

Soft Power Versus Hard Power: International Political Strategies of Great Powers

Yusran

Universitas Budi luhur

Korespondensi Email: yusran@budiluhur.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the use of soft power and hard power strategies in international politics carried out by major countries, and to understand how these two approaches complement or compete with each other in achieving national interests. Using descriptive qualitative methods, this study examines case studies in the United States and China over the last decade. The results of this study indicate that the hard power and soft power strategies implemented by the United States and China have a significant impact on the dynamics of international politics, both in the form of competition for global influence, regional stability, and changes in the world economic order. The United States tends to use its military superiority to ensure deterrence and enforce interests through economic sanctions, while its soft power derived from popular culture and democratic values remains a strong attraction in many countries. In contrast, China focuses on economic diplomacy through massive investment and strengthening trade relations that increase the dependence of its partners, accompanied by the modernization of its military as a guarantee of protecting strategic interests. The combination of the strategies of the two countries not only triggers competition in promoting development and governance models, but also creates a more complex international landscape, where narratives and public perceptions become new fields of competition besides the power of weapons and economy.

Keywords: Soft Power, Hard Power, Smart Power, International Politics, United States, China

Introduction

In the increasingly complex era of globalization, the dynamics of international politics are determined not only by military strength, but also by a country's ability to influence others through non-coercive means (Arwanto & Anggraini, 2021). The concepts of soft power and hard power have become two main instruments used by major powers in carrying out their foreign policy strategies. These two approaches have different characteristics but complement each other in achieving national goals (Ramadhan & Chaerul, 2023).

Soft power was introduced by Joseph S. Nye (1990) as a country's ability to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Forms of soft power include public diplomacy, the spread of culture, ideological values, and foreign policies that win the sympathy of the international community. In practice, major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia extensively use soft power instruments to strengthen their global influence (Ohnesorge, 2020).

Conversely, hard power refers to the use of coercive instruments such as military force and economic pressure to influence the behavior of other countries. Throughout the

history of international relations, hard power has been the dominant instrument to ensure national security and safeguard strategic interests (Lemke, 2016). However, the use of hard power is not free from risks such as escalating tensions, open conflicts, and a negative image in the eyes of the international community (Campbell & Hanlon, 2006).

An interesting phenomenon today is how major powers are beginning to combine these two approaches into what is called smart power (Nye, 2009). This approach emphasizes the synergistic use of attraction and coercion, making foreign policy strategies more adaptive in facing diverse global challenges. Thus, the analysis of soft power versus hard power becomes relevant to understanding the current patterns of global power interactions (Brannagan et al., 2025).

This study focuses on the international political strategies employed by the United States and China, as representations of major powers with broad geopolitical interests. The United States (US) as an established player, and China emerging as a new power (Suwarman et al., 2018). Unlike the Cold War era, when the US and the Soviet Union both relied on hard power approaches through military dominance, China chose a subtler path by maximizing soft power strategies (Dwiguna & Rofii, 2019). The Middle Kingdom does not have a history of colonialism or military expansion like its predecessors, instead leveraging its rapidly growing economic power. With abundant capital, China is now the world's largest creditor, providing loans totaling around 5 trillion US dollars to at least 152 countries, including about 50 developing countries that continue to accumulate debt (Rum, 2019).

Through the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has carried out direct investments across nearly every continent – even within US territory itself (Zhang, 2018). With this appealing economic approach, China has successfully become a key strategic trading partner for many countries, ranging from the US, the European Union, Australia, to other developing nations (Ohashi, 2018). While the US continues to solidify its superpower status through the deployment of military bases around the world, China spreads its influence through investments, trade, and economic diplomacy. This strategy slowly but surely makes many countries feel bound by interests and “indebted” to China, including Arab countries in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, which have long been close to the US but are now increasingly responding to the allure of China’s “silk dance” (Clarke, 2017).

Recent studies show that many major powers combine hard power and soft power in the form of smart power (Harahap et al., 2023). This is evident, for example, in US foreign policy which, although still relying on global military dominance, also intensively promotes democratic values and human rights to enhance its image worldwide. Meanwhile, China stands out as one of the most interesting cases in the last decade. Unlike the Soviet approach during the Cold War era that prioritized hard power, China instead seeks to expand its global influence through soft power instruments such as economic diplomacy, culture, infrastructure loans via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the expansion of international media networks (Kurlantzick, 2007; Hartig, 2016).

There is still a lack of comparative and systematic research exploring the dilemmas and synergies between soft power and hard power in the international political strategies

of major powers simultaneously. Therefore, this study attempts to fill that gap by examining how the United States and China—two primary superpower actors after the collapse of the Soviet Union—use these two approaches in their global strategies. This study also observes how the shifting patterns of power use affect the dynamics of international relations, including the responses of developing countries that become objects of the diplomacy and competition of these two major powers.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of how soft power and hard power strategies are implemented by major powers, particularly the United States and China, in contemporary international politics. The data for this research was obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, as well as through library research by reviewing literature such as books, scientific journals, policy reports, and official documents from governments and international organizations (Yulianah, 2022). In addition, the analysis also takes into account credible international media reports to capture the current context of global dynamics.

The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify patterns in the use of soft power and hard power, as well as to explore the relationship between the two in influencing other countries. This study also employs comparative techniques to contrast the strategies of the United States and China, thus uncovering similarities, differences, and the implications of using these two instruments of power on the configuration of international politics. Through this method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how soft power and hard power are strategically utilized by major powers to maintain or expand their global influence.

Result and Discussion

Soft Power and Hard Power Strategies in the International Politics of Major Powers

A. United States

The United States employs a combination of hard power and soft power to achieve its objectives around the world. Hard power refers to the use of military and economic strength to compel other countries, while soft power refers to the ability to influence other nations through cultural appeal, values, and foreign policy.

- **Hard Power**

1. **Military Power**

The United States has long been recognized as the country with the largest and most dominant military power in the world. With a defense budget reaching USD 895 billion in 2025, the U.S. ranks first in global military spending, far surpassing other major powers. This massive budget allocation enables the United States to maintain and develop the most advanced military technologies, ranging from missile defense systems, aircraft carriers, stealth fighter jets (such as the F-35 Lightning II), to strategic nuclear weapons. This dominance gives the United States extraordinary capacity to project military power into various regions whenever its national interests are perceived to be under threat.

One concrete example of the U.S.'s use of military hard power is direct intervention in armed conflicts. A classic case is the invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the pretext of dismantling weapons of mass destruction and overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime. Although these objectives were later debated, the invasion underscored how the U.S. leveraged its military superiority to reshape the political order of a country. Earlier, in 2001, the United States also led the invasion of Afghanistan in response to the September 11 attacks, aiming to dismantle Al-Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban government that harbored them.

Beyond direct interventions, the United States also employs its military power through the policy of maintaining military bases across the globe. Currently, the U.S. has approximately 750 military bases spread across more than 80 countries, from Germany, Japan, South Korea, to Djibouti in Africa. These bases serve not only to support logistics operations and military training but also symbolize the U.S.'s security commitments to its allies and act as regional power balancers — for instance, to contain Russian influence in Europe or China in the Indo-Pacific.

The application of hard power is also evident in the U.S.'s policies on arms sales and military training to friendly nations. The United States is the world's largest arms exporter, providing advanced weapons systems to NATO countries, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan, among others. These arms sales often come with military training programs, which not only enhance the interoperability of partner forces with the U.S. but also deepen their strategic dependence on Washington. Thus, the U.S. uses its military superiority not merely for self-defense but also as an instrument of hard diplomacy to reinforce its global influence.

In addition, the United States often leads multinational military operations under NATO or ad-hoc coalitions. An example is NATO's operation in Libya in 2011 that toppled Muammar Gaddafi, where the U.S. played a critical role in providing intelligence, logistics, and precision air strikes. This involvement demonstrates how the U.S. can mobilize its allies to collectively use military force to achieve certain geopolitical objectives.

2. Economic Power

The economic power of the United States is one of the main foundations of its status as a global superpower. With a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reaching around USD 28 trillion in 2025, the U.S. is not only the world's largest economy but also plays a central role in the international financial system. This dominance gives the U.S. broad influence over the architecture of the global economy — from the role of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency, leadership in multilateral institutions like the IMF and World Bank, to its significant influence in shaping international trade policies through the WTO.

One manifestation of America's economic power is its ability to impose sanctions with far-reaching impacts. The U.S. routinely leverages unilateral sanctions or those through the UN Security Council to pressure countries it deems threats to global interests or violators of international law. Examples include economic sanctions on Iran targeting its oil and banking sectors, which severely weakened Iran's economy. Similar sanctions were imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and were significantly

expanded following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Through these sanctions, the United States uses its economic leverage to compel behavioral changes in target states.

Beyond sanctions, the economic power of the United States is also manifested through international economic assistance that serves to build strategic alliances while strengthening stability in certain regions. Through programs like USAID, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and other budgetary supports, the U.S. channels billions of dollars to developing countries for infrastructure, health, education, and governance improvements. For example, aid to Egypt, which is consistently provided every year, aims to maintain close relations and ensure stability in the Middle East, a region strategic to U.S. interests.

The United States also uses its economic power to form and lead strategic alliances based on trade and investment interests. Agreements like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced NAFTA, and economic partnerships with the European Union through various bilateral agreements, illustrate how the U.S. maintains its economic dominance while strengthening political alliances. Additionally, through the vast networks of private investment by giant corporations – from technology companies (Apple, Google, Microsoft), the energy sector, to Wall Street financial industries – the U.S. consolidates its economic hegemony in the global order.

Through all these instruments, the economic power of the United States not only supports its domestic prosperity but also serves as an effective tool of foreign policy. Sanctions, economic aid, and trade alliances create dependencies and networks of shared interests that bind many countries to the orbit of the U.S. economy. Thus, America's economic power complements its military hard power, forming the foundation for the application of smart power strategies that combine coercion with attraction to sustain its global leadership.

- **Soft Power**

1. The Power of Culture

American popular culture is one of the country's most effective instruments of soft power. Through its highly advanced entertainment industry, the United States is able to instill values, lifestyles, and global perceptions of modernity and progress. Hollywood films, for example, are consumed by audiences in nearly every part of the world, creating narratives about individual freedom, democracy, and the American Dream. This not only promotes American culture but also shapes the way international communities view standards of living and Western values.

The U.S. music industry also exerts a profound influence. Genres such as jazz, blues, rock, hip hop, and global pop all largely have roots in the United States. Musicians like Michael Jackson, Madonna, Beyoncé, and Taylor Swift have become cross-cultural icons, topping charts in various countries. Their concerts draw millions of fans worldwide, while streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music (dominated by U.S.-produced songs) underscore the dominance of American music culture. This not only entertains, but also carries with it American lifestyles, slang, and fashion trends that are adopted by many fans.

Beyond film and music, American fashion and lifestyle significantly influence global trends. Fashion brands from the U.S. such as Levi's, Nike, and Calvin Klein have

become status symbols widely emulated. Similarly, modern lifestyle trends emerging from American culture—like coffee shop culture (Starbucks), fast food (McDonald's, KFC), and the startup work style of Silicon Valley—are now adopted in many countries. In this way, American popular culture is not merely about entertainment but also shapes consumer habits and life aspirations around the world.

Another concrete example is through digital platforms that also serve as channels for disseminating American culture. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, all based in the United States, shape the global communication ecosystem, where standards of humor, viral trends, and certain values largely originate from American contexts. Netflix series, for instance, have become daily viewing for millions worldwide, offering stories and perspectives that often promote values of inclusivity, freedom of expression, and individualism.

Through these various channels, the United States effectively uses its culture to build a positive image in the eyes of the world. Popular culture becomes a means of diplomacy that is gentle yet powerful, creating fascination and emotional closeness with America, which in turn supports the acceptance of U.S. foreign policies and the values it champions. This is the strength of America's soft power—often far harder to resist than economic or military pressure—because it influences the hearts and minds of global communities voluntarily.

2. The Power of Values

One of the main sources of America's soft power lies in the fundamental values it upholds, namely democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights. Since its founding, the U.S. Constitution has emphasized the importance of individual liberty and government derived from the people. This has become a global narrative that inspires many nations, especially in countries still grappling with authoritarian systems or long histories of political repression.

The democratic values upheld by the U.S., such as free and fair elections, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and respect for opposition, are standards many countries aspire to emulate. For people in other parts of the world, the American political system is often seen as a symbol of modernity and openness. This is why the U.S. frequently becomes a reference point for countries undergoing political reforms or building democratic institutions.

Additionally, the concept of civil liberties—which provides space for citizens to express their identities, beliefs, and creativity without fear of state repression—is also highly attractive. In the eyes of the world's younger generation, the freedom of expression found in America, including in the realms of culture, art, and lifestyle, is a magnet in itself. For example, many human rights activists from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East learn how to advocate for minority rights through American institutions or via exchange programs sponsored by the U.S.

America also actively promotes these values through international diplomacy, including through speeches by its leaders at global forums, public diplomacy campaigns, and moral and political pressure on countries deemed to violate human rights. Although sometimes considered hypocritical due to controversial aspects of U.S. foreign policy,

these values nonetheless remain global standards championed by many international organizations—largely due to American influence.

Ultimately, the democratic values, freedom, and human rights upheld by the United States not only strengthen its moral legitimacy in the eyes of the world but also make it easier for the country to build international coalitions. Nations seeking close ties with the U.S. often feel encouraged to align themselves with democratic standards or at least demonstrate commitment to human rights. In this way, these values function as instruments of soft power that keep America relevant and influential in global politics.

B. China

• Hard Power

1. Military

China is currently one of the world's largest military powers, with extremely rapid military development over the past two decades. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has transformed from a force reliant on sheer numbers into a modern military emphasizing advanced technology. The Chinese government has carried out massive military reforms to ensure that its forces are capable of handling both conventional and non-conventional threats in the modern era.

At sea, China possesses the largest navy in the world in terms of the number of warships, surpassing the United States in quantity. They have operated several aircraft carriers, including the Liaoning and Shandong, which serve as symbols of Beijing's maritime ambitions. This modernization is not only about large warships but also includes nuclear submarines, advanced destroyers, and frigates that enable China to project power far beyond its domestic waters.

In the air, China's Air Force has also developed rapidly with fifth-generation fighter jets like the J-20 Mighty Dragon, as well as large-scale drone programs. China actively conducts large-scale military exercises, both independently and with partner countries, as a show of force to warn potential rivals. The modernization of ballistic missiles and anti-satellite defense systems also shows that Beijing is not only focused on regional conflicts but is preparing for multi-domain warfare capabilities.

This military power is used to protect China's territorial claims, especially in the resource-rich and strategically important South China Sea. China has built artificial islands complete with military installations such as runways and missile defense systems in areas also claimed by several ASEAN countries. The intensive presence of Chinese warships and coast guard vessels in this region often triggers tensions with neighboring countries as well as the United States, which regularly conducts freedom of navigation operations.

Moreover, the Chinese military has begun to take on roles in international operations to demonstrate its status as a responsible global power. For example, participation in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden alongside multinational fleets shows how Beijing uses its military not only for narrow national interests but also to build a global image as a guardian of maritime stability. All of this indicates that although China often emphasizes soft power in many cases, its military strength remains a crucial foundation for protecting and advancing its national interests.

2. Economy

China is now one of the world's largest economic powers, with the second-largest nominal GDP after the United States. Its economic transformation since the era of reform and opening up in 1978 has lifted China out of mass poverty into a manufacturing giant and global trade hub. The Chinese economy not only supports its vast domestic needs but also drives global supply chains from raw materials to finished products.

China leverages its economic power to expand its political and strategic influence on the international stage. One of the main instruments is through foreign direct investment (FDI) and loans, especially to developing countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most prominent example. This program involves building infrastructure such as ports, high-speed rail, highways, and energy projects in more than 60 countries, which not only benefits China's economy but also strengthens political ties with recipient nations.

In international trade, China has become the main trading partner for many countries, even surpassing the United States in some regions. China is an important export market for countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. The dependence of many countries on the Chinese market gives Beijing economic leverage that can be used to pressure or influence other countries' foreign policies. For instance, when Norway awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to activist Liu Xiaobo, China responded by restricting salmon imports from Norway.

Additionally, China's economic power is evident in its strategy of acquiring high-tech foreign companies to accelerate its ambition of becoming a leader in strategic industries such as 5G technology, artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and biotechnology. Massive investments by Chinese companies in Africa's critical mineral mining sector also show how Beijing uses its economy to secure supplies essential for its industries.

Thus, China's economic strength is not only aimed at achieving domestic prosperity but also serves as a tool of soft power as well as economic statecraft. Through investments, trade, and economic aid, China builds its image as a global development partner while expanding its strategic influence. This makes many countries, especially developing ones, increasingly politically close to Beijing due to their strong economic ties.

- **Soft Power**

1. Cultural Power

China's rich culture is one of its most important soft power instruments used to attract sympathy and build global influence. Its long traditions covering art, literature, calligraphy, and the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have become attractions that draw global interest. Cultural festivals like the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) are celebrated festively not only in China but also in various countries with large Chinese diaspora communities, from Southeast Asia and North America to Europe.

One way China spreads its culture is through its cuisine, which has become global. Chinese restaurants can be found in almost every major city in the world. Dishes such as dim sum, Peking duck, hotpot, and various noodles and fried rice have become favorites across nations. The presence of this cuisine not only promotes China's distinctive flavors

but also serves as a gateway to cultural diplomacy that strengthens people-to-people relations.

China is also active in promoting its culture through institutions like the Confucius Institutes, which are spread across more than 150 countries. Through these institutions, China teaches Mandarin and introduces its arts and philosophies to people in other nations. This strategy has proven effective in increasing interest in learning about Chinese culture and the Mandarin language, while also softening China's image in the eyes of international publics.

In the realm of modern entertainment, China has begun exporting films, TV series, and music that carry its cultural values and national pride. Chinese historical epics or fantasy films like *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* or popular palace-themed series are often featured at international festivals, introducing Chinese aesthetics, folklore, and cultural identity to global audiences.

In this way, Chinese culture becomes an important tool for building influence subtly (soft power). Chinese arts, cuisine, language, and philosophies open diplomatic pathways that strengthen social and political relations with other countries. Global interest in Chinese culture often leads to increased respect or even a sense of closeness toward the country, ultimately supporting Beijing's foreign policy strategies.

2. Education and Research

In recent decades, China has placed the education and scientific research sectors as top national development priorities. The government allocates very large budgets to improve the quality of higher education, build world-class campuses, expand scholarship programs, and establish leading research centers. As a result, Chinese universities such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University now consistently rank among the best universities in the world.

This massive investment is not only meant to advance domestic human resources but also as an effort to attract foreign students. China offers various attractive scholarship programs, including the Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC), which covers full tuition, dormitories, and living allowances. As a result, the number of international students in China continues to soar, making the country one of the most popular study destinations in the world after the United States and the United Kingdom. These foreign students who study in China indirectly become agents who spread Chinese culture and foreign policy when they return to their home countries.

In research, China has become one of the countries with the largest scientific publication outputs in the world. China leads in many fields, including 5G communication technology, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and renewable energy. Tech giants like Huawei, Alibaba, and Tencent work closely with research institutions and universities, creating an innovation ecosystem that places China at the forefront of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

On the other hand, China actively engages in cross-country research collaborations. Various projects with universities and research institutions from Europe, the United States, and Africa increasingly expand its global scientific networks. For example, collaborations in building particle physics laboratories with CERN in Switzerland or joint pandemic research projects with the WHO. This not only drives

scientific advancement but also helps polish China's image as a visionary and cooperative global partner.

Thus, China's massive investment in education and research serves a dual function: strengthening national competitiveness while expanding international influence. Through student exchanges, research collaborations, and the presence of world-class universities, China has successfully positioned itself as one of the global centers of science, which further enhances its attractiveness in the eyes of the international community.

Impacts of Soft Power and Hard Power Strategies on the Dynamics of International Politics

- **Formation of New Alliances and Political Blocs**

Hard power strategies, particularly through the deployment of military force, have long been triggers for the formation of political and defense alliances at both global and regional levels. For example, Russia's expansion of military influence in Eastern Europe and the perceived threat by surrounding countries prompted NATO membership to expand to include former Eastern Bloc countries such as Poland and the Baltic states. In other words, the presence of significant military power often compels other nations to seek protective umbrellas through strategic partnerships. This phenomenon is also evident in the Asia-Pacific region, where concerns over China's military modernization have spurred strengthened defense partnerships among Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, and the United States in various formats such as the Quad or AUKUS.

On the other hand, soft power strategies tend to give rise to networks of economic cooperation and diplomacy that lead to the formation of new political blocs. This is exemplified by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has successfully engaged more than 60 countries in a cross-continental infrastructure development scheme. The close relationships built through investment, development loans, and cultural exchanges create dependencies as well as a sense of "indebtedness," which then influence the foreign policy orientations of these countries to align more closely with Beijing's interests. Consequently, both hard power and soft power drive the formation of new geopolitical configurations, albeit through different paths: one through security pressure, the other through the appeal of economic and cultural cooperation.

- **Competition for Global Influence**

Hard power strategies that rely on military superiority give rise to deterrence patterns, where countries tend to refrain from aggressive actions for fear of devastating military retaliation. This was evident in the relationship between the United States and Russia after World War II, where both nations' possession of nuclear weapons led them to avoid open conflict to prevent mutual destruction (mutually assured destruction). In the modern era, this deterrence pattern is also seen in the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems in South Korea, aimed at preventing North Korean aggression while simultaneously signaling strength to China.

In contrast, soft power opens a more subtle yet equally strategic avenue of competition. The United States promotes democracy, press freedom, and Silicon Valley technological standards, while China introduces a fast, centralized model of economic

development. Both countries vie to influence others to adopt political and economic governance similar to their own. This competition is also reflected in technological standard battles such as 5G, where the U.S. urges its allies to steer clear of Huawei, while China offers quick and affordable technology solutions. Thus, the international political landscape is now determined not only by military might, but also by the contest for narratives, ideologies, and technological standards.

- Regional Stability and Conflict

The hard power approach often carries consequences that undermine regional stability. U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, although aimed at toppling authoritarian regimes and combating terrorism, instead created power vacuums that sparked prolonged conflicts and gave rise to new extremist groups. Another example is military involvement in Libya, which triggered political uncertainty and made North Africa vulnerable to the spread of illegal weapons and armed militias. Thus, while hard power may be effective for short-term objectives, it frequently leaves behind complex long-term issues.

Conversely, the use of soft power as implemented by China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can contribute to infrastructure development and economic growth in developing countries, ultimately enhancing social stability. Roads, ports, and high-speed rail networks built by China in Africa and Southeast Asia help accelerate the flow of goods and create jobs. However, soft power also introduces new challenges: excessive financial dependence can pose sovereignty dilemmas, as recipient countries worry they no longer have the freedom to set policies due to heavy debt burdens. This makes the dynamics of soft power not always entirely positive, though far less prone to direct conflict than hard power.

- Changes in the Global Economic Order

Soft power strategies in the economic sphere have revolutionized patterns of interstate relations. China, for instance, through open trade policies and massive investments via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become a major trading partner for dozens of countries across Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. This economic dependence makes many countries more cautious in taking stances on issues sensitive to Beijing, such as Taiwan or the South China Sea, so as not to disrupt trade and investment ties. In other words, economic interdependence built through soft power has become an effective instrument for China to secure its strategic interests without direct military pressure.

In contrast, the United States employs hard power instruments in the form of economic sanctions to pressure countries deemed to threaten global stability or violate international norms. A clear example is the heavy sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program or on North Korea to compel it to halt nuclear weapons development. These sanctions directly impact the domestic economies of target countries and force them to reconsider their foreign policies. This demonstrates how both hard power and soft power can influence a country's policy path, albeit through vastly different approaches: one based on coercion and threats, the other on gradually built economic dependence.

- Evolution of International Image and Legitimacy

Countries adept at leveraging soft power often gain a positive image in the eyes of the international community, which in turn strengthens their global legitimacy. The

United States, for example, through its dominance of popular culture such as Hollywood films, pop music, sports, and social media technology, builds a global perception that captivates millions, often inspiring admiration for values of freedom, creativity, and the American lifestyle. This makes many nations and societies more open to cooperation with the U.S., even though Washington's foreign policies frequently draw controversy.

China also bolsters its international image by highlighting domestic achievements such as lifting hundreds of millions of its people out of poverty in a relatively short time. This development success story is often used as inspiration and an alternative model for developing countries seeking rapid growth without following Western liberal patterns. On the other hand, excessive use of hard power, such as military aggression or overt political pressure, often damages global reputations. The U.S. faced widespread anti-American sentiment after the invasion of Iraq, while China's hardline policies on Hong Kong or the Uighur issue have triggered anti-China sentiments. This underscores that balancing hard power and soft power is essential to avoid being counterproductive to the international legitimacy one seeks to build.

Conclusion

The dynamics of international politics today are no longer only determined by the superiority of military power alone, but are also greatly influenced by the appeal of culture, economic strength, and the values promoted by each country. The United States, with its global military dominance, the largest defense budget, and a long history of military intervention in various parts of the world, demonstrates the effective use of hard power to protect its national interests. However, at the same time, the US also maximizes soft power through cultural diplomacy, the spread of democratic values, freedom, and human rights that are characteristic of its global identity. Meanwhile, China has emerged as a new global power with an approach that combines rapid economic growth, military modernization, and aggressive economic diplomacy. China's soft power strategy is reflected in its massive investment in infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, which has strengthened the economic dependence of developing countries on Beijing. In addition, the promotion of traditional culture and the success of domestic development have become positive narratives that are carried to improve China's international image. However, its military modernization also shows how hard power remains an important instrument to secure territorial claims and strategic interests in the region.

This dynamic has had several impacts on the international political order. The US and China competition is not only in the realm of arms race, but also competition to promote the system of state governance, technology standards, and economic development models. Consequently, many countries adjust their foreign policies so as not to damage relations with these two great powers, creating a complex pattern of interdependence. On the other hand, the use of hard power that is too dominant often triggers tension or resistance, while soft power can be a double-edged sword if it triggers concerns about dependence or loss of sovereignty. Thus, it can be said that the balance of hard power and soft power strategies is very important in maintaining stability while strengthening global legitimacy. Countries that rely only on military power tend to face higher international resistance, while those that rely too much on soft power risk being

ignored when a conflict arises that requires coercive power. In this context, both the United States and China continue to adjust their strategies to maintain global influence, while reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the world in the 21st century.

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