

Soft Power and Struggles for Leadership: The United States, Russia and China

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Abstract

This article argues that struggles for global leadership and soft power are at the center of gaining consent of the ruled. The United States once led the world in leadership. It is now facing serious challenges because of its own doing. The Iraq War (2003) was a disaster, not just for American power projection, but for its global standing. The political soft power vacuum was an opportunity for great powers. The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia opened new fronts in their quest for global leadership. Without followers, one cannot be a leader. This makes the battle for weak states part of the international system.

Keywords: *foreign policy, culture, Iraq, Russian soft power, Chinese soft power, American soft power*

1. Introduction

Leaders need followers. Followers can be coerced but it is far more economical and wiser to simply gain consent. Gaining consent of the ruled requires soft power. This article argues that struggles for global

leadership is currently at the center of international relations and reflects the new multipolar international order (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; O’Hanlon, 2019; Haass, 2017). This might be due to the vacuum left by the United States due to its relative reputational decline after the Iraq War (2003). The Iraq War was a disaster, not just for American power projection, but for its global standing. The United States once led the world in leadership, but now is facing serious challenges because of its own failures. The political soft power vacuum is an opportunity for great powers to expand their influence. This fact is essential in China and Russia’s own quest for global leadership. Without followers, one cannot be a leader. This makes the battle for weak states part of the international system. All cultures have something special and unique about them, and this is true for Russia and China. Exporting culture around the world is necessary to seduce potential followers away from the United States. This article will analyze soft power as it relates to the United States and illustrate its loss during the 2003 Iraq intervention. Next, it will illustrate Chinese and Russian soft power as it relates to the loss as part of a wider strategy of systemic transition. China has an incredible history and will have great success exporting its culture to the rest of the world. The same can be said about Russia. These two states must increase their soft power in order to replace the United States as a hegemonic power.

2. Soft Power Defined

Niccolò Machiavelli warned leaders against worrying about being liked. He suggested that it was better to be feared than to be loved. He also says, that “a wise prince should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not in that of others; he must endeavor only to avoid hatred...” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XVII). With reputation costs (costs to soft power), lack of evidence proving Iraq had Weapons of Mass

Destruction, growing discontent for the prolonged Iraq war and the growing U.S. debt, the Bush administration adopted a softer, more multilateral and cooperative approach. This approach is closely related to the theory of Neoliberal Institutionalism. This theory (discussed by Robert Keohane in his book *After Hegemony*) understands that even the strongest states benefit from cooperation, citing the Ricardian theory of comparative advantage. Going alone is not an optimal approach. Rather, multilateral cooperation that allows for some burden sharing forces actors from their comfortable free rider position. Leadership, or Soft Power, is fundamental to this strategy. It is a novel and inventive way to deal with violent actors within the global sphere.

Soft power is an important part of protecting state interests. Also known as reputational power, states must be able to maintain a positive perception. It is "...the ability to affect others through the cooptive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye, 2011: 21). The United States provides an excellent example, with its political and economic system, but also its entertainment (movies, music and celebrities). Today's revisionist powers like Russia, Iran and China boast great histories, cuisine, culture, literature and so forth. All states, even the ones that we have come to know as aggressive, have soft power to some degree; something of value and a source of pride. This article will define soft power in relation to these actors. It will argue that the blunders and perceived crimes against international law hurts the United States and its projection of power as a global leader. Specifically, the disastrous war with Iraq in 2003 led to this degradation in American reputation and influence. Like all power, soft power may dwindle if not used correctly to maintain specific political goals in the defense of state interests. The reduction of American power creates a vacuum, a soft power political vacuum, for competing states. While the likelihood of the United States

losing its soft power completely is highly unlikely (it is intangible after all), we must understand the ramifications of vacuums within an international system in transition.

Joseph Nye defined the term soft power as it relates to achieving foreign policy objectives. In his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* Nye asserts that soft power "...rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" and is integral to "...shape the preferences of others" (Nye, 2004: 5). It is the ability to influence and attract others so that they in turn will follow. Nye argues that it is better to gain without using carrots and sticks, instead first relying on admiration. Nye argues that "seduction is always more effective than coercion and many values like democracy, human rights and individual opportunities are deeply seductive" (*ibid.*: x). Power is therefore not simply military capability, but rather, is the ability to seduce other actors to follow.

Edward Hallett Carr, a Classical Realist also understands soft power to be a valuable tool of foreign policy. He refers to Soft Power as "power over opinion" and acknowledges that it "...is therefore not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power and has always been closely associated with them" (Carr, 1978: 132). This kind of power is crucial to gather allies, to pursue interests, and to delegitimize enemies.

Soft power may be promoted through history and culture, music and movies, or through institutional political example, such as American democracy or Scandinavian socialism. Nye ultimately illustrates this in the powerful example of the Czech response to the American film *Twelve Angry Men* and its critical portrayal of the American judicial system: "If that country can make this kind of thing, films about itself, oh, that country must have a pride and must have an inner strength, and must be strong enough and must be free" (*ibid.*: 17). In that case, all

states have some soft power, something a state has as a point of pride. This will be discussed later.

The United States prides itself on its reputation. People around the world admire its constitution and separation of powers, modeling their own system to the United States (Blaustein and Sigler, 1988: xiv). Other states call upon it for assistance in troubled times. The United States is a frontrunner in commerce, music, movies, technology, and education among other major items that make a state a world leader. Education is the most important factor. The best and brightest foreign students are attracted to the United States to study. They then choose to go back to their home countries to work and spread their positive (in this case at least positive) experiences or stay in the United States. In all, the United States boasts cultural values enshrined in political institutions that help project an overall positive reputation in the international community; especially those states who are not antagonized by the United States due to conflicts of interest.

The United States also has a very bad reputation, a more reprehensible side. Those states that are on the opposite end of the international system's balance of power will at times face its wrath. In 2019, the United States implemented tariffs on China, sanctions on Russia, and is threatening to act militarily against Iran. The United States reputation in the Muslim world is also low. It is safe to say that the 2003 Iraq War decreased the United States' standing with the rest of the world, especially in Islamic majority states. The United States is seen as an imperialist nation (Ahmad, 2004). United States action was predicated on its expansion in the world since the end of the Cold War. Most importantly, soft power is about accomplishing political goals without spending military or economic resources. It is about gaining through consent and attraction without coercion. Nye argues against the danger of arrogance saying "...attraction can turn to repulsion if we act

in an arrogant manner and destroy the real message of our deeper values (Nye, 2004: x). He argues that while the Iraq War in 2003 did remove a tyrant from power, it was immensely costly to United States' soft power. Morgenthau argues that "good motives...do not guarantee the moral goodness and political success of the policies they inspire" (Morgenthau, 1985: 6). The following section will discuss the ramifications of this war on American soft power.

3. Soft Power Vacuum: The Impact of the 2003 Iraq Invasion on American Reputation

To understand the impact of the Iraq War (2003) on American soft power, one must first understand the identity of the United States throughout its foreign policy history. Indeed, soft power is about identity, not simply self-perception, but the perception others have about you. People only consent to follow if they like or approve of the leader. If not, they will seek out others to lead. This section will argue that negative actions done by the United States provide an opportunity to other great powers seeking the position of global leader.

Ironically, bringing democracy to Iraq is a violent imposition of American soft power on Iraq. But did this signal a departure from American projection of power? Historically, the United States interprets its action as inherently good for themselves and the world. The belief in exceptionalism, the idea that American ideals are ultimately beneficial to all, is the chink in the armor of American soft power. The trauma of 9/11 led many to believe that the United States had a moral duty to convert the world to democracy for their own security. President Bush's Neoconservative Realist "Fukuyama plus Force" made examples of Afghanistan and Iraq, isolating traditional allies: it is defined by unilateralism, preemption and idealism. This was seen as Bush's

transformation and contribution of U.S. Grand Strategy. However, given the history of the United States, it was not so much a revolution or a change in doctrine, but rather a continuation of history. This sentiment can be seen as far back as the birth of the United States, specifically the post-independence settler movement into Transappalachia. As historian Walter Nugent describes: “Stubbornness, conviction that the West belonged to them, and a willingness to double-cross their allies helped the American team greatly. Idealism in rhetoric from the start, this was the American contradiction. This deep belief that that America had a right to all that land – the sense that America was exceptional – was already in [their] minds...” (2008: 40).

Since its inception, the United States has fundamentally transformed itself from a unilateral isolationist power to unilateral global policeman due to threats, real or imagined. New formulations which take into consideration new threats, continuing to shape U.S. foreign policy. Acting as a world policeman may seem in the best interests of the world, but when put to the test, the unintended consequences harm American identity and reputation. The Bush Revolution failed to establish permanence due to the costs, but also because of this tendency. Given this, and growing unpopularity of Bush’s actions, one can conclude that the Bush Doctrine was simply a traumatic response to an act of terrorism relatively unknown to the American people.

The violent imposition of soft power can be understood as a neoconservative strategy, one that combines Offensive Realism and Wilsonian Liberalism. Offensive Realism, (coined by John Mearsheimer in his book *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*) dictates that every state’s purpose, regardless of size, is to dominate others to avoid domination. This, combined with Wilsonianism, the theory which postulates that the world can be remade through the impartation of domestic Western

liberal values, created the Bush Doctrine. The U.S. faced no other superpower, presenting ample opportunities to form a democratic world by any means. This is a particularly ugly foreign policy strategy as it shows the hypocrisy of the United States. On one hand, you have the gross use of force to implement American interests under the guise of democracy. Said differently and more precisely: "...it becomes apparent that it is the policies of successive US governments that are so hated: the manner in which the world's sole superpower tends always to get its way; its sometimes brutal foreign policy and profitable project of globalization; its support for tyrants while mouthing the language of democracy and human rights; and the way it uses local proxies to dominate the world order" (Booth and Dunne, 2002: 2).

The high costs of the war forced the Bush administration to change its tactics to improve American reputation. The 2003 Iraq war also hurt American reputation with traditional allies like France and Germany. President Obama hoped to restart relations with the world by recovering the soft power lost by the United States. His aim was to "rebuild alliances, partnerships and institutions necessary to confront common threats and enhance common security" (Obama, 2007: 5). He wanted to work with other states, not against them, making compromises over unilateral action. However, even this strategy resulted in strategies that degraded American soft power. The multilateral yet violent interventions in Libya is a case in point. In the case of Syria, Obama sounded more like Bush than himself:

I'm confident in the case our government has made without waiting for U.N. inspectors. I'm comfortable going forward without the approval of a United Nations Security Council that, so far, has been completely paralyzed and unwilling to hold Assad

accountable...failed to pass a resolution with a similar goal, even as the Prime Minister supported taking action.

(Lindsay, 2012: 765)

There remain elements of neoconservatism in Obama's foreign policy, regardless of his desires to engage with enemy states and personalities like Muammar Gaddafi (Walt, 2011). Such a fact cannot go unrecognized by the states of the international system. It is a continuation of Bush's strategy.

In 2019, the President of the United States is Donald J. Trump. His reputation is not the kindest and the full effect of his behavior and policy cannot be truly understood or appreciated yet. He seems to be taking a defensive realist position. He has not carried out any new interventions and is seeking to wind down American presence in the world. He uses economic power, not military power, to achieve his international political goals. As a result, Trump marks a departure. Within this departure from global affairs, there may be an opportunity for China and Russia to expand their own influence and leadership in the world. The following sections will discuss the soft power of both China and Russia, while maintaining that the history of American interventionism has caused a vacuum in soft power. All great powers see themselves as exceptional, as inherently good and made for global leadership. In this regard, soft power must be studied as part of the wider struggle to strengthen material interests.

4. Chinese Soft Power: Filling the Vacuum

In 1997, a representative from the Asian Development Bank, described Chinese soft power saying, "when it comes to soft power, it will take much longer before it can make a an impact close to what the United

States enjoys now” (quoted in *Emerging Asia* 1997: 11). This time has come. It seems plausible now due to the vacuum left by the United States and the abundant wealth China now enjoys from its prolonged period of economic growth. Now, China has become a major revisionist power in the international system. It hopes to change the rules of the international system to gain for itself a leadership position in the world (Gilpin, 1988). Its soft power will be a major part of filling the void left by the United States, this requires going on the charm offensive. To its credit, it has been quite prolific in this department. The current geopolitical context of Chinese foreign policy is a world away from the Mao era. China is no longer the insular Maoist state but has opened up to the rest of the world. As China increased its presence in the world, we begin to understand the need to protect and enhance the reputation of the country.

China’s reputation began to improve in the mid-1990s (Cho and Jeong, 2008: 454). It was understood that in order to be a world leader, a state would need to have some cultural presence in the world (*ibid.*: 457). In 1999, Huang Shuofeng wrote and published a book called *Theory on Comprehensive National Power*. In it, Huang describes all aspects of state power (military, economic, diplomatic, etc.) and its coalescence into a coherent state strategy (described in *ibid.*). Another scholar, Ye Zicheng argues that the Soviet Union collapsed not due to economic reasons, but because of its weakening soft power and influence in the world. Ye also argues that all sources of power must be increased together for the state’s own longevity (*ibid.*: 458). Pang Zhongying, another scholar from China, proposes improving reputation at home through institutional building and may also correspond to current international institutional building (*ibid.*).

Soft power expounds on the exportation of culture. Such an endeavor was first mentioned by a major leader in 2007 when then

Premier Hu Jintao declared “The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture” (quoted in Albert, 2018, *cf. org*). Chinese soft power is predicated on these areas: “cultural attractiveness, political values, development model, international institutions, international image, and economic temptation” (Li & Worm, 2009: 1). There are now many cultural enterprises led by the Chinese government to extol the goodwill of the Chinese state. The *One Belt, One Road* project is one, but more importantly is the cultural aspect of power. There is also something to be said about the Chinese economic model called the Beijing Consensus. This strategy combines the developmental model with foreign policy like the Washington Consensus (*ibid.*: 462). Exporting a model of development will unite much of the world attracted to state led development strategies.

The focus on culture is the real area of concentration for China; and China boasts a beautiful history that once dominated much of the world economy centuries ago. There are three major ways China is exporting their culture to the rest of the world:

- *Confucius Institutes*: China opened the first Confucius Institute in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea. As of January 2018, there were more than five hundred institutes scattered around the world. The centers, nonprofit organizations affiliated with China’s ministry of education, provide Mandarin language courses, cooking and calligraphy classes, and celebrations for Chinese national holidays. The institutes echo cultural associations like the United Kingdom’s British Councils, France’s Alliance Française, Germany’s Goethe Institute, and Spain’s Cervantes Institute. The Confucius Institute partners with universities, typically with a minimum of \$100,000 in annual support for

programming, while Confucius Classrooms are established with primary and secondary institutions.

- *Educational exchanges*: China has become a top destination for international students. It ranked third among the world's most popular study destinations in 2017, according to the Institute of International Education. The majority of international students pursue self-funded courses of study; however, the China Scholarship Council provides student financial aid to not only Chinese students going abroad, but also to foreigners coming to China. More than 440,000 international students from 205 countries studied in China in 2016. They came primarily from South Korea, the United States, Thailand, Pakistan, and India, based on statistics from the China Scholarship Council, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education.
- *International media*: Beijing has thrown its weight behind its foreign language news outlets to establish greater control over narratives about China. This allows Beijing to reach a broader audience for not only high-profile summits between Chinese leaders and their foreign counterparts but also for China's more underreported activities around the world. The government's primary news agency, Xinhua, has grown to 170 foreign bureaus and has plans to reach 200 by 2020. *China Daily* and *Global Times* publish English language editions available worldwide. CCTV, the state television broadcasting news service, rebranded itself as China Global Television Network in December 2016 and broadcasts six channels, two in English and others in Arabic, French, Russian, and Spanish, with reporting teams in more than seventy countries. China Radio International broadcasts 392 hours of programming a day in thirty-eight languages from twenty-seven overseas bureaus (*ibid.*).

China is thus bolstering its standing around the world by offering the best of itself to the world. This actively competes with the United States as well as Russia's own charm offensive. As we will see, Russia's soft power offensive has more to do with justifying its actions of expansion around the world and less about the beauty, intellectualism and charm of Russian culture (see below). China wants to offer its best self to the world and this is most demonstrated by one of the world's favorite animals: the panda bear.

For decades, the People's Republic of China has used their national animal, the panda, to promote good relations with states globally. The United States received a pair of pandas in 1972 as part of President's Nixon's diplomatic trip. In 1975, China also gave two pandas to Mexico: Shao Shao and Qiang Qiang. Their three cubs are still alive and living there. States do not own these beautiful animals, rather they are lent or leased as part of the Chinese goodwill program. In the 1980s, the cost was \$50,000 per month, per panda or \$600,000 a year (*The Economist*, 18 January 2019). Today, the cost has risen significantly and vary from country to country, some costing up to \$1 million a year (Chughtai and Maglio, 2017, *Al Jazeera*). The Panda may be part of a coercive diplomacy strategy. In 2010, then US President Obama visited the Dalai Lama. In response, China took back the Pandas (*The Economist*, 18 January 2019). This intended to punish the United States by taking away the popular creature.

Of national animals, the panda is the most loved. Unlike other animals like the American eagle and the Russian bear, the panda is warm, cute and even clumsy. Videos on YouTube show the panda, and panda babysitters, as part of an endearing and charming culture. While other animals, eagles and bears, tend to kill and devour less powerful creatures, the panda eats bamboo and really wants to be left alone.

Making the connection then, the identity of China and Chinese power is benign. When the panda is used as part of Chinese diplomacy, these connections are also made. According to Wang (2017), the panda has a multiplicity of meanings:

Pandas have become a symbol of China and they are really significant to the Chinese culture. From the eyes of the Chinese people, pandas are like warriors because of the qualities they possess. Pandas are able to find food for themselves, climb trees, and withstand extremely cold temperatures. It has even been said that pandas are as strong as tigers. This proves that they are tough, like warriors, and China wants to be seen in that way as well. In addition to symbolizing strength, the panda also symbolizes peace and friendship because they have a gentle temperament and aren't known for attacking others. Also, the black and white color of the panda is seen as the physical representation of Yin and Yang, and how the balance between these two bring about harmony and peace. Furthermore, pandas are significant to the Chinese people because they are seen as neighbors, since both Chinese people and pandas resided in China in the early ages of time. Many works of literature include the panda. This animal is also believed to have powers to combat evil spirits. Therefore, news of pandas being born is really exciting for the Chinese because the panda is really significant in both Chinese history and culture.

(Wang, 2017, *thedailychina.org*)

These creatures are important to the state and this specific description is meant to inspire those to follow. Like any national symbol, it is designed to promote Chinese soft power around the world. Promoting their significance also encourages Chinese citizens to be proud of their heritage.

To many, China's foreign policy presence does not resemble a panda, but an aggressive dragon, flexing its muscles in the South China Sea (Harris, 2015). China's island building in the South China Sea is a direct threat to other states in the region like Japan and Taiwan (Ross, 2017). Its claim over the entire nine-dash line brings it into conflict with states Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, and Malaysia (*ibid.*). The sinking of Vietnamese fishing boats also points to this aggression (*ABC News*, 8 April 2020). So even as China tries to create a peaceful image through soft power projection, its aggression toward its neighbors paints an entirely different picture.

5. Russian Soft Power: A Long, Exceptional History

Like China, the history and culture of Russia is one of greatness. From Catherine the Great to Vladimir Putin, the state of Russia has strived to communicate strength in adversity. Russia enjoys a unique position in the world, and like the United States, Russia thinks itself an exceptional power. The state is not European yet not Asian; it sits on the crossroads (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017: 21). It is the older brother that leads other Slavs to the promise land and sees itself as the protector of the Orthodox Christian church. Russia also presents itself as an alternative to Western modernity and the nihilism associated with it (*ibid.*: 22). Russian soft power thus espouses a more traditional sense of belonging, a nationalist pride that combines Russian Christian Orthodoxy, philosophy, language and history. Russia hopes to use this soft power for leadership purposes.

Russia spreads its soft power through bilateral relations with neighbors like Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan. Further, institutions like the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Eurasian Customs Union greatly assist Russia in its protection of its interests. These

organizations are led by Russia and promote proper relations with regional players. Globally, Russia implements several enterprises that help protect its interests and reputation. The Institute for Democracy and Cooperation forwards good Russian acts and, simultaneously, any desecration of democratic values and norms done by Western powers. This is a continuation of Soviet *whataboutism* developed to illustrate the double-standard presented by the United States and European powers (*ibid.*: 31). It is a method of deflecting, to show that while Russia breaks international norms and laws, the Americans do the same. As a result, it is acceptable.

Russia is also increasing economic aid like the United States and China albeit on a smaller scale. Russian aid quadrupled since 2010, from USD\$231 million to USD\$902 million in 2015 (Asmus, 2018, *Aiddata*). This aid goes to states in East and Central Europe, but also Latin America and Africa (*ibid.*). Aid was sent to Serbia after flooding left many homeless (Robinson, 30 November 2014). This aid was distributed through the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre, meant to improve Russian standing with the rest of the world, but also consolidate good relations with Serbia.

Russia is also installing think tanks around the world to help improve its image worldwide. The Swedish Defense Agency published a report in 2017 entitled “Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power” which made the connection between Russian money to improve global reputation. The funding for these think tanks is directly and indirectly funded by the government of Russia, from government grants to private enterprise seeking to gain good standing with the government (Pallin and Oxenstierna, 2017: 17). The major finding of the report follows:

...the think tanks that take on less of an advocacy role in their messaging tend to be the ones with the best relations with Western

researchers. Their experts are sought after as speakers at conferences and roundtables around the world and their access to Russian government circles adds to their attraction as cooperation partners. The think tanks that are more propagandistic tend to end up creating networks with experts, organizations and institutes in the West that are less mainstream.

(*ibid.*: 4)

The report concludes that the Russian state is indeed attempting to bolster its standing with the rest of the world as part of an overall battle for global influence against major American and European players. One such think tank, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, is entirely state funded and provided a state perspective for the current Ukrainian conflict. It is involved in several states including those of the BRICS: Brazil, India, China and South Africa (*ibid.*: 30). It also has a scholarly journal called *National Security Strategy* which encourages all to participate with one caveat: “The RISI team feel free to express their patriotic positions and invite everyone for cooperation. Everyone who is fond of Russia” (quoted in *ibid.*: 30). There are nine other cited think tanks, all presenting a certain interpretation of Russian foreign policy (*ibid.*: 22).

As part of an overall strategy, Russia understands that its foreign policy goals are counter to the status quo. It is seeking to stop its containment by the United States and Europe. One article in *National Security Strategy* (see above) understands this and tries to defend Russian action in Ukraine as part of a reaction to aggressive anti-Russian sentiment: “The support of United States and the European Union for an anti-constitutional coup d’état in Ukraine resulted in a deep-going divide in Ukrainian society and that an armed conflict began” (*National Security Strategy*, 2015: 17). Another Russian state-sponsored

publication is *Foreign Policy Concept* which argues similarly in its defense of Russian reputation:

Delivery to the international community of unbiased information about Russia's perspectives on key international issues, its foreign policy initiatives and efforts, processes and plans of its socioeconomic development and Russia's cultural research achievements is an important element of foreign policy activities of the Russian Federation. Russia seeks to ensure that the world has an objective image of the country, develops its own effective ways to influence foreign audiences, promotes Russian and Russian-language media in the global information space, providing them with necessary government support, is proactive in international information cooperation, and takes necessary steps to counter threats to its information security. New information and communication technology is used to this end. Russia is intent on promoting a set of legal and ethical forms regarding the safe use of such technology. Russia asserts the right of every person to access unbiased information about global developments and various points of view. Greater participation of Russia's academics and experts in the dialogue with foreign specialists on global politics and international security is one of the areas of public diplomacy development.

(Foreign Policy Concept, 2016: 46-48)

Here, one can see that Russia's main aim is to communicate its position relative to others in the fight to protect its reputation. Many in the Western world see Putin as an evil man. American media portrays Putin as a Hitler of sorts, annexing states without any known appreciation for reasons. For many, Putin is the main reason Trump is in office due to his "hacking" of the election. *CNN*, a media source that describes itself as

the “most trusted name in news” is one media outlet that pushes this specific story (*CNN*, 2 May 2019). One notation described the interference: “Putin ordered a multifaceted influence campaign that included spreading pro-Trump propaganda online and hacking the DNC and Podesta. Bracing for a possible Clinton win, Russian bloggers were prepared to promote a hashtag #DemocracyRIP on election night. Paid social media users, aka “trolls,” shared stories about Clinton controversies to create a cloud of scandal around her campaign” (*ibid.*). Russia thus feels it necessary to defend its reputation against these, and other such accusations, to protect itself and its soft power.

Russian soft power is all part of a wider grand strategy. Bolstering soft power must be done alongside any military action. The identity of Russia is carefully intertwined with any narrative formulation. For instance, while Russia boasts this long history, it is one that presents itself as a victim. Russian action in Chechnya, although in Russian national interest and part of a defensive strategy safeguarding Russian territorial integrity, was seen as particularly brutal by the Western world (*BBC News*, 7 December 1999). The 2008 war with Georgia also hurt Russian reputation. In this case, the Russian state argued for the intervention to protect the lives of minorities and separatists in Georgia. These minorities (South Ossetians and Abkhazians) sought Russian citizenship. Simultaneously, Georgia was attempting to get membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. This alliance was designed to contain Russia, an act that could not be tolerated from the Russian perspective. This led to the war.

Turning away from Russian soft power may come with a price. Georgia and Moldova, for instance, decided it would be in their best interests to gain closer relations with the European Union. The patterns we saw in the Georgian war were repeated in the case of Ukraine. From the Russian perspective, Russia acted against Ukraine annexing Crimea

because of Ukraine's increasingly closer relations with the European Union. The European Union is not just an economic union; it is a political one as well. Russia perceives itself as caged. If Ukraine became part of the European Union, then their buffer with the Western world would be eradicated. This vulnerability could no longer be tolerated. Also, Ukraine had Russian minorities, any intervention could be predicated on their needing protection.

While these matters seem to be in Russian self-interest from their perspective, the international community widely came out against Russia. Specifically, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 262 which argued for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This resolution "Calls upon all States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol on the basis of the above-mentioned referendum and to refrain from any action or dealing that might be interpreted as recognizing any such altered status" (UN Resolution 68/262, 7 March 2014). In response, Putin has argued that the world, more specifically the United Nations, is against him:

We all know that after the end of the Cold War — everyone is aware of that — a single center of domination emerged in the world, and then those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that if they were strong and exceptional, they knew better and they did not have to reckon with the U.N., which, instead of [acting to] automatically authorize and legitimize the necessary decisions, often creates obstacles or, in other words, stands in the way...

(The Washington Post, 28 September 2015)

While there may be some value in presenting itself as a victim in all this, Russia has indeed hurt its soft power reputation around the world. You are not going to win any hearts and minds with great power politics from the 19th century.

6. Analysis and Synthesis

Since the 2008 financial crisis, scholars have argued that the international system is shifting from a unipolarity to multipolarity (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; O'Hanlon, 2019; Haass, 2017). Multipolarity argues that the United States is in relative decline and that China and Russia are rising absolutely. As a result, China and Russia may expand their influence at the expense of the United States. The Chinese state in the past forty years has invested billions of dollars to improve their media projection including a positive online presence through comment policing, hosting the Olympic Games in 2008 and funding Confucius Institutes and Chinese language speaking schools globally. Panda Diplomacy fits into this effort as an integral part of Chinese foreign policy and soft power reputation. When it comes to competing for global leadership, China has a better chance of taking the helm than Russia. Russia lacks the charisma, the economic power, and the overarching, long-term strategy of China. If Russia does not get its way, it is willing to use military force regardless of the cost. This is, in the short term, incredibly damaging. For this reason, this section will focus on Chinese soft power and foreign policy. China is far more willing to bide it's time to do the more controversial tasks such as reunification with Taiwan, although that strategy has changed recently with Xi Jinping (*The New York Times*, 1 January 2019). Further, China is increasing its presence in the world to accustom many of its key actors to their leadership and prepare for its peaceful rise to dominance.

The United States and China are engaged in a fight for global institutional leadership. China's *One Belt, One Road* scheme is an effort to supplant the United States and its Bretton Woods Institutions as the global hegemon. This effort is carried out through economic means through loans and aid. In response, the United States is increasing its aid efforts. The US BUILD Act (Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development) is an effort to balance against China's strategy and defend its position as hegemon (Runde and Bandura, 2018). The battle is thus not violent but based on economic means and reputation.

Despite its origins, the People's Republic of China has experienced remarkable growth for several decades and has considerable political clout. The *One Belt, One Road* venture gained members across the world from Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America. This comprises the Middle East (the Saudi Arabian-China refining deal) as well as Europe (Deutsche Bank, 2 April 2019). Italy is now a signatory to this program. China's main objective is to open markets to its exports to decrease any exposure to the United States. Give the current trade war climate, it is in China's interest to find new buyers for its goods. There are other purposes such as access to energy resources such as coal, oil and gas (Lelyveld, 2019).

By opening markets and lending, China now enjoys global influence. Loans are in yuan (*Financial Times*, 29 November 2015). This is also beneficial because it may and may weaken the United States dollar, possibly replacing it as world's reserve currency. Further, if a state does default on its loan, China may undermine that state's sovereignty through different readjustment policies. Examples include:

- In 2011, China reportedly agreed to write off an unknown amount of debt owed by Tajikistan in exchange for some 1,158 square kilometers of disputed territory.

- In 2011, with Cuba in a desperate economic situation and seeking debt relief, China, its largest single creditor agreed to restructure between \$4-6 billion of the debt...it reportedly included an agreement by China to extend additional trade credits and financing for port rehabilitation.
- Sri Lanka was unwilling to service an \$8 billion loan at 6 percent interest that was used to finance the construction of the Hambantota Port. China agreed in July 2017 to a debt-for-equity swap accompanied by a 99-year lease for managing the port (Hurley *et al.*, 2018).

China is thus gaining political power through the failure of states to pay back loans. Weak states need financing to develop, pursue state goals and protect interests. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) may offer the same loans but they come with structural adjustment programs which are unpopular (Kassab, 2015). This has proven difficult for ruling regimes and may increase social instability. Chinese loans do not come with any structural adjustment programs. In terms of political hegemonic pursuit, China's strategy may be more successful.

Using economic power, China is maintaining control over the economies of weak states in the international system. By doing so, it could have a global position and push aside the United States. To consolidate its position further, China is creating its own international banks to rival the United States' Bretton Woods institutions. This is in part because of the United States' rejection of increasing China's voting rights at the International Monetary Fund (*Reuters*, 12 December 2014). Playing the great power game of Go, China is dominating the board of international relations (Kassab, 2017).

In total, China's *One Belt, One Road* leads 65 states, 4.4 billion people and approximately 40 percent of global GDP (Wade, n.d.). In response, the United States perceives this strategy as a threat to its own hegemonic position. The US BUILD Act is an effort to defend this position. It aims at fighting China's influence. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo states: "The Act provides opportunities for American companies to compete overseas and create jobs here at home, a critical component of the President's national economic strategy. BUILD strengthens the U.S. government's development finance capacity, offering a better alternative to state-directed investments and advancing our foreign policy goals" (quoted in Runde and Bandura, 2018). The term "state-directed investment" is directed at China and its model of state development which marries state goals with economic policy to increase and project global power and influence. In other words, without mentioning China, the United States is trying to curb Chinese influence and loan practices by offering alternatives. Hence, countering Chinese economic influence is a major goal for the United States.

The US BUILD Act fundamentally balances against China's *One Belt, One Road* project. By granting financing to weak states, the United States may lure weak states away from China. The institutional competition will be an ongoing part of international relations albeit rather than multilateralism, bilateralism may be the future of hegemonic activity.

China has a very long way to go when it comes to global standing. Several issues stand out as very serious. The first is its chronic pollution and environmental degradation issues. China has surpassed the United States and currently sits as the world's number one polluter. Scholars from the Chinese University of Hong Kong estimate that 1 million people die per year in China due to pollution (*South China Morning Post*, 2 October 2018). Second is its treatment of minorities, both

religious and ethnic. The Falun Gong continues to be persecuted alongside Christians and Muslims. Most serious is the recent internment of one million Uighur Muslims (*BBC News*, 24 October 2018). There is also monitoring of Uighurs in their own homes by government security forces (*NPR*, 7 May 2019). Connected to this is Hong Kong's own struggle against China's extradition laws (*BBC News*, 10 June 2019). Hong Kong was promised that there would be no change to its internal politics for 50 years. This proposed extradition bill seems to renege on that promise. Of course, the argument could be that Hong Kong is under Chinese jurisdiction and must accept changes to its laws. This does hurt the reputation of China and does damage to its trust.

Internationally, states are developing trust issues with China which might hurt its ability to lead in the future. Around the world, states are defaulting on Chinese loans and states must surrender some sovereignty to China in return. A 2019 Lowy Institute Poll measuring Australian's attitudes toward the world placed trust with China at a fifteen-year low (*South China Morning Post*, 26 June 2019). All of these issues will play an important role in determining the viability of Chinese global leadership. Yet, as long as China balances its coercion with consensual power, there may be success. Any great power must be able to demonstrate power and seduction. Power, even soft power, is about dominance and, as a foreign power, states and nations will always hate outside interference. Chinese exceptionalism may become a major force in global politics on par with the United States in the future. If the United States insists on strategies like Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, etc., then Chinese dominance may be welcomed.

Like the United States and China, Russia has failed to see the reputational costs that come with aggression. Those states and peoples in support of Russia are those already with a pro-Russian mindset. In 2019, a poll concluded that a majority of Russians approve of the annexation

of Crimea. However, Russian citizens are concerned with the harmful economic consequences of sanctions and other costs associated with negative reactions (*Radio Free Europe*, 3 April 2019). Hence, the Russian people are worried about their state's overall standing with the rest of the world. Soft power and the battle for public opinion is at the forefront of state interests in this century. Russia and China must perform a sort of "sleight of hand" when it comes to any expansionist adventure. To recall, the status quo as we know it today is a product of American power. This means any violation of international law such as sovereignty must be done with an equal and proportionate good deed. To overturn these rules would be in any revisionists' best interests. Thus, the United States, Russia and China might be able to maintain a positive reputation in the world.

7. Conclusion

As a superpower and former unipolar hegemon, the United States has global interests; it is everywhere. This is going to be an issue for states like Russia and China, states that are seeking to themselves expand to protect their economic and political interests. This presents a real problem for the international system. Both Russia and China seek to change certain parts of the system through soft power means because they see the system as unjust, and not in their interests. The United States does not want the system to change because it suits its interests. These issues might instigate a war, but it also presents an opportunity for slow change. However, since weak states are essential to control the international system, and these three great powers are trying to win their hearts and minds, there may be an opportunity for weak states to extract as much gains from the system of competition as possible (Kassab, 2015, 2017). This might finally be the century for weak states.

Note

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