

Chinese Soft Power and American Exceptionalism: A Comparative Analysis in the Global Context

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Abstract

The United States of America's proclamation of its unique status as a symbol of liberty, freedom, and democracy has had a global impact. America's global superpower status is derived from both material wealth and normative power. America also claims superiority over non-Americans for its national identity of exceptionalism. America's hard and soft power dominated the world after World War II and continue to prevail. More recently, China's economic rise and increasing global engagement is changing the power dynamics globally. In this context, China's successful cultural and economic diplomacy is emerging as a competing narrative to the US ideals of exceptionalism, trend that is also changing the global order. There is plenty of literature produced on how China's economic rise is a challenge to the US hegemony. However, this article is focused on a comparative analysis of American exceptionalism as a driving force of the US foreign policy, a justification for its global hegemony, and its contradictions vis-à-vis the growing potential of Chinese influence through economic diplomacy. Drawing on Joseph S. Nye's principles of soft power, this paper argues that China's win-win cooperation mantra for economic engagements is appealing to the developing world and is projecting its soft power more broadly in variance to the basic principles of soft power presented by Nye.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, China, soft power, global hegemony

Introduction:

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Often, the phrase ‘exceptionalism’ has been used in very unspecific ways to claim American superiority vis-à-vis non-Americans and to legitimate American hegemony outside of the US; it also conveys notions of uniqueness and predestination (Paul, 2014, p.14).

The political founding of the United States (US) is based on the discourse of exceptionalism. The self-representation of the US has been informed by its rhetorical structure based on various myths regarding itself as ‘the City upon a Hill’ and the notion of American exceptionalism (Paul, 2014). Experts believe that the core of the US exceptionalism is “its intensely liberal character and an ideological vision of a way of life centered on political, economic and social freedom” (Nye Jr., 2018, para 8). The most striking argument for its exceptional character is its belief that democracy is the best form of government (Haenle & Wilder, 2023). The economic power of the US, its contribution to the global public good, and the US as a land of opportunity have been presented as reasons for its exceptionalism and charm.

The virtues of America based on its democratic journey are based on the idea of manifest destiny and liberal internationalism. The US foreign policy is also inspired by its notion of exceptionalism which is explained in detail in this paper. As the US believes that the principles of liberty and democracy are universal, it is natural to promote them globally. The success of the US in economic, technological, and social domains further encouraged it to shape the world’s order according to its beliefs and interests. Moreover, the US also came out as the superior nation as compared to Europe and even the Soviets in many ways and made itself a leader of the democratic world in the war against communism.

While US exceptionalism proclaims itself as destined to lead and transform the world, Chinese exceptionalism is more driven by its culture, history, ideologies, and the idea of its great political system and economic success. The formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 as a result of the civil war under the leadership of the

Communist Party of China (CPC) clashed with the liberal agenda of the US. The unprecedented economic success of China with a different governance system is the actual problem that is irking the US. China's main foreign policy ideals are win-win cooperation, mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, multilateralism, respect for global institutions, and democracy in the global structure.

China's alternative design for the world stresses the equal, unfringeable sovereignty of all states large and small, Western and non-Western, rich and poor, democratic and authoritarian, each to run its own system as it sees fit, whether its methods suit Western standards or not. Another Chinese term for such a system is "multipolarity" (Asia for Educators, Columbia University, n.d.)

Chinese representation of soft power is different from the US exceptionalism. China has yet to achieve success in soft power projection based on culture and intangible means as presented by Joseph S. Nye Jr., but its influence is increasing through its economic diplomacy. The economic expansion of China is giving it leverage to create political influence and its role in global affairs is also increasing. Secondly, China's rich resources, size of the territory, population, global economic market, and increasing political power are becoming a challenge to the status quo (Zhao, 2016). Since China announced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, it has been going global through global connectivity, investment, and trade. To become self-reliant in technology, China has increased spending on its Research and development (R&D) and achieved rapid advancement in the global information infrastructure and its applications.

The US has been criticized for inconsistencies and controversies concerning its exceptionalism ideals. China too falls short in many domains of soft power. However, China has been successful in attracting gigantic economic partnerships around the world backed by peaceful economic rise and peaceful development rhetoric,

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terming itself a responsible power. This paper attempts to analyse the variations in American and Chinese soft power by referring to the soft power theory by Joseph S. Nye Jr. The study relates US soft power to its mantra of exceptionalism and how it draws on these ideals for its foreign policy influence globally as well as incurring contradictions in its principles and actions. Another major part of the paper is understanding the sources of Chinese soft power, its strengths and weaknesses, and China's rise as a parallel to the US soft power.

Soft Power

Soft power originally coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr., "refers to the ability to influence through persuasion rather than coercion, excluding the more traditional forms of influence such as investment and formal diplomacy" (Kalathil, 2011, p.2). In other words, the country can create temptation and attraction toward its culture, values, and political system that other countries willingly follow. China employed a distinctive economic engagement policy through aid, investment, and trade, which shows a policy shift 2001 from its political goals to economic interests, especially after joining the World Trade Organization in (Liang, 2012). It is a classic case of "blurring the boundaries between soft and economic power" (Carminati, 2020, p.1).

Joseph Nye focuses on the soft and intangible assets for establishing favourable preferences of others such as "an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority" (Nye Jr., 2008, p.95). Nye's concept of soft power makes a clear distinction between hard power and soft power. Power and influence are attained by using "force as sticks", "inducement and payments as carrots", and other soft means. China's soft power, however, relies more on economic diplomacy which also implies a broader meaning according to Joshua Kurlantzick (Carminati, 2020). China has great potential in its cultural and civilizational values but due to the Cold War

legacy and the world's wariness toward communism, China altered its way in favour of cultivating business partnerships after 2001 (Liang, 2012). In recent years, China has also increased its cultural engagement through Confucious Institutes and cultural exchange, but predominantly its ability to influence other nations is based on economic partnerships. Therefore, it is difficult to strictly differentiate China's hard and soft power as the means used for friendly cooperation.

China's unconditional aid policy, non-interference, and treatment of poor countries as equal partners have much appeal in developing countries. China has also achieved a political asset by terming itself the largest developing country despite accumulating unprecedented economic power (Liang, 2012). China's friendly and cooperative relations with the African region over the last 20 years are based on this model.

American Exceptionalism and Sense of Superiority

Seymour Martin Lipset who was an American political scientist and sociologist described the nation's ideology in five words: "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" (Velasco G., 2004, p. 595). According to Lipset, unlike British and other nations, the identity of Americans is not based on history but on ideology. He further elaborates that the concept of Americanism is based on certain dogmas of good society which also shape their exceptional creed. Liberalism is the core idea behind their creed formation over the centuries. They also believe that their ideology resonates with Natural Law, therefore, the principles on which Americanism is developed can be applied universally (Holmes, 2020).

Americans see the US as a nation that is not unique but superior because this New World was dedicated to promoting morality, freedom, and the advancement of humanity unlike the old world, typical of Europe, where most of the monarchies were guilty of

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exploiting their people (Walt, 2011). It is also believed that the US is not destined to rise and fall like other great nations, but it is a country to drive global progress. The US believes that whatever it achieves is the human limits in excellence in politics, business, technology, sports, the arts, or even warfare (Lipset, 1996). Since this exceptionalism is a fundamental component of the American identity, it has a significant underlying impact on the conduct of US foreign policy.

American exceptionalism and its foreign policy are also founded through its idea of manifest destiny. The early settlers in the US believed in the divine providence for the creation of this new nation, and its territorial expansion was also justified by this idea. John Louis O'Sullivan called it the manifest destiny in 1845. The US expansion from 13 states at the time of independence in 1776 to 50 states was a manifestation of this ideology. The ideals of democracy and capitalism on which the settlers kept the foundation of the US were deemed so universal that they considered justified to spread across the continent through expansion. It also resulted in the expulsion of the natives from their homes on the pretext of a noble cause of developing a civilized world through the providence of God ("Manifest Destiny," 2019). However, the US was not globalized in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries as it was expanding within the continent. The extension of manifest destiny ideology can be witnessed in the US global policies later in the twentieth century.

Post-World War II America not only ascended to a superpower status but also assumed a moral responsibility to promote its ideals beyond its borders. American ideals are based on American exceptionalism and Wilsonian liberal internationalism, the liberal order that was initially meant for the abolition of colonialism and liberal economic and commercial practices, also added the facets of freedom, human rights, and democracy. American leadership proudly referred to the natural law on which America had been founded (Wright, 1926). Natural law is interpreted based on an individual's desire to live freely. Therefore, this law is not only for

the US but should be implemented universally. This was the thinking that pitted America as a rival against the Soviet Union, and now China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are under the radar on the same criteria. However, there is still a dichotomy in the US treatment of certain authoritarian regimes. The selective opposition of the US is also based on patronages, interests, and double standards, which invites a lot of criticism.

The post-World War II US foreign policy is mainly focused on preserving the “liberal international order” that they developed through alliances and institutions. The rationale and justification for protecting the Western-led liberal order is the belief in the contribution of this system to peace and prosperity of the world characterized by “the longest period in modern history without war between major powers” (Nye Jr., 2018, para 1).

US Exceptionalism and its Foreign Policy

Interestingly, American exceptionalism not only justified expansion within the continent of North America but also provided a great reason for designating the Soviet Union as evil. As noted by Heike Paul, during the Cold War, American exceptionalism proved to be a “powerful hegemonic construct” and a political doctrine that developed the US’s distinct identity (2014, p.17). Promoting democracy and protecting the liberal democratic structure of the world have largely guided the US foreign policy during its contestation with the Soviet Union and continues to do so as China is now emerging as a new challenge.

The Cold War policies of the US were the manifestation of these beliefs. However, according to Joseph. S. Nye, the US has produced leaders who are critical of the success of this liberal order. Therefore, Nye has explained two sides of the US exceptionalism in foreign policy; as a pillar of inspiration and a pillar of action. The US as a pillar of inspiration is linked to the notion of soft power. Joseph Nye has pointed out the contradictions of US policy. In its

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drive to spread democracy, the US also used hard power and military interventions. Nye analyses Woodrow Wilson's famous phrase of "making the world safe for democracy," which later gave a greater purpose and ground to the US for opposing models of governance other than democracy through both carrot and stick approach. Furthermore, in the mid-20th century, "John F. Kennedy called for Americans to make the world safe for diversity" (Nye Jr., 2018, para 6). But the critics pointed out contradictions as the US sent forces to Vietnam and invaded Iraq on the pretext of promoting "freedom and a global community of democracies" (Nye Jr., 2018, para 6).

From the very beginning, the US had internal contradictions with its liberal ideology as the slavery system continued even after the first constitution was drafted that was grounded in principles of liberty. Similarly, Americans are divided on how to promote liberal values through their foreign policy engagements. American exceptionalism has been employed in two different ways in the US foreign policy as explained by Daniel H. Deudney from the Johns Hopkins University and Jeffrey W. Meiser from the University of Portland:

For some Americans, particularly recent neo-conservatives, intoxicated with power and righteousness, American exceptionalism is a green light, a legitimizing rationale, and an all-purpose excuse for ignoring international law and world public opinion, for invading other countries and imposing governments.... For others, American exceptionalism is a code for the liberal internationalist aspiration for a world made free and peaceful not through the assertion of unchecked American power and influence, but rather through the erection of a system of international law and organization that protects domestic liberty by moderating international anarchy. (Nye Jr., 2018, para 10)

Protection of international liberal order by force depicts the US pillar of action side of its exceptionalism. This side of the US is criticized by its leaders as well by other countries. This is where

China and other countries offer alternative sources of attraction and soft power.

The US also maintains various sources of soft power which makes it a basis of inspiration. The most important source of the US soft power is its political system and democratic values. The US political system which has undergone various reforms over the centuries through allowing democracy and freedom of expression albeit with some tainted history of slavery, has a global appeal. The cultural appeal lies in its social democratic values, the rule of law, Hollywood movies, and famous brands. It is followed by the robust education system of the US that attracts the largest number of students from around the world. The US is home to most of the top-ranked universities in the world. The US is also a leader in science, technology, and innovation. China also benefited from the US educational market tremendously.

Since the very beginning of the electronic media revolution, the US also ruled over the perceptions of people through its very popular news outlets which are explained later in this paper. After further advancement in information and digital technology, the US again leads in both software and hardware. The Silicon Valley and some of the biggest tech companies in the world such as Google, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft belong to the US (“The Soft Power”, 2019). The country also has very strong diplomatic relations with nations around the world, which supports the country’s interests around the globe (Silver, 2021).

After the Soviet disintegration, the US with its enormous soft-power and hard-power potential emerged as the most eligible superpower. In the 1990s, the US consolidated itself to lead the world in a relatively favourable environment without a potential contender or challenger. In later years, with the turn of the new millennium as the world transitioned to rapid globalization, the US strove to maintain its primacy. China with its unprecedented economic upsurge stimulated different dynamics for the US. The US was deterred by the Chinese economic rise due to its different government system

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which contests the US liberal ideals and values. However, in the present world, the US is faced with the challenge of not only the increasing economic muscles of China but also its global influence through economic diplomacy as its most reliable soft power tool.

Paradox of American Exceptionalism

The myth of American exceptionalism is deeply rooted in America's historical evolution as a nation through continuous self-conscious appraisal of its values, culture, and legal system in order to achieve liberty, prosperity, and advancement. However several controversies question the US exceptionalism in history and even today. The US is still a country defined by historical controversies and racial and economic inequality.

At the time when European settlers arrived on the American continent in the fifteenth century, the population of Native Americans living there was noted to be around 10 million according to historians. By the twentieth century, this population reduced to an estimated 300,000 in number (Astoundz, 2023). Indeed, “[t]he self-serving concept of manifest destiny, the belief that the expansion of the United States was divinely ordained, justifiable, and inevitable, was used to rationalize the removal of American Indians from their native homelands” (“Manifest Destiny and Indian Removal,” 2015)

Moreover, on achieving independence in 1776, the new nation was formed on the notion of equality but contrary to this, the US also maintained the institution of slavery which left an indelible imprint on the soul of the American nation (Loury, 1998). African American is the modern and recent term used for the Africans who were bought and transported to North America as slaves. These people were not identified as humans, but they were the property of the white people and commodities for purchase. Slavery that started when white settlers arrived in the New World was finally abolished after the Civil War in 1865. Indeed, despite America's talk about freedom and liberty, the country has repeatedly manifested authoritarian traits in its rule. According to Nikole Hannah-Jones,

American democratic ideals were false until they gave equal rights to African Americans (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The racial segregation laws were a big part of the American government until a few decades ago and the country still seems to have white supremacy (Parker & Towler, 2019).

The religious history of America is also a contradiction to American exceptionalism. American history is introduced by the arrival of pilgrims, puritans, and white Europeans who came to the imagined land of present-day North America in the fifteenth century. The myth of promised land and the prophetic notion of Puritan's city on a hill (Paul, 2014) also gave way to religious intolerance until independence in 1776.

Americans also took pride in the unprecedented experiment of making a nation based on political moderation and constitutional democracy. The Civil War in 1861 between the Union and Confederate Southern States in the US in which both rival governments claimed the leadership of civilized democracy as well as the atrocities committed in the Civil War questioned their notion of idealized society. US exceptionalism was once again questioned at the end of the Trump era in January 2021 when rioters stormed the Capitol Hill building (Barsanti, 2022).

Another contradiction of American exceptionalism is its selective opposition to authoritarian states and its discriminatory stand on human rights issues. America considers itself as the flag bearer of democracy, but we have seen that it has enjoyed good relations with authoritarian nations where it has its interests. For example, the US has good relations with the Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), etc. In the past, the US also enjoyed good relations with China for some time to dominate the Soviets (Telhami, 2003). Its selective approach toward democracy especially in the Middle East brings a lot of negative public opinion in the Arab world about the US. Recently, "President Joe Biden and his administration have made repeated statements about reclaiming the US position as leader of the "free world" and

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promoter of democracy” (Kurd, 2023, para 1). Despite making claims, the soft power of the US takes a back seat when it comes to security issues. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 without fulfilling its promise of nation-building in the country, are testimony to the country’s security prioritization over soft power.

China’s Rise: A Challenge to US Exceptionalism

Scholars believe that the nation that believed in itself as destined to make a free and democratic world carries the historical baggage of atrocities and injustices against Native Americans and African Americans (Parker & Towler, 2019). In more recent years, the rise of China has come to be seen as a challenge to the US hegemony. Indeed, the US hegemony seems to be sliding down with the rise of the Chinese economic and social structure. China has emerged as a global power in the last two decades with the status of the second largest economy in the world, a modernized and powerful military, a gigantic trade and economic cooperation, that is not only asserting itself politically but also aspiring for centrality in global affairs (“China’s Approach to Global Governance” (n.d.).

Chinese exceptionalism is defined as the combination of their great power reformism, pacifism, and China’s vast historical and cultural experiences (Zhang, 2011). China’s exceptionalism is primarily focused on its economic success with a distinct political system. Moreover, China’s unique perspective on the world and its foreign policy based on mutual respect and harmony, distinguishes it from the US. Moreover, China’s self-image is coloured and shaped by its history and very rich cultural traditions including Confucius’s philosophy. China’s system of governance also has roots in its self-image and historical traditions. The way the Communist Party of China (CPC) draws its legitimacy from its own beliefs and ideas for its way of life, forms Chinese exceptionalism. China is also focused on portraying its government as another ideal system. Indeed, the Communist Party accomplishes its domestic goals and also aspires

to a favourable international environment for achieving external goals.

China is working towards creating a structure of world order that will serve its interests. This posture of China poses a challenge to the Western-led system. According to the constructivist approach, China's Confucius traditions present its soft image. However, the skeptics' view is that China uses Confucianism to mask its realpolitik. Chinese sociologist Kang Xiaoguang believes that Chinese exceptionalism depends on the economic success of its model of governance, elevated international status, unchallenged power of the Communist Party, and its growing political legitimacy (Ho, 2021, p. 13-19). Moreover, China's exceptionalism consists of its defensive and offensive discourse. China defends its actions according to its set terms which are aligned with the vision and ideology of CPC. China does not consider the rules espoused by the Western system as universal and applicable to all. The offensive discourse legitimizes Chinese actions by emphasizing China's position and its worldview (Ho, 2021, p.13-19).

Since China has become a global power, it has had a desire to win hearts and minds. But primarily, China's soft power lies in its phenomenal economic strength (Carminati, 2020). By expanding China's clout through economic diplomacy, trade, and investment instead of political meddling, China is portraying itself as a non-coercive power. President Hu Jintao officially embarked on China's soft power in 2007. President Hu linked the great rejuvenation with the thriving Chinese culture. Following that, China promoted the notions of a peaceful rise and harmonious society, expanded partnerships and public relations, and developed Confucius institutes globally. According to estimates, China spends \$10 billion a year to enhance its soft power ("China's \$10bn annual spending on soft power has bought little of it," 2019). In contemporary times, China is promoting shared development and a shared future for mankind through the visionary initiatives of President Xi Jinping and the BRI project (Albert, 2018).

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China's cultural appeal has not had significant results so far (Albert, 2018). China's charm offensive is very much dependent on its monetary strength. David Shambaugh, a renowned expert on China "claimed that the strongest instrument in Beijing's soft power toolbox is money" (Carminati, 2020). Apart from expanding investments through BRI, China also increased its influence by providing aid and assistance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when developing countries were in dire need of vaccines and medicines. China has the economic leverage to advance soft power more broadly as analysed by Joshua Kurlantzick in the book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World China* (2007). China's economic diplomacy, trade agreements, and development assistance are the core of its soft power drive (Carminati, 2020).

The goal of China's cultural soft power research is to project a favorable global image, foster a friendly global environment, and contribute to the development of a peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative world. China's cultural soft power is built on the basic communist value system. Its attractiveness or cultural soft power will increase only when socialism with Chinese characteristics is completely recognized by the Chinese people (Akdağ, 2022, 205).

The US is alarmed by the erection of China's soft power image. The accumulation of wealth aided by a distinct ideological drive and alternative means for influence is giving China leverage as a contender to the US exceptionalism (Sullivan & Brands, 2020).

Sources of China's Soft Power Image

As discussed earlier, China's predominant appeal resides in its success story of economic reforms and growth. China opened its economy and markets to the world in 1979 and just in a few decades

became the second-largest economy in the world. Another milestone of China that stunned the world has been its success in lifting 800 million citizens from poverty. These examples amplify China's economic clout and image as a reliable economic partner.

According to the constructivist approach, it is important to understand the ideological underpinnings behind China's development assistance. China observes respect, prestige, and equality with partners as core principles of economic diplomacy. It is due to China's history of humiliation that China behaves as a benign economic partner and does not pressurize partners for political patronage. China does not call its development assistance "aid" because China believes that the Western aid programme is used to patronize or further neo-colonial aims (Rana, 2022).

What proved to be a catalyst in China's soft power drive are its trillions of dollars worth of mega connectivity project BRI which is now joined by around 152 countries. BRI can be compared to the US Marshall plan in Europe which resulted in the greater strategic, political, economic, and normative influence of the US. The BRI project will give China a structural advantage in the contemporary global order. BRI is a massive project comprising six corridors around different regions with land, maritime, and digital Silk Road infrastructure that hold a huge potential to intensify China's socioeconomic interactions and cultural influence with the world (Carminati, 2020).

The BRI project is not just about infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports, and economic zones; China is also expanding the horizon of BRI to include cooperation in technology learning, people-to-people contacts, cultural cooperation, vocational training, and health and poverty reduction programmes. The socio-economic aspect of BRI will increase China's outreach to the people of partner countries which will win positive acceptance and appreciation for China (Rana, 2022).

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China is also increasing its clout by presenting a new vision and leadership program for development, security, and peaceful coexistence in the world. The three initiatives launched recently by China's President Xi Jinping, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) 2021, Global Security Initiative (GSI) 2022, and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) 2023 present a new approach to shared development, common interest in security, and acceptance of diverse civilizations. These initiatives are based on China's normative philosophy of "win-win cooperation, common humanity, and a peaceful world" (Haenle & Wilder, 2023, para 2). Likewise, China's concept of GSI is based on indivisible security, a win-win approach instead of a zero-sum approach. GDI is aimed at realizing peace through expanding economic development, and GCI manifests China's belief in the community of a shared future for mankind instead of a single country or civilization. China rejects the notion of the superiority of one system or a civilization. It takes pride in its 5000-year-old civilization with a continuous history. Dennis Wilder, a senior fellow at Georgetown University, believes that these initiatives have ushered in a new era in China's role at the global level: "China is starting to say that its model can be one for the world in a way that it hasn't said in recent history" (Haenle & Wilder, 2023, para 2). China is asserting an alternative normative order based on Chinese exceptionalism.

China's plan for presenting its model also shows the philosophical difference between contemporary China and the US. It is evident from the contemporary terms and relations between the two countries. President Xi Jinping has not agreed to define relations with the US in terms of competition. This could be the reason China refused to open military-to-military channels during the visit of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in June 2023 to ease tensions in relations. During the visit of US Secretary Antony Blinken, President Xi said "competition among major powers does not conform to the trend of the times" (Haenle & Wilder, 2023, para 1).

China is becoming a leader in science and technology. It is rapidly achieving excellence in developing parallel in global information technology with the US and other developed nations. Through becoming a big market for emerging information and telecommunication technologies, China also aims to capture global economic markets through digital trade, 5G technology, big data collection, and Artificial Intelligence sources. The US is already feeling threatened by China's growing success in this domain (Wu, 2020). The domination of high-tech industries is, for China, a key to "determine the future distribution of economic and military power" (Sullivan & Brands, 2020, para 2).

The US media influence during the Cold War is also known as Western media imperialism. It was called media imperialism because it was unbalanced news dissemination from the core to the periphery. Now with the growing digitalization of media, China is also following suit. China is not only promoting its distinct cultural and political identity but it also strives to balance its soft power image through media against the US propaganda. According to studies, the theory that China is a responsible state is also gaining momentum (Zhao, 2016).

Knowing the importance of global information, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) which is known to be the parent institution of the media enterprises of China, started initiatives for English in the 1990s. The aim was to develop channels of international outreach like CNN and BBC based in a Chinese model. China developed its first global English Channel in 1986; now, this channel is named China Global Television Network (CGTN) in 2016. CCTV is another addition. As part of its "go global" drive, China has developed various media to disseminate its narrative to international audiences. These include China Daily, Xinhua News Agency's English website, China Radio International (CRI), CCTV, and CGTN that all aim to tell China's story. China's English newspapers like *Global Times* and *South China Morning Post* also aim to counteract anti-China propaganda (Zhang, 2018).

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President Xi Jinping also promotes the Chinese model of governance, especially outlined in his book *Governance* that had sold half a million worldwide until 2017.

However, China faces the problem of delegitimization of its power and influence by the US. To improve China's public perception, the Chinese government has launched a major public relations drive. The country is expanding its relations across all regions of the world. Through these initiatives, China is portraying itself as a responsible power (Herbert, et al., 2021). More recently, China's assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic was aimed at portraying itself as a responsible power. China sent free masks, and vaccines which are also called Mask Diplomacy and Vaccine Diplomacy which were aimed at winning the impression of China as a responsible power (Lee, 2021).

China's Soft Power: Strengths and Limitations

China has been successful in going global through its economic strength. It is no more a regional power, but it has become a global actor. China has reached every corner of the world. Besides its sphere of influence in the East Asia, China has developed economic relations with Latin America, the African continent, the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Europe as well as with individual countries and islands (Chhabra, et al., 2020). China's soft power has been growing in recent years, assisted by its increasingly powerful economy and increased international profile. This has allowed China to extend its influence through a range of diplomatic, cultural, and economic activities. China has used soft power as a way to project its values and interests, and to shape the behavior of other countries to gain support for its policies.

However, while China's soft power has seen some success, it has also been met with resistance in some countries. This is due to the perception that China is using its soft power to push its political agenda, particularly in areas such as the South China Sea and in its

relations with Taiwan. In addition, some countries are wary of China's growing economic and military power and are concerned about its attempts to influence their behavior (Gul, 2022).

According to a Pew Research survey analysis, China's role in the world affairs is increasing. However, China is still short of translating this expanding global role into favourable voices. (Silver, et al., 2019). Views about China are divided based on economic interests and normative differences. China enjoys positive views in the African continent, Latin America, Pakistan, and Russia, to name a few, due to mutually beneficial relations. The Pew Research survey suggests that China is enjoying positive public views in countries with emerging markets. People in these emerging economies consider economic rise as a positive thing for their country (Silver, et al., 2019). But in the Western countries and the East Asia, views about China are plummeting and becoming negative. Views about China especially turned negative in many countries during 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Chhabra, et al., 2020) and reached a historic high in 2022 due to China's human rights issues during Xi's era and its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic (Silver, et al., 2022). Due to these reasons, Western countries boycotted the Winter Olympics 2022 in Beijing (Graham-Harrison & Ni, 2022).

China has been working on its soft power image for fifteen years now. However, it seems that China is unable to implement its soft power properly as compared to other economic powers. Many barriers are hindering this process. For example, Chinese culture does not appeal to other nations like the culture of the West does globally, mainly because it has some traits that are difficult for other nations to adopt. Also, English being the global language makes it easier to transfer Western culture ("China's soft power strategy can't keep up with its fearsome reputation" 2016).

According to scholars, the reason that China's cultural soft power is not very appealing is also because of the government-centric

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approach to soft power. China has adopted a top-down approach. It is its government that is wielding its soft power at the government level through foreign relations. That is the reason that China's soft power is considered inorganic because it is not originating from the society of China (Herbert, et al., 2021). The Communist Party is heavily dependent on its legitimacy on the economic success story and appeal to nationalism which reduces a universal appeal to the Chinese Dream. Secondly, as mentioned above, the CPC government is ignoring the fact that "soft power springs largely from individuals, the private sector, and civil society" (Nye Jr., 2015, para 7).

Like the US, China also has its paradox of the Chinese Dream. While China is making tremendous economic progress, its society is still struggling with social issues such as inequality and poverty in some parts. Despite making huge economic success, the country still faces social issues, especially a lack of political freedom (Dickson, 2021). Likewise, despite achieving huge technological advancements, a major part of the population is still disconnected from the outer world due to restrictions on many social platforms.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed Chinese soft-power image in parallel to the US exceptionalism. The paper explained in detail various features of US exceptionalism and soft power. The US idea of exceptionalism as rooted in its history is a guiding force for the US foreign policy. The US used to take pride in its unique transformation to democracy but since Woodrow Wilson's liberal internationalism, the country has also come to consider itself a custodian of the liberal order. The paper has discussed how the US legitimized its hegemony and actions during the Cold War and continues to do so by invoking the idea of US exceptionalism. This study has also highlighted the paradox of American exceptionalism. In addition to historical controversies of injustices against Native Americans and African Americans, the paper has also discussed the inconsistent practices of the US regarding soft power when it comes

to security interests. The security policies of the US since the Vietnam War have been critiqued for the unchecked power of the US. Violation of international law through military interventions under the pretext of defending global peace, has raised many questions about the US belief in the liberal democratic system.

The primary facet of Chinese soft power is its successful economic diplomacy and the success of the Chinese political system under the Chinese Communist Party. In addition to its rhetoric of win-win cooperation, China is also spending money on promoting Chinese culture, its values, and traditions through public relations initiatives, media, and Confucius institutes (Xuetong & Jin, 2008). Chinese soft power strategy is both ideological and strategic. China is not only countering the theory propagated by the US that presents China as a threat, but it is also projecting itself as a responsible and benign power through various policies and instruments. As China has reached a global power stature, the conventional wisdom guides China to strategically deploy “cultural, media, and economic resources and amplify these efforts in the global networked information space” (Kalathil, 2011). China draws its soft power mainly from its economic and development initiatives. The economic success story also gives legitimacy to the Chinese political system.

China’s economy has become a global economic engine over the past two decades. Besides China’s large volumes of trade, investment, and commercial relations, its global status has been elevated by the BRI project. This project amplified China’s position as a global creditor and an architect of infrastructural development, especially in the Asian continent. While the BRI project is also criticized, given its size and potential, this connectivity project holds huge potential for China’s global influence.

While analyzing China’s soft power vis-à-vis the US global influence, this study finds that China falls short on its cultural appeal despite a huge expenditure on the same. The way the US is criticized for a dichotomy in its rhetoric as a defender of the free world and a

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supporter of authoritarian states, similarly, China is also critiqued for its soft power projections while implementing censorship internally. According to the constructivist approach, China's weakness in cultural soft power is covered by its economic development assistant which brings a lot of partners as well as appreciation for it. However, analyzing China's soft power as per the criteria given by Joseph S. Nye Jr., China still lags far behind the US in cultural influence.

The US still leads the world in both material and normative strength. China is rapidly closing the gap in material strength but it is unlikely to replace the charm of the West anytime soon. However, the research finds that the way China has adopted a broader reach for soft power through its economic initiatives, is transforming the world in its favour and creating cracks in the US-led world order. The Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping are also evidence of China's aspiration to offer alternative means to meet the pressing contemporary security and development needs. Finally, China is also promoting the concept of indivisible security which is again challenging the US-dominated global structure.

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