Europe and Asia, an important part of the U.S. global security infrastructure. By bolstering the credibility of U.S. nuclear assurances, the NPR aims to encourage allies not to pursue their own nuclear weapons and thus preserve nonproliferation norms. Yet, this commitment demands substantial investment in infrastructure modernization and confidence-building strategies complicating long term arms control objectives (Futter & Zala, 2021).

**China’s No First Use (NFU) Policy and Arsenal Growth**

China has long adhered to what it calls a No First Use (NFU) policy under which it would not use nuclear weapons unless first attacked by an adversary using them. This has been the foundation of China’s nuclear doctrine ever since the success of its first nuclear test in 1964 and comes from its policy of minimum deterrence. Unlike the United States and Russia which currently both adopt launch-on-warning doctrine and are equipped with diversified and advanced arsenals, China had historically based its strategy on a small, survivable arsenal intended to prevent potential nuclear coercion or attack (Fravel, 2008). Yet while it has publicly committed to NFU, China is currently expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. Satellite images and open-source intelligence suggest at least 300 new ICBM silos are under construction throughout Xinjiang and Gansu provinces, indicating a transition to a more robust second-strike capability. Such increase could be motivated by fears about the survivability of its deterrent in the wake of the US development of increasingly sophisticated missile defences and global strike capabilities (Kristensen & Korda, 2021). China’s modernization is not simply the increase of quantity, but also the upgrading of quality. The People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) has equipped MIRVs (multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles) warheads to its DF-41 missiles in addition to increasing retaliatory ability. It is a part of a larger picture that also includes the road-mobile ICBMs, the JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile, and perhaps even nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicle in order to complicate enemy targeting and enhance the credibility of deterrence (Zhao, 2020). Chinese officials maintain that NFU is still the pillar of its nuclear doctrine, but the opaqueness over its force structures and deployment set-up feeds speculation. There are some analysts who question whether Beijing would discover the wisdom of NFU during a crisis or employ launch on warning postures in the future. Although there is no official change of policy, it seems that such strategic ambiguity, and the evolution of capabilities, indicate a more nuanced deterrence policy than commonly believed (Turner, 2021). China’s combination of survivability and strategic ambiguity serves its goal of deterring without provoking an arms race. But the breakneck speed of modernization, combined with a lack of transparency, fuels regional and global uncertainty. With the U.S. and its NATO and other allies observing these events, fears of strategic miscalculation, an arms race, and crisis instability have all heightened (Tanner, 2022).

**Deterrence Models and Strategic Stability**

For both the United States and China, deterrence still forms the basis of their nuclear strategies, but their models are shaped by different historical experiences, threat perceptions, and strategic cultures. The U.S. embraces "deterrence by punishment," and it deters the enemy from taking action by holding the threat of massive retaliation against it. The model is supported by the triad and the extended deterrents; both of which pursue a strategy of both deterrence and reassurance (Schelling, 1966). China, in contrast, has pursued a "deterrence by denial" strategy alongside minimum deterrence. Its NFU stance gives it the view that a small, secure arsenal is adequate to deter nuclear attack; it does not need to compete in arms races or embrace warfighting doctrines. This is inspired by Maoist thinking, based on the principle of strategic patience and refusal to succumb to nuclear blackmail. But the distinction between denial and punishment is getting fuzzy as China's capabilities increase and its doctrine evolves (Goldstein 2006). Strategic stability, then, entails that both sides retain credible second-strike capabilities, and no incentive is created for the first strike. Both the U.S. triad and China’s growing second-strike capability serve to maintain this stability, but the proliferation of new technologies, including hypersonic weapons, missile defense, and cyber, is challenging this equilibrium. Developments in space-based sensors and long-range precision strike capabilities threaten the principle of mutual vulnerability and so compromise the stability of deterrence (Acton, 2020). Another aspect is the different crisis management systems. The United States has set up hotlines, early-warning systems and nuclear risk-reduction mechanisms with Russia, but it has no such arrangements with China. Without mutual understanding and crisis communication procedures, a conventional war particularly in the Indo-Pacific -- might inadvertently escalate into a nuclear war (Sagan, 2004). Moreover asymmetric nature of the deterrence opens barrier on account of different nuclear thresholds. If the U.S. keeps it ambiguous to edge both conventional and nuclear threats (more toward nuclear threats), China’s declaratory policy is narrower. This misalignment threatens to result in miscalculations regarding red lines and retaliation thresholds that could exacerbate risks of escalation by an adversary in a crisis involving Taiwan, the South China Sea, or other contested areas (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

**Arms Control Agreements & Modernization Trends**

Arms control has long been a key tool for anchoring nuclear stability, especially between America and Russia. But the U.S.-China dimension of arms control is undeveloped because of disparities in arsenal size and strategic cultures, as well as mutual suspicion. China has historically criticized bilateral treaties as favoring those with higher numbers of warheads and compromising its right to development of its own deterrence (Kulacki, 2011). Arms control agreements have also been eroding in recent years. In 2019 the departure of the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, on the expiration of the Open Skies Treaty also pointed to an unraveling of Cold War-era arms control deals. Even as the New START Treaty was extended until 2026, it does not include China, which has declined repeated American calls for a trilateral dialogue (Reif, 2021). Trends in modernization are complicating arms control prospects even more. The United States is on track to spend more than $1.5 trillion on modernising its nuclear forces, from the B-21 bomber to Columbia-class submarines and a new ICBM (GBSD). These are efforts that are designed to retain the deterrent while preparing for the replacement of aging systems. Critics say these investments are driving and arms race, and taking money away from nonproliferation items (Woolf, 2022). China’s modernization is more opaque but also important. Its priority to mobile, MIRVs, and dual capable systems further undermine the line between conventional an nuclear. This indeterminacy weakens the verification, arms control value, and exacerbates the risk of miscalculation in the event of crisis. And China’s refusal to accept confidence-building measures such as data exchanges and inspection protocols constrains progress toward mutual restraint (Glaser & Fetter, 2021). Any new try at arms control must take these asymmetries into account. Suggestions involve the instituting of a strategic stability dialogue; the reduction of the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons; and the improvement of channels of crisis communication. Multilateral constructs such as the P5 Process under the NPT provide small forums for “dialogues,” but further bilateral engagement will be required to facilitate serious arms control negotiations between the United States and China (Davenport, 2020).

## Comparative Analysis of Soft Power

**Public Diplomacy and Cultural Influence: Hollywood vs. Confucius Institutes**

Public diplomacy is integral to soft power: it enables states to disseminate their values, culture and ideology to foreign publics. America has long used its cultural industries, especially Hollywood, to build and disseminate a compelling global narrative around freedom, individualism and liberal democracy. Hollywood movies are a global revenue machine at the box office and online with attractive images and compelling narratives that sway people’s thoughts toward the American way. Even the influence of culture is accented by globally popular music, fashion, and sports industries based in American culture (Nye, 2004). More generally, Hollywood has its own way of working its magic, both organically and commercially, across lines of language and nation. Its portrayals of American life and values, for all the critique lodged over the years about reductive stereotypes, have operated as a species of cultural diplomacy. It is through this medium the U.S. transmits not only entertainment, but democratic values, gender egalitarianism, consumption-oriented lifestyles and technological optimism. This wide appeal makes the U.S. brand more appealing adding up to the soft power of the U.S. (Cull, 2008). By contrast, the Chinese approach to cultural influence is more institutionalized and state-controlled. One of Beijing’s leading vehicles for enhancing its international image, the Confucius Institutes (CIs), which were established in 2004. These institutes, usually based at foreign universities, are meant to spread the Chinese language and culture and create more mutual understanding. By 2022, there were over 500 CIs in over 150 countries (Fisher & Hobson, 2020). And yet, worries about academic freedom, ideological bias, and CCP influence have caused closures and curtailments, especially in the world’s Western democracies. Although they have played a crucial role in promoting Chinese language and culture around the world, the effect of Confucius Institutes on strengthening China’s soft power has been mixed. These films are heavily sponsored by the Chinese government which, according to its critics, robs such movies of a certain neutrality (especially compared to the seemingly apolitical and decentralized cultural exports of the United States). CIs, however, have flourished in parts of Africa, South East Asia, and Latin America where the enthusiasm for learning the Chinese language and economic benefits is emerging (Hartig, 2016). The divergent management of these two models of cultural influence market-driven and organic on the part of the U.S., institutional and state-directed for China emphasize their divergent styles of soft power. America still leads in global soft power, and China, for all its investment, faces a degree of skepticism based on its political system and censorship operations (Shambaugh, 2015).

**Educational Exchanges and Scholarships: Fulbright vs. China Scholarship Council**

What educations does, its a sof power tools in so far as it builds on the relation ships between future globe trottin leaders. The United States has a long history of academic diplomacy, mostly associated with the Fulbright Program. Founded in 1946, the program has supported more than 400,000 students from over 160 countries, promoting cultural dialogue and intellectual exchange. American universities remain to be premier choice for international students and remains the preeminence and the influence of US higher education system (Johnson, 2014). The US system of higher education is thriving because of a combination of academic quality, institutional independence, and cultural porosity. These international students are not only an economic engine, but they also help advance American values when, after graduating, they return to their home country. Furthermore, American educational exchange programs are frequently set in the context of general diplomatic initiatives designed to build stronger bilateral relationships and to advance U.S. leadership in science, technology, and global governance (Nye, 2004). China’s attempt to reproduce and manage this impact is through the China Scholarship Council (CSC) which sends thousands of foreign and domestic students abroad and recruits them to return annually. The scholarships are frequently attached to China’s strategic objectives, whether winning friends in Belt and Road initiative countries or developing expertise in priority sectors. The massification of international study in China increased steadily until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a process facilitated not just through state subsidies, expansion of in-country Confucius institutes, and university host investment (Yang, 2019). As China’s educational outreach is growing its global reach, there are a number of reasons its soft power extends only so far. Language, culture and fears of surveillance and indoctrination also contribute to the lack of appeal of Chinese institutions in most liberal democracies. But China has succeeded in Africa and Central Asia, where the ideological battleground is more limited and infrastructure partnerships or educational access is more greatly appreciated (Brady, 2017). In short, China has had some success in higher education, but the U.S. continues to outclass it in terms of prestige and academic freedom and alumni influence. Similar "soft influence" of U.S. exchange programs through education provides still deeper inroads with liberal values and networks of civil society (Wilson, 2008).

**Economic Diplomacy: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vs. U.S. Aid Programs**

Economic diplomacy is a crossbreed of soft and hard power, a blend of financial means to impact political preferences and international orientation. China’s 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the epitome of this strategy. BRI, involving more than 140 countries and investments of more than $1 trillion, aims to create infrastructure and linkage and thereby build Chinese standards and influence. Loaning, giving, and investing itself into the development mix, Beijing has established itself as the Global South’s leading development partner (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). The BRI is attractive because of its speed, scale and relative lack of conditionality. For many developing countries, Chinese funding is an alternative to Western aid that is contingent on governance or environmental standards. Initiatives such as the railway in Kenya, ports in Sri Lanka and power plants in Pakistan have delivered concrete dividends, even as concerns around the sustainability of debt, transparency and labor practices endure (Hillman, 2020). Critics claim the BRI is a strategic device to economically and politically ensnare states to Beijing, diminishing their sovereignty in international forums. Conversely, U.S. economic diplomacy is most often funneled through organizations such as USAID, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and development banks. These programmes focus on human rights, democracy and environmental protection, and reflect normative priorities. The American aid, though sometimes slower and more bureaucratic, is considered more open and long-term sustainable, he said. The U.S. has also begun to respond to BRI by taking initiatives such as that of Build Back Better World (B3W) and of Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to provide high standard alternatives (Feigenbaum, 2021). US aid initiatives have traditionally supported capacity building, education and health, like the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), or agricultural reform projects across Latin America. These measures help to create a positive view of the United States, particularly when assistance is perceived as selfless and benevolent. Yet, framing differs by region and former conditionality’s have often resulted in resent between beneficiary countries (Lancaster 2007). The main difference between BRI and U.S. aid has to do with the value orientation behind the two forms of assistance: China adheres to a strategy of connectivity and the principle of mutual benefit, while the U.S. emphasizes a commitment to democratic values and institutional growth. Both approaches mirror the wider national interests and ideological persuasion and provide different model of development partnership to recipient states (Carrai, 2021).

**Media and Global Narrative Building: CGTN, CCTV vs. CNN, BBC**

Media has been a robust vehicle for producing global narratives on legitimacy, values and world order. For decades the United States and its allies have enjoyed a monopoly on global news, with networks like CNN, the New York Times and the BBC. These outlets are commercial and editorially independent, but they generally embody liberal democratic values and the projects of freedom of expression, investigative journalism and global pluralism. Their power consists in consensusing on their agenda and framing world events so that international audiences identify with this framing (Entman, 2008). CNN International and the BBC World Service reach hundreds of millions of people with up-to-the-moment coverage and in-depth analysis. Their role in international crises, conflicts and summits is somewhat similar to their position in previous periods – an arbiter that can be trusted, although charges of bias towards the West and selective reporting are still made. Despite this, their long-held credibility and standards allow the U.S. and its counterparts a significant narrative edge (Cottle, 2009). China’s media push is meant to counterweight that dominance, and to propagate its view of the world. China-based CGTN and CCTV are state-funded channels that air around the world, containing news, documentaries and cultural programming for international audiences in multiple languages. Their editorial positions and those of the CCP share a focus on economic growth, harmony, and non-interference and generally have minimized coverage of domestic problems or diplomatic disputes (Stockmann, 2013). And CGTN has spent heavily on constructing studios and bureaus in Africa, Europe and the Americas, often focusing on stories the Western media has overlooked. These efforts dovetail with Beijing’s aspiration to “tell China’s story well” and change the narrative on human rights, governance and global order. But those effects are mitigated by the impressions of propaganda, no freedom of the press and lack of access to alternative viewpoints. CGTN and other Chinese media have been subject to registration and operation restrictions in a number of countries as a result of fears about foreign influence (Brady, 2015). That contest between Western and Chinese media mirrors a larger battle for control of the narrative and ideological legitimacy. While American and British media retain dominance over global reach, Chinese media are growing fast, especially in the Global South. However, the trust deficit is significant, with Western media enjoying more credibility in places where openness and journalistic freedom are considered important.

## Strategic Approaches to Global Influence

**Indo-Pacific Strategy vs. Belt and Road Initiative**

The Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are two contrasting visions underpinning efforts to determine rival influence and regional connectivity during the 21st-century. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy, a product of the Trump administration and carried forward by President Biden with adjustments, is aimed at catalyzing a “free and open Indo-Pacific” based on democratic principles, freedom of navigation, economic openness, and alliance system. It is a reaction to what is seen as Chinese aggressive policies related to China’s rise and the BRI (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The Indo-Pacific Strategy holds strategic cooperation with Japan, Australia, India and ASEAN member states as key priorities. Initiatives such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and AUKUS (Australia–UK–U. S. pact) are symbols of multilateral efforts to balance China's rising power. What’s more, the U.S. has rolled out military deployments, joint exercises, and economic mechanisms (including the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)) geared toward promoting supply chain resilience and technological standards that conform to democratic norms (White House, 2022). China’s BRI, for example, centres on building physical infrastructure, digital links and financial ties. Conceived in 2013, BRI aims to connect Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America through ports, railways, roads and fiber optic networks. China’s story highlights win-win cooperation, development support, and no interference, which resonates especially among the Global South. However, BRI has been criticized on the grounds that such projects are likely to lead to debt bondage, environmental damage and minimal local employment benefits (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). On a broader strategic level, while the Indo-Pacific Strategy is built on security foundations, the BRI is presented as an economic perspective. Yet both frameworks have geopolitical stakes. The American goal is to defend recognized international liberal order, freedom of navigation and regional stability, while the Chinese vision is to refashion the world economic architecture in a way that adheres to its political model and strategic autonomy (Rolland, 2017). Whereas Indo-Pacific Strategy is based on institutional re-convergence and values-driven diplomacy; BRI operates on the incentives of economic engagement and practical convergence. This divergence is indicative of more general ideological and institutional orientations to competing for global leadership and regional hegemony pursued by the two powers (Tellis 2020).

**Use of International Institutions (UN, WTO, WHO)**

The US and China both employ international institutions as a means to legitimize their global influence, but their approaches, and the styles of participation, are not equally similar. The United States is at the genesis of bodies such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), and World Health Organization (WHO), and it has helped define these institutions around liberal democratic values, human rights, and free-market ideals. American leadership and the post-World War II international order have been premised on these institutions (Ikenberry, 2001). The U.S. approach to international institutions is both leadership and reform. The U.S., for example, has frequently lambasted UN inefficiencies or WHO alleged biases while remaining a leading source of financial support for both and a major purveyor of technical capability. Trump administration quit WHO during COVID-19 outbreak out of claims of China’s overwhelming control and influence that had been reversed by President Biden to rebuild U.S. credibility and leadership in global health governance (Gostin & Meier, 2020). China, in contrast, has invested more in international institutions as part of an overall strategy to build influence and re-constitute norms. Today, China makes an increasing contribution to UN peacekeeping, has increased voting rights in international financial institutions and seeks to aspire to the heads of its specialized agencies. Beijing stresses multipolarity, and state sovereignty and development-focused agendas, frequently challenging the Western framing of human rights and democratic governance (Foot, 2020). China’s attempts to undermine the WTO include advancing other trade norms and fighting off domestic demands for change. Within the W.H.O., Beijing has lobbied for recognition of traditional Chinese medicine and pressed to restrict Taiwan’s involvement. Though such strategies are received in the West with accusations of double standards, many Global South nations welcome China’s assertiveness as a corrective to Western hegemony (Weiss 2019). Yet these divergent approaches provide a lens into how and why each power instrumentalists international institutions as theaters of ideological contestation, norm setting, and legitimacy. As U.S. upholds the current rules-based order, China is attempting to reinterpret or modify norms according to its political system and strategic interests (Zhao, 2021).

**Strategic Alliances: NATO vs. SCO, BRICS**

At a basic level, alliances are the most important instrument of global leverage, the means by which states combine resources, exercise influence, and help to fashion international norms. The United States provides leadership through formal military alliances like NATO a bedrock of transatlantic security. NATO’s growing size, modernization, and ongoing relevance demonstrate the U.S. leadership in collective defense, particularly in deterring Russian aggression and mollifying instability in the Middle East and Eastern Europe (Rynning, 2018).

Part of the reason is that NATO is a full-fledged alliance structure with defense guarantees (Article 5), interoperability and shared democratic values as part of the formalized institutional architecture. Its activities span everything from military deterrence to cyber security co-operation to capacity building in partner countries. NATO engagement with Indo-Pacific partners arises out of its global repositioning to confront shared threats, such as the rise of China, the meteoric growth of cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns (Lute & Burns, 2020). China, on the contrary, projects power through more informal albeit strategically important groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). The SCO is a platform for Chinese and Russian leadership in Central Asia; a set of instruments for establishing a regional security orientation, and for expanding the space of cooperation among Eurasian powers. Though it lacks the same institutional depth of NATO, yet, the SCO legitimizes Chinese regional ambitions and anti-Western framings of its foreign policy (Stanzel, 2018). As an alliance of developing nations, BRICS aims to encourage South-South cooperation and pursue a multipolar world, as well as the reform of international financial institutions. China instrumentalizes BRICS to unite with other powerful developing countries on climate change, development finance, and digital governance. Though the grouping is variegated and not always coherent, it provides China with a basis upon which to contest Western dominance in multilateral fora (Patrick 2015). In short, the U.S. depends on formal alliances with clear legal obligations, while China forms ad hoc coalitions in line with strategic interests. Such divergent models of alliance are rooted in distinct geopolitical cultures: on the one hand, linkage and value consistent leadership in Washington; on the other, a flexible, issue-based relationship, free from ideological pre-conditions in Beijing (Bailes, 2007).

### Technological Competition and Cyber Strategies

Technology innovation and cyber power have become such key arenas of strategic competition between the US and China. Both nations appreciate how digital technology now has the potential to create global norms and to perhaps give a nation cultural superiority, military supremacy and economic dominance. So they are now engaged in a battle over artificial intelligence (AI), 5G networks, quantum computing and cyberwarfare. The United States still leads the world in basic research, high-end semiconductors and digital platforms. The innovations from companies like Google, Microsoft, and NVIDIA shape global industry standards for AI ethics, cloud computing, and cybersecurity. Washington has also tried to maintain this advantage with export controls, foreign investment reviews, and initiatives like the Chips and Science Act of 2022, which seeks to revitalize domestic semiconductor production and innovation ecosystems (Segal, 2020). In cyber strategy, the U.S. embraces a model of persistent engagement and forward defense. Its (DoD-mandated) Cyber Command actively assays and disrupts the adversary’s networks, federal agencies work with private companies to protect critical infrastructure. Public attributions of foreign cyber-attacks, indictments against state-sponsored attackers, and diplomatic efforts to create cyber norms each demonstrate America’s multi-dimensional approach to cyberspace security (Healey, 2019). China’s vision is grounded in digital sovereignty, state-led innovation, and global standard-setting. Through projects such as “Made in China 2025” and the “Digital Silk Road,” Beijing has sought to dominate emerging technologies and undercut reliance on Western suppliers. Scores of companies, such as Huawei, ZTE and Alibaba, are key players in this strategy to spread China’s digital influence in places like Africa, Asia and Latin America. China’s ambition to build a foundation for leadership in critical technology fields is also laid bare by the development of Beidou, the country’s satellite navigation system, in new AI surveillance tools (Triolo, Allison, & Brown, 2020). In cyber strategy, China uses a mix of state-sponsored espionage, industrial advantage, and information control. Political The Ministry of State Security and People’s Liberation Army are behind hacking operations that target political structures, research labs and international enterprises. At home, the Great Firewall and digital surveillance support a cyber governance model oriented towards stability and ideological conformity (Creemers, 2017). The competition isn’t just about technology; it’s also ideological. The U.S. supports an open, interoperable internet founded upon privacy and free expression — China is pushing for cyber sovereignty, content control, and state authority. These visions are stretching for dominance in the United Nations and in the International Telecommunication Union and they are vying for control in the future of cyberspace (Deibert, 2021).

**Conclusion**

Competition between the two advancing countries the United States and China has moved beyond military force to include diplomacy, technology, economy, and institutions. Throughout, we have seen the ways in which the two countries use competing frameworks - forged by their history, political design, and global ambition - to exert power and influence international norms. The U.S. still clings to established alliance partnerships, liberal democratic ideals, and institutional power to assert leadership. Meanwhile, its Indo-Pacific Strategy, multilateral institution-building, and investment in global education and media are soft power instruments that prioritise shared values and rule-based cooperation. At the same time, the U.S. is using its tech ecosystem, defense capabilities and economic tools to attain strategic advantages. By contrast, China’s rise is characterized by a pragmatic, state-driven effort to reorder the balance of power without fighting. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Confucius Institutes and the China Scholarship Council reveal Beijing’s focus on connectivity, education, and cultural diplomacy. Concurrently, projects such as the SCO, BRICS and Digital Silk Road reflect China’s attempts to build alternative governance systems that work in opposition to the Western monopoly on institutions. One important issue which arises from this comparison is the difference in legitimacy and attraction. Although the U.S. retains confidence among democratic allies and institutional allies, China’s influence is seen with some wariness, especially in liberal communities. But China’s increasing foothold in the Global South demonstrates how well it has been able to wield economic and developmental instruments in the regions that the West so often neglects. In technology and cyber, the competition has become especially dire. The American model favors openness, transparency, and working with private innovators. China’s approach is based on state control, digital sovereignty and normative power through infrastructure and standards. This divergence defines competing visions of the future of global governance, digital rights, and innovation. But, ultimately, the competition is about more than power — it is about whose vision of international order will dominate in the 21st century. The U.S. is working to conserve “the liberal order,” based on principles and cooperation; where China tries to promote “the multipolar, development-centered order,” which puts state sovereignty and non-interventionist principles ahead. The resilience of both approaches will be determined by the extent of their adaptability, legitimacy and responsiveness to global imperatives. Given that the world is becoming both increasingly interconnected and contested, others will be affected by how well these two powers compete, manage risk, and cooperate on global problems they have in common. Peaceful cohabitation and working together are still feasible, but they can be realized only under the continuation of dialogue, respect for each other and a balanced and universal international structure.

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