

Article

Soft Power in the US-China Competition Development Promise vs. Value-based Promise

XU You

Abstract

The rise of China as an emerging great power has consistently captured the attention of the world over the last few decades. The major concern is the intensified competition between China and the US. Many scholars have examined this through various frameworks, but their studies are usually limited to the security or economic domains. Compared to the well-argued hard power competition, soft power has received much less attention. This study aims to investigate soft power in the great power competition between China and the US. More specifically, I focus on the US response to China's growing soft power through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). I argue that soft power is also crucial in great power competition, and its main objective is to expand international influence by gaining support from other countries affected by soft power. This article finds that when advancing soft power into the international arena, China usually highlights the development perspective, aiming to position China as a gateway to prosperity. On the other hand, the US's approach is value-based, aiming to position the US as a champion of the international liberal order and democracy. Therefore, this article further argues that the competition between China and the US is not about authoritarian vs. democratic, but about the development promise vs. value-based promise. With a particular emphasis on soft power, this article tries to show the new dynamics in the current US-China competition.

1. Introduction

In recent years, as a result of China's continuous rise in national power and the escalation of the trade war, the rivalry between China and the US has frequently been at the heart of debate in international relations. On the one hand, realists achieve a relatively pessimistic assessment of the US-China competition. They believe that when an emerging power,

unsatisfied with the status quo, achieves parity with the incumbent state and is willing to use force to alter the international system, the likelihood of conflict will be high (Organski, 1958; Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981). Realist scholars generally regard the US-China competition as a zero-sum game, which means there are no win-win peaceful solutions. By contrast, liberal scholars reach a relatively optimistic conclusion about US-China competition. They acknowledge China's revisionist intentions but also note that the competition does not necessarily end in war. They argue that both China and the US have no reason to start a war because both of them can gain great benefits from increasing economic interdependence (Kang, 2007; Ikenberry, 2008; Johnston, 2008).

Compared to the well-argued security and economic domains that focus on hard power, soft power has received much less attention. Although soft power is not a new term in international relations, scholars seldom relate it to the great power competition. Introduced by Nye (2008, P94), soft power means "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment." Scholars have noted that states may achieve many of their goals in the international arena by using soft power rather than military force (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014). Although it is neither the sole nor even the most crucial source of power, undervaluing soft power should still be an unwise decision.

Consulting the previous great power competitions, particularly the Cold War, many scholars have pointed out the contribution of soft power to the US's final success in the great power competition with the Soviet Union. As Lundestad (1986) notes, different from the Soviet Union, which relied on force to expand its influence, the US's expansion in Western Europe was not imposed by force but was more likely "an empire by invitation". Similarly, other scholars also argue that the Berlin Wall was not taken down by artillery but by people who had been affected by Western soft power (Nye, 2022). It is clear that soft power had already played an important role in the great power competition during the Cold War. Unlike hard power, whose effects tend to be quick and direct, soft power usually affects in an imperceptible way, but it still should not be underestimated in the great power competition.

Meanwhile, the current international system also encourages the use of soft power rather than hard power to achieve policy goals. Any offensive behavior nowadays will be easily considered to have aggressive intentions and result in a coalition to balance against it (Posen, 2009). The Ukraine crisis since 2014 has just reflected the importance of soft power in the current international system. Influenced by Western soft power, Ukraine has become more favorable to the Western world, and Western influence has also been raised in the region under this trend. On the other hand, Russia's attempt to use hard power to push Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence only led to Ukraine's resistance and

condemnation from the international community. Undoubtedly, soft power is a more acceptable and safe choice for countries to achieve their strategic goals in the current international system.

In the great power competition between China and the US that this article focuses on, China has long recognized that the use of hard power may intimidate its neighbors into forming balancing coalitions, but soft power will not (Nye, 2021). Furthermore, China also realizes that the frequent use of hard power would not only increase economic costs but also result in balance-of-power coalitions that would undermine its grand strategy of the renaissance (Goldstein, 2005). As a result, besides cultivating hard power, China has also invested plenty of resources in expanding its soft power (Cho & Jeong, 2008). Many scholars believe that China is competing with the US to gain influence through creating appeals for other countries aligned with the US, thus reducing US soft power (Friedberg, 2012). They also argued that through enunciating its values, institutions, and culture, China has become a significant political rival to US soft power (Kurlantzick, 2005). Given the importance of soft power, current research about soft power in the US-China competition is obviously insufficient.

This study aims to investigate soft power in the great power competition between China and the US. More specifically, I focus on the US response to China's growing soft power through the BRI, which is China's current most important international initiative and influence promotion project. In the rest of this article, Part two first examines China's soft power, exploring how China promotes its influence through the BRI. Part three examines the US response to China's expanding influence through the BRI, with a particular focus on the US counter-BRI initiative of Build Back Better World (B3W). Part four discussed both China's and the US's approaches to advancing soft power, based on the analysis of the BRI and B3W. The last part concludes this article. This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of soft power in the great power competition, but tries to show new dynamics in the current competition.

2. China's rising soft power and the BRI

Nye (2004) identifies three broad categories of soft power in his book, which are culture, political values, and policies. In the practice of expanding soft power into the international arena, China also advances its soft power in these three dimensions. First, China devotes itself to cultural exchange, including but not limited to the teaching of the Chinese language and history, and the establishment of the Confucius Institute worldwide is the best example of China's cultural exchange program. As Paradise (2009) points out, at the first level, the Confucius Institute intends to improve Chinese language and cultural

studies, but it is also part of a bigger soft power initiative where China seeks to win people's hearts and minds. However, since the US government began to regard the Confucius Institutes as propaganda for the Chinese government and called for the shutdown of the Confucius Institutes in Western countries in the early 2010s, the impact of the Confucius Institutes has been seriously limited (Sahlins, 2013).

Second, China also pursues soft power by spreading its political values to the world, and at the center of this are the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Scholars point out that the core political value represented by these principles is sovereign equality, which means that a country should have the right to handle domestic issues without foreign intervention (Nathan & Ross, 1997). Through illustrating Chinese special political values, China would like to create a responsible and peaceful image in the international arena. Nevertheless, compared to the liberal democratic values of the US, Chinese political values are still not as attractive as the US's to most other countries in the world.

Lastly, and the most important and effective one during President Xi's tenure, China seeks to promote its soft power through designing grand foreign policies, and the largest and most well-known one among those is the BRI. Scholars believe that China's soft power has experienced a significant rise since the implementation of the BRI.

2.1 China's vision of the BRI

The BRI is a global economic development project proposed by the Chinese government in 2013. It is usually regarded as an important component of China's grand diplomatic strategy. Through the BRI, China aims to link Asia with Africa and Europe through land and marine economic networks to expand regional cooperation. The project promises to improve regional connectivity, intensify trade, and broaden interpersonal ties among countries along the BRI.

In 2015, China's government released the first action plan to provide further guidance for the BRI. According to the plan, the BRI is based on five basic principles, which are: following the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence; being open to cooperation; being harmonious and inclusive; and following market operation and mutual benefit. In addition, five cooperation priorities have also been repeatedly stressed in the report, including policy coordination, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonding (National Development et al., 2015). As many Chinese scholars point out, "friendship" and "peace" are two important characteristics of the BRI (Wang, Zhekenov & Kurmangali, 2018). China would like to position the initiative as synonymous with friendly cooperation and the "Road to Peace".

In China, the BRI is usually portrayed as win-win diplomacy that can benefit the region. One of the major goals of the BRI is to bring prosperity to countries that lack the

capacity to undertake major infrastructure projects. Chinese officers believe that the projects that China brings to the host countries will help them develop their own economies and become more prosperous. Meanwhile, the initiative can also help China export industrial overcapacity and facilitate domestic economic restructuring. It is a grand Chinese strategy that aims to both enhance China's international image and global power.

2.2 China's capacity to deliver its BRI promises

Sponsored by China, the BRI envisions a 1.3 trillion dollars investment project that aims to create a web of infrastructure in the region, including ports, roads, railroads, telecommunications, and energy pipelines. The mass infrastructure building is expected to improve economic linkages and facilitate development in more than 60 partner countries along the BRI. To finance the BRI, China established the 40 billion dollars Silk Road Fund in 2014. Besides, the plan has also been aided by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is led by China and has already invested 100 billion dollars in the initiative (Marsh, 2019). These two institutions are the major financing vehicles for the BRI infrastructure projects, and China's large state-owned investment banks have provided the great majority of the funds.

In addition, China's production capacity also allows China to realize its ambitions. Scholars note that China's excess capacity in industries such as steel and cement can just fulfill the needs of mass infrastructure projects in the BRI (OECD, 2018). Besides production capacity, China's infrastructure construction capacity is also at the world's top level. Domestic urbanization in the past few decades has brought China abundant experience in infrastructure construction. It is clear that China has adequate funds, resources, and ability to conduct the BRI and achieve the goal of the BRI.

2.3 China's expanded influence through the BRI

Since the BRI was first introduced in 2013, more than 138 countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation with the BRI. Furthermore, according to one estimate, around 2,951 BRI projects valued at 3.81 trillion dollars have already been underway in the countries along the BRI (Torr, 2021). Many of these countries have or are expected to take a "pro-China" political position. Zhou and Esteban (2018) believe that through promoting China's norms and ideas, the BRI has successfully reshaped international environment in favor of China.

Southeast Asia

China's neighboring region, particularly Southeast Asia, was among the first to embrace China's initiative. For Southeast Asian countries, the BRI is not brand new because over

the past few decades, China and the ASEAN countries have had substantial economic collaboration. After the BRI was announced in 2013, all of the ASEAN countries signed an MOU with China, and several important BRI projects were also introduced in the region. The most representative one is the Jakarta-Bandung Railway, aiming to connect Indonesia's largest city, Jakarta, and the capital of Western Java, Bandung, which is expected to be finished before the G20 Bali Summit in November 2022. Meanwhile, China's FDI in Southeast Asia also grows rapidly. According to ASEANStats (2021), China's FDI in ASEAN countries was only 6,165 million dollars in 2013, but it has increased nearly twice as much to 13,596 million dollars by 2021. Furthermore, the trade between China and ASEAN has also experienced fast growth. In 2013, the trade between China and ASEAN was 351,583 million dollars, and this number has increased sharply to 503,302 million dollars in 2020 (ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2021). Compared to ASEAN's other major trading partners, trade with China has increased remarkably.

Along with China's increasing economic connection with ASEAN countries, China's regional influence also increases. Many scholars argue that the BRI has provided China with a dominant position in determining the future political and economic landscape of Southeast Asia (Hong, 2017). Some others suggest that Southeast Asian countries have accepted China's leadership in the region in order to "bandwagon for profits" with China (Khong, 2017). The increasing trade imbalance in favor of China in Southeast Asia has given China the economic leverage to pursue its strategic purposes, and scholars believe that the BRI will further strengthen this. As Arase (2015) points out, the BRI has brought China-centered Asia back in the 21st-century Asian architecture. Prior to the BRI, China's increasing economic importance for Southeast Asia had already resulted in significant Chinese influence. There is no doubt that the BRI will help China further cement and develop its foothold in the region.

Africa

In Africa, China has launched a 1 billion dollars Belt and Road Africa Infrastructure Development Fund for African countries and pledged 60 more billion in aid to Africa in 2018. The major focus of Chinese investment in Africa is infrastructure construction, as Chinese officers generally believe that the biggest obstacle to Africa's development has been inadequate infrastructure (Dollar, 2019). Therefore, in order to rectify this infrastructure gap and bring prosperity to Africa, China has conducted several big infrastructure projects in Africa, including the Coastal Railway in Nigeria, the Addis-Adaba-Djibouti Railway, and the Bagamoyo Port. Till 2022, over 30% of Africa's big construction projects were delivered by China (Kenny, 2022).

Besides being the largest investor in infrastructure, China is also the biggest trading

partner for Africa. Scholars have long pointed out that the increasing existence of China in Africa has led to China's expanded influence on the continent. When the issue of Hong Kong was discussed at the United Nations (UN) in 2018, 25 of the 53 countries that supported the China's position were African countries. This number had increased to 33 when the issue of Xinjiang was discussed at the UN in 2021 (Kumakura, 2021). There is no doubt that China's political influence in Africa is nonnegligible, and the implementation of the BRI has further widened China's influence. Furthermore, China also established its first overseas military facility in Africa in 2017, only six miles from the US Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, with plans to build further facilities there in the near future.

Europe

Europe, as the BRI's destination, is unquestionably an important participant in China's plan. China has built close strategic relationships with several European countries. In Southern Europe, Greece was regarded by China as the European Gateway and the first stop of the BRI in Europe. To strengthen the partnership, China has invested more than 3 billion dollars in Greece and got control of Piraeus, one of the biggest ports in the Mediterranean (Gontika, 2022). Similarly, the cooperation between China and Italy is also remarkable, and Italy, as the first G7 member, signed an MOU on the BRI with China in 2019. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), China created the "16+1" mechanism to enhance cooperation with local countries, and Greece also joined the mechanism in 2019. In 2020, China's trade with the CEE countries exceeded 100 billion dollars, with the average annual growth reaching 8% each year since 2012 (Chu, 2021). However, the withdrawal of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia from the mechanism since 2021 one after another has also made a heavy damage to China's diplomatic efforts in Europe.

Despite the recent struggles China has faced in Europe, the intensified economic cooperation has successfully narrowed the political gap between China and these European countries. Scholars point out that China has already reaped political benefits from the BRI. In 2016, several EU countries, including Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and Greece, blocked the EU's joint statement when the International Court condemned China's conduct in the South China Sea (Gotev, 2016). In June 2017, Greece again refrained from supporting the European statement at the UN to criticize the crackdown on activists and dissidents in China. In the same year, Hungary also blocked the European Commission from a European consensus to criticize China's human rights issues (Benner & Weidenfeld, 2018). It is clear that China's expanded influence in Europe has successfully cultivated a group of "pro-China" countries in the region.

2.4 Counterarguments of China's soft power in BRI

The fact that BRI significantly expanded China's global influence has been widely accepted by scholars, but whether this is related to China's increasing soft power is still under debate. Some scholars regard the BRI as "debt-trap diplomacy" and economic coercion, which forces other countries to accept China's influence (Parker & Chefitz, 2018). This article disagrees with these arguments and argues that China, rather than compelling other countries to accept China's influence, seeks to raise its global impact by making commitments of development to local countries. What is important here is the ability of China to convince other countries of China's promised development and its benign intentions in future cooperation. In this sense, through using persuasive rhetoric, China has consciously convinced other countries of its promise in the BRI and has successfully achieved political influence through it. Although China cannot guarantee that its promise will finally come true in the future, China's current strategy has helped China gain fruitful achievements.

3. US response to China's expanded soft power through the BRI

From China's earliest announcement of the BRI until late 2016, the US's response to China's BRI was largely positive. Although President Obama rejected Chinese President Xi's invitation to join the AIIB, he also did not fully criticize the BRI, and said that "the AIIB could be 'positive' for Asia" (Dyer, 2015). In 2015, the White House (2015) also released a factsheet stating that the US "welcomes China's growing contributions to financing development and infrastructure in Asia and beyond" during Xi's visit to Washington.

Trump continued Obama's benign reaction to China's BRI during the early stage of his ruling. In May 2017, the US-China joint statement noted that the US "recognizes the importance of China's One Belt and One Road initiative and is to send delegates to attend the Belt and Road Forum" (US Commerce Department, 2017). However, the early benevolence was quickly replaced by more negative rhetoric. In October, Trump's Secretary of State, Tillerson (2017), began to describe the BRI as a project which would result in "default and the conversion of debt to equity". Meanwhile, Trump also attempted to increase the investment of existing US-led international financial organizations in developing countries to compete with China. He urged the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to "direct their efforts toward high-quality infrastructure investment that promotes economic growth," but the achievements were limited (The White House, 2017).

The Biden administration continued Trump's negative stance on the BRI and developed more specific foreign policies to counter BRI. At the 2021 G7 Summit, led by the US, leaders of G7 countries agreed to launch a global infrastructure partnership, B3W, to rival

BRI. The B3W has become a core part of Biden's strategic competition with China.

3.1 US's vision of the B3W

The B3W is an economic initiative intended by the US and announced in the context of the G7 Summit in June 2021, which is designed to provide an alternative to China's BRI. As a senior official in Biden's administration said, "this is not just about confronting or taking on China, but until now we haven't offered a positive alternative that reflects our values, our standards and our way of doing business" (Holland & Faulconbridge, 2021). Through the B3W, the US aims to create a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership to help finance projects in developing countries.

Together with leaders of the G7, the Biden Administration listed seven guiding principles of B3W, which are: values-driven; good governance and strong standards; climate-friendly; strong strategic partnerships; mobilizing private capital through development finance; and enhancing the impact of multilateral public finance (The White House, 2021b). The B3W also shares standards with two existing US-led initiatives: the Blue Dot Network (BDN) and the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, which stress financial transparency and environmental sustainability (McKeown, 2022).

The focus of the B3W is primarily on four areas, including climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality. "There's an urgent need for infrastructure development in countries," Biden said in the meeting on B3W, "when you build it — it prioritizes the fight against climate change from the moment the spade goes in the ground, and jumpstarts the green economic growth" (The White House, 2021a). The US government aims to position the B3W as a transparent and sustainable financing mechanism, which will socially, environmentally, and financially build a better future for the host countries.

3.2 US's capacity to deliver its B3W promises

According to the White House (2021b) fact sheet, the B3W aims to address the 40 trillion dollars investment need for infrastructure projects in developing countries. In addition to promising that the US will mobilize billions of dollars in overseas infrastructure financing through existing bilateral and multilateral tools, private sectors are also highlighted in the financing mechanism. In the Biden administration's words, "support and catalyze a significant increase in responsible and market-based private capital" in infrastructure investment.

However, some experts have noted that Biden's financing mechanism is unfeasible and bound to fail. They believe that the plan has gone well beyond the funding capacity

of the US. They also doubt Biden's capacity to convince Congress to support a 40 trillion dollars global infrastructure plan and the sustainability of the plan since there is a high possibility that the Republicans will control both the Senate and the House in the coming midterm elections (Global Times, 2021). Introducing private sectors to infrastructure investment may become a good solution to meet the gap, but experts point out that even in the US, most infrastructure is in public ownership, and Biden's attempts to extend private infrastructure provision have made the US an outlier (Kenny, 2021).

3.3 The ongoing B3W

Although the B3W is still an ongoing project which has not been officially launched yet, since the plan was announced in June 2021, the US government has begun to take action to actively promote the B3W before its formal launch. The first step of it is to use various international occasions to propagandize the initiative.

On July 16, 2021, one month after the announcement of the B3W, Biden claims in the APEC Virtual Leaders' Retreat that the US will "provide high-standard, climate-aligned, and transparently financed infrastructure to APEC economies that need support" through the B3W initiative (The White House, 2021c). On September 21, Biden also claimed that the B3W, "with transparent, sustainable investment in projects... allows societies in low- and middle-income countries to grow and to prosper." in his speech at the UN General Assembly (The White House, 2021d). On October 14, in the joint statement of the 3rd Greece-US strategic dialogue, the US highlighted the B3W "as a possible area of cooperation for investment in low and middle-income economies" and both the US and Greece "look forward to exchanging views on trends and best practices regarding investment screening" (US Embassy in Greece, 2021). During a visit to Africa on November 20, the Secretary of State, Blinken, claims that the US program in Africa is based on the values "we share as democracies, namely transparency, accountability, rule of law, competition, and innovation, which are also driving ideas behind the B3W" (Felix, 2021). Blinken also claims in his visit to Southeast Asia on December 14 that the US will continue to provide high-quality and high-standard infrastructure building to ASEAN countries through the Quad, BDN, and B3W mechanisms (Lester, 2021). It can be argued that the B3W has become one of the cores of the Biden administration's international strategic agenda.

In terms of regional selection, similar to China's choosing neighboring countries to first implement the BRI, the US also chooses Latin America as the first region in the B3W's plan. To that end, in September 2021, US officials completed a listening tour to Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama. The US delegation made its first stop in Colombia, where they discussed sustainable development and Venezuelan migration with President Duque and committed to an 8 million dollars loan to address these issues, together with a

similar investment announced for the agricultural sector. On the second stop in Ecuador, the US delegation announced a 150 million dollars loan to sustainable, women-owned businesses, alongside a pledge to finance more sustainable projects and pandemic recovery. During the delegation's final stop in Panama, they announced that the B3W will prioritize water access, digital inclusion, and transparency in Panama. They also discussed the promotion of a carbon-negative goal for the Panama Canal with President Cortizo (Wilkinson, 2021).

4. China's development promise vs. US's value-based promise

In light of the fact that the B3W is still an ongoing initiative and has not been officially launched yet, it is still hard to see how it can provide the US with the desired strategic competition with China's BRI. However, some important characteristics have begun to take shape, which can generate a predictable set of outcomes, and its future trajectory can be inferred based on these characteristics that have been shown.

4.1 Developmental BRI vs. value-oriented B3W

The biggest difference between the BRI and B3W in the propaganda is obvious, where the BRI stresses the development and prosperity that it can bring to the region while the B3W highlights the values that it adheres to.

The language of development and prosperity is frequently invoked in China's description of the BRI. When President Xi first announced the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013, he called on regional countries to jointly build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" through innovative cooperation models to accelerate trade and investment among Eurasian countries and facilitate regional development (Xinhua, 2013). Following Xi's thoughts, the BRI is designed to improve regional connectivity, intensify trade, and broaden interpersonal ties among regional countries. In 2015, China outlined five priorities for the BRI, and four of them are related to the development and prosperity. The BRI is also usually portrayed as a win-win economic initiative that can benefit the region. China promises a mutually beneficial partnership where host countries provide new markets while China provides loans and investment as part of an "inclusive globalization" process (Liu & Dunford, 2016). The BRI is obvious a developmental project in which almost every step is related to achieving development.

In contrast to presenting China as a cooperative partner for regional development and prosperity in the BRI, the US is more focused on promoting Western values in the B3W. Among the three words that the US uses most often to describe the B3W, two of them are related to values, and values-driven even ranks the first of them. In Biden and

Blinken's description of the B3W, they seldom mentioned what exactly the B3W aims to do, but always highlighted that it is based on the values we share as democracies. The major focus of the B3W also reflects the values-driven characteristics. Although the BRI and B3W are both centered on infrastructure investment, the projects of the BRI are mostly about "real infrastructure construction," which means the construction of bridges, roads, ports, or airports. However, the focus areas of the B3W are centered on some less developmental but highly politically correct areas, such as dealing with climate change and health security, or promoting gender equity and equality. Western values have been deeply rooted in the B3W.

The reason why China chooses to mention values less is likely related to the fact that China's values are not as attractive as Western ones. Meanwhile, China also suffers from criticism and accusations from Western countries in terms of its human rights issues. China realizes this point and thereby avoids discussing shared political values on diplomatic occasions, turning the focus to collaborative development agendas. On the other hand, the biggest problem on the US side is the lack of funds in the B3W. Farnsworth, the vice-president of the Council of the Americas, argues that "private sector companies won't pay over the market price for strategic assets, but China will pay whatever it takes," so "the US can try to compete on values—transparency, labor rights, the environment" (Youkee, 2022). The different strategies of China and the US in their economic initiatives are a result of giving play to their strengths whilst circumventing weaknesses. It can be argued that China's lack of attractive political values and the US's lack of funds contributed to the disparities in the BRI and B3W.

4.2 Distinct soft power promoting approaches

The above two completely different focuses of the BRI and B3W also reflect the distinct soft power promoting approaches, where China emphasizes on developmental perspective while the US emphasizes on values-driven perspective.

China would like to position itself as a gateway to development in national image promotion through describing China as a cooperative power that will contribute to global economic development. The promise of promoting global development is always at the center of China's foreign policies. In President Xi's most recent speech at the UN in September 2021, he reaffirmed "staying committed to benefits for all" and that China will "employ such means as debt suspension and development aid to help developing countries, particularly vulnerable ones facing exceptional difficulties, with an emphasis on addressing unbalanced and inadequate development among and within countries" (The State Council, 2021). At the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation on August 18, 2022, China declared to "take concrete actions to promote common development" and "waive

the 23 interest-free loans for 17 African countries that had matured by the end of 2021”, reaffirming that “China will continue to actively support and participate in the construction of major infrastructure in Africa through financing, investment, and assistance” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). During the recent pandemic, China has distributed various medical supplies to the rest of the world, including masks, COVID-19 vaccines, and financial support to demonstrate that China is a responsible country (Wong, 2020). It is clear China has devoted plenty of resources to building its national image as a promoter of shared prosperity.

The US, on the other hand, would like to position itself as a champion of liberal democratic ideals on the international stage. President Biden has often expressed his endorsement to the idea of “rebuilding the muscle of democratic alliances” and “defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity” after his inauguration (The White House, 2021e). In December 2021, the Biden administration also hosted the first Summit for Democracy, inviting 110 countries and regions to participate. The objective of this summit is “to renew democracy at home and confront autocracies abroad” (CSIS, 2021). This is not new and can even date back to the Cold War era when the US was in direct ideological competition with the Soviet Union. This time, however, its adversary is tough material addiction rather than communism. Although the US would like to define its competitor as authoritarian, there is no doubt that what attracts other countries to accept China’s influence is not China’s political values, but the development that China can bring to them. Hence, what the US liberal democracy is competing with should not be authoritarian, but the material addiction of other countries, or in other words, China’s promised development. What is important in this competition is which one between China’s promised development and the US’s promised democracy is more attractive to the rest of the world. Again, we return to the definition of soft power: “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” Both China and the US have adopted their own strategies to attract other countries to accept their political influence.

If we take public opinion polls as an indicator of the efficiency of soft power between China and the US, the Pew Research Center reports that China’s current global image is still more negative than the US, and even worse than in the past (Silver, 2021). The closest global favorability between China and the US was in 2017 when Trump’s administration adopted the “American First” policy, but the gap began to grow larger later. This survey may reflect the popularity of liberal democracy in the world and, furthermore, may be a sign in favor of the US’s image as a champion of democratic values.

5. Conclusion

Nye (2014) writes in his article that in the world today, “victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins.” Both China and the US have told a story to the rest of the world, where China’s story is about a prosperous future through working with China, while the US’s story is about a better liberal democratic future.

In China’s story, the BRI focuses on bringing development and prosperity to the countries along the BRI. In the implementation of the BRI, China has partly realized its promise, facilitating development in the host countries, which has led to China’s expanding influence in the region. Compared to the BRI, the B3W, which reflects the US’s promise to champion international liberal democracy, gives particular emphasis to its values-driven characteristics. In the US’s story, the BRI is a great challenge to the international liberal order, while the more transparent and sustainable, values-driven B3W can provide high-quality and high-standard infrastructure investment.

The rivalry between the BRI and B3W is the epitome of soft power competition between China and the US. Both China and the US would like to utilize their soft power to attract other countries, thus increasing their own international influence, but their strategies are different. China attracts other countries through its promised development, while the US attracts other countries through its promised liberal democracy. For the rest of the world, they may prefer to see that the soft power of China and the US can be complementary rather than oppositional. Most of them admire the US liberal democracy, but they also like to accept China’s promised development. The way other countries treat what China and the US offer to the rest of the world will drive the direction of competition in the coming years.

Reference

- ASEANstats. (2021). *Flows of Inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into ASEAN by Source Country (in million US\$)*. (2021). Retrieved August 19, 2022, from <https://data.aseanstats.org/fdi-by-hosts-and-sources>
- ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2021. (2021). The ASEAN Secretariat Jakarta.
- Benner, T. & Weidenfeld, J. (2018, April 20). Europe, don’t let China divide and conquer. *POLITICO*. Retrieved August 17, 2022, Retrieved August 15, 2022, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-china-divide-and-conquer/>
- Cho, Y. & Jeong, J. (2008) China’s soft power: discussions, resources, and prospects. *Asian Survey*, 48(3), 453-472.
- Chu, D. (2021, June 9). Cooperation fosters China-CEEC trade. *Global Times*. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1225861.shtml>

- CSIS. (2021). *Experts react: The 2021 Summit for Democracy*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.
- Dollar, D. (2019). *Understanding China's Belt and Road infrastructure projects in Africa*. Global China: Domains of strategic competition.
- Dyer, G. (2015, April 28). Obama says AIIB could be 'positive' for Asia. *Financial Times*. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://www.ft.com/content/80271e0c-eddc-11e4-90d2-00144feab7de>
- Felix, B. (2021, November 21). Blinken says U.S. investing in Africa without unsustainable debt. *Reuters*. Retrieved August 21, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/blinken-says-us-investing-africa-without-unsustainable-debt-2021-11-20/>
- Friedberg, A. (2012). *A contest for supremacy: China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and change in world politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Global Times. (2021, November 9). US' B3W infrastructure projects financially unfeasible, bound to fail: Experts. *Global Times*. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238551.shtml>
- Goldstein, A. (2005). *Rising to the challenge: China's grand strategy and international security*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Gontika, T. (2022). *The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and the port of Piraeus*. London: Routledge.
- Gotev, G. (2016, July 14). EU unable to adopt statement upholding South China Sea ruling. *EURATIV*, Retrieved August 17, from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-unable-to-adopt-statement-upholding-south-china-sea-ruling/>
- Holland, S. & Faulconbridge, G. (2021, June 13). G7 rivals China with Grand Infrastructure Plan. *Reuters*. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/g7-counter-chinas-belt-road-with-infrastructure-project-senior-us-official-2021-06-12/>
- Hong, Y. (2017). China's Belt and Road Initiative and its implications for Southeast Asia. *Asia Policy*, 24, 117-122.
- Ikenberry, G. (2008). The rise of China: Power, institutions, and the Western order. In Robert S. & Zhu, F. eds. *China's ascent: Power, security, and the future of international politics*. 89-114. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Johnston, A. (2008). *Social states: China in international institutions, 1980-2000*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kang, D. (2007). *China rising: Peace, power, and order in East Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kenny, C. (2021, June 30). *Building back better for the world: It isn't about who builds, but how they build*. Center for Global Development.
- Kenny, C. (2022). *Why is China building so much in Africa?* Center for Global Development.
- Khong, Y. (2017). Who will replace the US in Southeast Asia? *East Asia Forum*. Retrieved August 8, from <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/>
- Kumakura, J. (2021). *China and the Joint Statement on Xinjiang and Hong Kong*. Tokyo: The Japan Institute of International Affairs.
- Kurlantzick, J. (2005). The decline of American soft power. *Current History*, 104(686), 419-424.

- Lester, S. (2021, December 14). Secretary of State blinken speaks about Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in Indonesia. *China Trade Monitor*. Retrieved August 21, 2022, from <https://www.chinatradermonitor.com/secretary-of-state-blinken-speaks-about-indo-pacific-economic-framework-in-indonesia/>
- Liu, W. & Dunford, M. (2016). Inclusive globalization: Unpacking Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. *Area Development and Policy*, 1(3), 323-340.
- Lundestad, G. (1986). Empire by invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952. *Journal of Peace Research*, 23(3), 263-277.
- Marsh. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative: Assessing shifting attitudes*. New York: Marsh JLT Specialty.
- McKeown, S. (2022). *Opportunities for increased multilateral engagement with B3W*. Washington, DC: Centers for Strategic and International Studies.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022, August 19). China and Africa: Strengthening friendship, solidarity and cooperation for a new era of common development. Retrieved August 22, from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220819_10745617.html
- Nathan, A. & Ross, R. (1997). *The Great Wall and the empty fortress: China's search for security*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- National Development et al. (2015). Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road. *Belt and Road Form*, Retrived August 9, from <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0410/c22-45.html>
- Nye, J. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Nye, J. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94-109.
- Nye, J. (2014). The information revolution of soft power. *Current History*, 113(759), 19-22.
- Nye, J. (2022, January 19). Whatever happened to soft power? *The Strategist*. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/whatever-happened-to-soft-power/>
- OECD. (2018). *China's Belt and Road Initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape*. OECD business and finance outlook.
- Organski, K. (1958). *World politics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Organski, K. & Kugler, J. (1980). *The war ledger*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press.
- Paradise, J. (2009). China and international harmony: The role of Confucius Institutes in bolstering Beijing's soft power. *Asian Survey*, 49(4), 647-669.
- Parker, S. & Chefitz, G. (2018, June 1). China's debtbook diplomacy: How China is turning bad loans into strategic investments. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved August 17, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/chinas-debtbook-diplomacy-how-china-is-turning-bad-loans-into-strategic-investments/>
- Posen, B. (2009). Emerging multipolarity: why should we care? *Current History*, 108(721), 347-352.
- Roselle, L, Miskimmon, A, & O'Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), 70-84.
- Sahlins, M. (2013). China U. *The Nation*, Retrieved August 18, from <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/china-u/>

- Silver, L. (2021). *China's international image remains broadly negative as views of the U.S. rebound*. Pew Research Center.
- The State Council. (2021). *Full text of Xi's statement at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. The State Council of People's Republic of China.
- The White House. (2015, September 25). *Fact sheet: US-China economic relations*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2017). *Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2021a). *Remarks by President Biden in meeting on the Build Back Better World Initiative*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2021b). *Fact sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders launch Build Back Better World (B3W) partnership*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2021c). *Readout of President Joe Biden's participation in the APEC virtual leaders' retreat*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2021d). *Remarks by President Biden before the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- The White House. (2021e). *Remarks by President Biden on America's place in the world*. Office of the Press Secretary.
- Torr, G. (2021). *Silk roads: A history of the great trading routes between East and West*. London: Arcturus Publishing.
- US Commerce Department. (2017). *Initial actions of the U.S.-China economic cooperation 100-day plan*. Washington, DC.
- US Embassy in Greece. (2021). *Joint Statement on Third United States – Greece Strategic Dialogue*. Office of the spokesman.
- Wang, H., Zhekenov, D. & Kurmangali, M. (2018). Chinese global project: One Belt and One Road. *International Relations and International Law Journal*, 81(1), 28-35.
- Wilkinson, H. (2021, December 14). B3W vs BRI in Latin America. *AS/COA*. Retrieved August 21, 2022, Retrieved August 11 from <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-b3w-vs-bri-latin-america>
- Wong, B. (2020, June 2). China's Mask Diplomacy. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved August 22, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-mask-diplomacy/>
- Xinhua. (2013, September 7). President Xi proposes silk road economic belt. *China daily*, Retrieved August 21, 2022, from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/07/content_16951811.htm
- Youkee, M. (2022, March 22). Can the G7's B3W infrastructure initiative work in Latin America? *China Dialogue*. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://chinadialogue.net/en/business/can-the-g7s-b3w-infrastructure-initiative-work-in-latin-america/>
- Zhou, W. & Esteban, M. (2018). Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112), 487-501.